

Running Head: Nonviolence and Reconciliation

“Truth and non-violence are as old as the hills:” Using Gandhi’s principles to teach nonviolence
and reconciliation in American secondary schools

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April 20, 2020

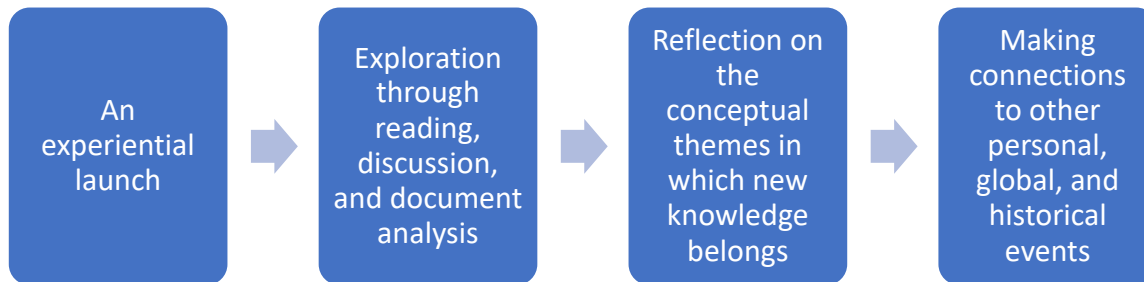
Abstract

Over the past 20 years, I have taught social studies and social studies methods to students in middle school and high school, and at the undergraduate and graduate levels. In each setting, I emphasize the need for students to learn in a way that engages them cognitively, intellectually, and empathetically and allows them to make connections beyond the walls of the classroom. One way I have found to do this is to integrate Gandhi's principles of *Satyagraha* (a policy of passive political resistance) and *Swaraj* (self-rule or home-rule). In this essay, I expand on the use of these principles and practices in middle school classrooms through experiential learning, document analysis, writing, and seminar.

Keywords: Non-violence, experiential education, student engagement, social justice, equity

Over the past 20 years, I have been fortunate enough to teach courses on non-violence and reconciliation to students in middle and high school and at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Central to these courses are Gandhi's core values of nonviolence, *Satyagraha* (a policy of passive political resistance) and *Swaraj* (self-rule or home-rule). While much of my research and teaching focus has lived in the realm of the African American Civil Rights movement, the basis of King's version of this movement is rooted in Gandhi's principles. To that end, this essay is a statement of my work in teaching Gandhi's principles.

My students' learning experience is, at its core, experiential. I believe that good social studies instruction is rooted in developing the hands, the head, and the heart. In other words, students must develop a knowledge of content and history by doing the work of historians – sourcing documents and building conceptions – and making connections between what they've learned and what they passionately care about. Instructionally, I follow a model about which I've written:

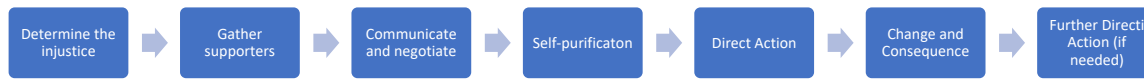


In the case of teaching Gandhi's principles, our learning experiences fall in several conceptual buckets. First, we explore the idea of resistance and revolution, building a strong understanding of the ideals of revolutionaries. Second, we explore the details of several examples of resistance, working to form a theory of how change happens. Finally, we take a look at the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed over time, focusing on the principles of reconciliation.

We begin our exploration with an experience that creates a sense of frustration. I task students with a simple timed task of coloring a worksheet. In order to complete the task, however, they have to “work” to earn the different colored pencils. This work involves them doing trivial tasks with which they may or may not have success. Ultimately, they are unable to complete the task in the time given because the restrictions levied simply do not allow it to happen. By the end of the time allotted, they are frustrated and usually express that frustration pretty openly. I listen (and argue) with their complaints, making note of the language and terminology they use, the tone of their voices, and the ideals they express.

After letting them off the hook (and not giving them zeroes), we work together to develop a statement of complaints against me (the oppressor) that rather closely resembles the Declaration of Independence. We define their ideals, then conduct an historical reading of the Declaration, comparing their ideals with those of the Founding Fathers. Students find that while they use different language, their ideals are strikingly similar. From this, students develop a list of ideals held by revolutionaries.

