

LESSON SIX

Socratic Seminar on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter From Birmingham Jail

LESSON OVERVIEW

Students prepare for and participate in a Socratic Seminar to discuss Dr. Martin Luther King's Letter from Birmingham Jail.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Analyze a historical document, Letter from Birmingham Jail.
- Develop interpretation and discussion skills
- Develop an understanding of the issues, ideas, and values of an important historical text.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How did Dr. King view the Civil Rights Movement?
- How did others view the movement?
- What was the purpose of this letter?
- What is meant by just/unjust law? When, if ever, is it okay to break an unjust law?

KEY CONCEPTS

- Democratic citizenship
- Passive resistance
- Civil disobedience
- Conflict
- Just/unjust law

VOCABULARY

- Resistance
- Non-violent
- Protest

GROUPING (for Day Two)

- To prepare the students and the classroom for the seminar, arrange students in a circle facing one another. This is done so that all students are on an equal plane for the discussion.
- If the group is larger than 20, arrange two circles, an inner circle and an outer one. The inner circle engages in the discussion and the outer circle is given a directed listening assignment, such as recording important points made by the speakers and reflecting on the effectiveness of the discussion in general.
- Have groups identified prior to class. Group heterogeneously or have the most talkative students in one group and less talkative in the other. If two circles are used, direct students from the outer circle to exchange seats with those in the inner circle midway through the discussion.

MATERIALS

Teacher Resources

6A: Seminar Norms

Student Handouts

6.1: Letter from Birmingham Jail

6.2: Statement from Alabama Clergymen

6.3: Seminar Ticket

Goal 1	Goal 2	Goal 3	Goal 4	Goal 5
Conflict	Democratic Citizenship	Historical Inquiry & Historiography	Historical Empathy	Discussion & Deliberation
	X			X

Procedures

DAY ONE:

INTRODUCTION/HOOK

Ask students to visualize Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in action. Allow some volunteers to share what they visualize. (Protests? March on Washington? Giving speeches?)

Put up picture of Martin Luther King, Jr. being arrested in 1962 in St Augustine, Fl. (available via Library of Congress: http://www.americaslibrary.gov/aa/king/aa_king_jail_1_e.html)

Ask:

Is this how you think of Martin Luther King, Jr.?

Explain to students that this picture was taken before his famous March on Washington where he delivered the “I Have a Dream” speech. He was arrested for trespassing as part of a demonstration.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Read the introduction to Dr. King’s Letter from Birmingham Jail and then the first two paragraphs. (**Handout 6.1**).

Teacher Notes

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Ask:

- *Why was Dr. King in Birmingham? What was his mission?*
- *What was happening in Birmingham in 1963?*

Provide some background on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s journey to Birmingham to help lead the demonstrations.

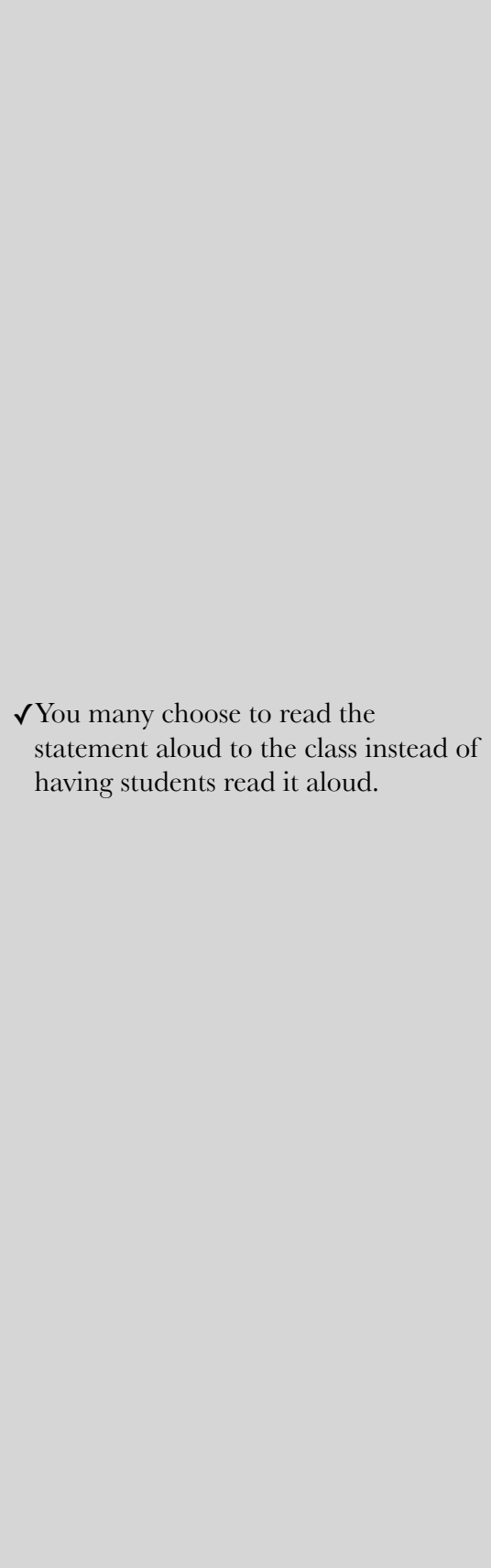
Remind students that historians seek historical documents to be able to understand historical events. In this case, pictures and Dr. King's actual words are vital in any analysis. It will also be helpful to look at the statement to which Dr. King was responding with his Letter from Birmingham Jail.