Then, we focus in on several specific examples of successful revolutions. One of my favorites (and the one I use as our model) is the Birmingham Children’s March in 1963. The Teaching Tolerance organization produced an outstanding short documentary on the Children’s March (<https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/film-kits/mighty-times-the-childrens-march>) for use in middle and high school classrooms, and using this, students can see a successful example of a non-violent revolution from start to finish. After watching, we debrief and I ask students to work in small groups to try to chart the pattern the students followed in their act of resistance. Ultimately, we build a simplified version of Gandhi and King’s processes for resistance:



This model gives students a theoretical framework for understanding the process of resistance and allows them to study other examples for similarities and variations. Further, they are able to continue to lift out the ideals of revolutionaries, seeing the similarities despite differences in context and historical period.

Often, I will send students off to do some research on other movements. Depending on the nature of historical focus of the course, these may be American examples or more global examples. In the past, we have looked at other examples within the Civil Rights movement (the Greensboro Sit-ins and the Montgomery Bus Boycotts) and more global examples (The Salt Marches, the Egyptian revolt in 2010, and the Haitian Revolution, to name a few). Students analyze these revolutionary moments in the context of our theoretical framework.

As a teacher in the American South, we live in a world directly affected by generations of oppression and white supremacy. The stark reality is the African American students in my classroom are only two generations removed from segregated schooling and only three generations removed from a public educational system that did not include their ancestors at all. Further, white supremacy and oppression define our communities: our neighborhoods and churches are still segregated, our schools bear the legacy of the names of the leaders of the Ku Klux Klan, and our courthouse lawns hold monuments to the Civil War that were erected some sixty years after the war ended. Consequently, I have always barreled into the history of the American Civil Rights movement head on. I think my African American students need to hear the whole story as validation their history is American history, and my White students need to hear it so they begin to contemplate their place in a system built on white supremacy.

Further, my positionality leads to a deep discussion around non-violent resistance. I am a white male who grew up in an historically Black neighborhood and attended historically Black schools. Between my seventh and twelfth grade years, nine of my friends were murdered. Out of these crises, which I still struggle to understand, I became a crusader for non-violence and non-violent change. Through our study of resistance, I hope to help students see how they can change their world when they see injustice.

Ultimately, what rises from this work are questions about the relationship and interaction between the oppressed and oppressors, the nature and sustainability of power, and whether equity and equality are realistically possible. I am always amazed at middle and high school students' ability to thoughtfully consider and discuss these rather lofty questions. It typically leads to quite the Socratic Seminar.

We finish with a direct look at reconciliation. Tim Tyson, in his historical narrative *Blood Done Sign My Name* (2004), writes

As a nation and as individual human beings, we would rather hear the gospel stories of Mrs. Roseanna Allen and Miss Amy Womble's witness than the blues stories of murder, retribution, and injustice that mark our actual history. [The positive stories] make good narrative, but [are] not reliable recipes for social transformation. Unjust social orders do not fall merely by appeals to the consciences of the oppressors, though such appeals may be an important element; history teaches us that they fall because a large enough number of people organize a movement powerful enough to push them down. Rarely do such revolutions emerge in a neat and morally pristine process (317).

I find it interesting to compare South Africa's pathway after the fall of Apartheid with the United States through the 1970s and 80s. South Africa established a Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, where perpetrators and victims had the legal obligation and opportunity to share the truth – the good and the bad. The United States would have benefitted from such a

commission. As Dr. Tyson (2004) writes so eloquently, “any psychiatrist can tell you that genuine healing requires a candid confrontation with our past. In any case, if there is to be reconciliation, first there must be truth” (10).

As we work through these deeply personal events in history, we focus on the Gandhi’s principles of non-violence, self-governance, and passive resistance, and the role they played in shaping global affairs. And through our exploration, analysis, and discussion, we reach a point of needing reconciliation. In my classes, I asked students to work in groups to do the work of a Commission for Truth and Reconciliation. Students establish the truth – the pretty and the ugly – then brainstorm ways we can help to overturn the unjust systems that developed from years of oppression. Armed with their new knowledge, their conceptual understanding, and their truth, I trust they will begin to make decisions to countermand our world history. Ultimately, that’s my goal: to subversively help develop citizens that make the world more equitable and democratic so all voices are heard, recognized, and valued.

To close, I believe secondary teachers can create enlightened, engaging classrooms if they center this work on Gandhi’s principles. It’s not so much that we can learn from history; rather, it lives more in the idea that our history has created our present. To this end, our present is unjust, and that through understanding, we can elicit change that overturns those unjust systems and structures, and gives all humanity equal access to the opportunity structure.

References

Tyson, T. (2004). *Blood done sign my name: A true story*. New York: Three Rivers Press.