Hand out the Statement from Alabama Clergymen (**Handout 6.2**). Inform students that this is a copy of the actual statement written by Alabama Clergymen and directed to Dr. King. Ask students to read it silently or direct them to take turns reading it aloud. Ask students to follow along and circle any vocabulary they do not understand.

Use these document analysis questions:

- *Who is the author(s) of the document?*
- *What does the letter tell us about the events in Birmingham and the perspective of the authors (evidence)?*
- *What do we learn from this evidence?*
- *What are the limitations of this evidence? What else do we want to learn / know?*

Explain that this analysis will help students prepare for the Socratic seminar that they are going to participate in tomorrow. Follow the reading with a brief class discussion, including an analysis of any words that were confusing.



✓ You may choose to read the statement aloud to the class instead of having students read it aloud.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES (continued)

Say:

Tomorrow you will participate in a seminar on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail, his response to the Alabama Clergymen. A seminar is a discussion group in which well-informed people talk about an event or an issue in order to understand it more thoroughly, especially the ideas, values, and values presented in the reading.

Although people may have different interpretations or opinions, the purpose of a seminar is not to debate but rather to put together the collective understanding of the group. We can learn from each other as we discuss the issues and our understanding of them. In a seminar there are no right or wrong answers.

To be well-informed, you must prepare ahead of time. That means you will need to do some work and come to class with your "ticket," that is, your preparatory notes on the reading.

Usually when we have discussions I lead them, but in a seminar you all are responsible for the discussion. I will only be here to facilitate, to keep things going but not to ask the questions.

Because you will be in charge of the discussion, you will need to prepare very well. If you are not prepared you will have to sit out and not be part of the discussion.

Our seminar will be about the events that occurred in Birmingham in 1963. So let's begin the preparations.

Give students King's Letter from Birmingham Jail (6.1) and the discussion ticket (6.3). Read the Letter from a Birmingham Jail aloud while students follow along, starting with the third paragraph. Ask students to mark up the text with questions, identify unfamiliar words, or chart initial reactions. You may want to show the example of your own marked up text as a model.

✓ Display a large poster with Seminar Norms and discussion phrases (or put up on whiteboard or smartboard) and familiarize students with the guidelines (Teacher Resource 6A).

✓ Students who come unprepared should work on an alternative assignment. Emphasize the purpose for the seminar – to develop good discussion skills and gain a better understanding of the issues, ideas and values of the text.

✓ You may want to read parts of the letter and pause, asking students for what they understand the message to be in this part of the letter.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES (continued)

Guide students’ thinking in asking themselves questions such as:

- What are the injustices King speaks of?
- What different forms of response to injustice does Dr. King discuss?
- What different emotions does Dr. King reveal?
- What emotions do readers feel?
- What examples of violence does he share?
- What does he believe is the “truth”?

Review the Seminar Ticket with the students and instruct them to read the text again before starting their work. Encourage them to work with a partner or in small groups.

Direct students to complete their preparations for homework.

DAY 2: SOCRATIC SEMINAR INTRODUCTION/HOOK

Ask students to talk with the person next to them as a warm-up for the discussion, sharing one of their responses to the questions on the Seminar Ticket as well as some of their vocabulary words.

Focus the Lesson

As a class, discuss what questions would be good seminar questions and put together a list on the board. Limit the number of questions and indicate that these will be helpful if they need prompts to maintain the discussion.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Socratic Seminar

Go over the norms for Socratic Seminar (**Teacher Resource 6.A**).

Pose an opening question. Don’t forget to provide wait time. Suggested questions for initiating the discussion:

- *What is the purpose of this letter?*

✓ Depending on the vocabulary used in your state standards, you might choose to emphasize the term passive resistance or civil disobedience. You might need to emphasize how radical this methodology was at the time.

✓ Use the questions to help students think about the contents and questions they should be asking themselves as they read and reflect. This is not the time for complete discussion of these questions.

✓ See “GROUPING” instructions at beginning of lesson plan

✓ You may also refer to questions from the Seminar ticket or ask students to discuss what they are wondering about.

✓ Refer to the class chart listing norms.

✓ Encourage participants to address the group rather than you.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES (continued)

- *Who is the audience or audiences of this letter?*
- *How does King differentiate a just from unjust law?*
- *According to Dr. King, is it ever appropriate to break an unjust law?*

Use the following guidelines for facilitating discussion:

1. When discussion starts to taper off or you feel you have gone far enough on a particular topic, pose another question.
2. Let students lead the direction of the discussion.
3. Invite others to participate if several students are dominating or to help summarize the students' main points.
4. Allow the question to veer away from the question list if the discussion is productive.
5. Seek quality of responses, not quantity. It is not necessary to get through the list of questions.
6. Allow time for a summary question.

DEBRIEFING

Last Word: Have students turn to their partner and share any ideas or thoughts they did not get a chance to share.

or

Discussion Debrief: Ask students the following: How do you think seminar went today? What did we do well? How can we do better next time?

Seminar Response Activity (choose one or have students choose):

- Is there such a thing as an unjust law in a democracy? Under what conditions might it be necessary for a democratic citizen to break an unjust law?
- You are a citizen of Birmingham in 1963. Write your own letter to the paper's editor responding to both King and the white clergy who posted the original letter.

✓ A good seminar leaves students with more to say on the topic and more ideas to include in the seminar response. Don't expect a neat closure. Hopefully students will continue discussing these ideas on their own.

✓ Seminar response activities could be completed as class work or homework.