

Life Long Learning: Making and Using a Commonplace Book

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Lesson title: Life Long Learning: Making and Using a Commonplace Book

Time: Two Days

Materials needed: Colored construction paper, enough for each student to have 2 sheets and enough white lined paper for each student to have 5 sheets. You will also need a stapler and staples and assorted colored markers.

Lesson Objective: To re-introduce to 8th grade U.S. History students that learning is a life long process and that true learning can be more easily accomplished if they begin to develop the art of recognizing new information that is relevant to their lives and writing it down for future use.

Goals: 1- Each student will construct their own commonplace book.
2- Each student will make at least one entry in their commonplace book each week. The entry must be something that is new to them that they read. They must also explain why they chose that entry and why it is relevant in their life.

Day One:

Anticipatory set: Ask the class who some famous men of the 1700's might have been. Bring Thomas Jefferson into the discussion. Ask the students what he did that made him a famous American. Obviously, the Declaration of Independence must be brought into the discussion. Ask the students how they thought he got to be smart enough to write such a document. Discuss whether it was genetics, hard work, or a combination of both. Ask the class what things Jefferson might have done as a student to promote his learning.

Ask the class if they know what a commonplace book is. Define it and explain how it was used by Jefferson.

Activity: Give each student the materials they will need to make their own commonplace book.

Have them put a simple booklet together using two sheets of colored paper as a cover with 5 sheets of white lined paper stapled inside. Allow the students to decorate their covers any way they choose to.

Day Two

Goal: History students will practice identifying information found in the writings of Thomas Jefferson that they might find useful in their own lives. They will write the passage down in their commonplace book and then paraphrase it to explain why it would be useful knowledge for them to have.

Read the following passage out loud to the class. They should have copies of the selections to follow along with you.

Writing number One: (The following excerpts are exactly as Thomas Jefferson wrote them. The spelling has not been changed nor edited.)

“On the contrary when we see or read of any atrocious deed, we are disgusted with its deformity, and conceive an abhorrence of vice. Now every emotion of this kind is an exercise of our virtuous dispositions, and dispositions of the mind, like limbs of the body acquire strength by exercise. But exercise produces habit, and in the instance of which we speak the exercise being of the moral feelings produces a habit of thinking and acting virtuously.” From a letter to Robert Skipwith, August 3, 1771

Have your students write down what they think this passage is telling them and why it is important in their lives.

Example number two:

to contradict the giver of life who gave it for happiness & not for wretchedness; and “This to men of certain ways of thinking would be to annihilate the blessing of existence; certainly to such it were better that they had never been born. However with these I may think public service & private misery inseparably linked together, I have not the vanity to count myself among those whom the state would think worth oppressing with perpetual service.” From a letter to James Monroe, May 20, 1782

Repeat the activity you did with writing number one.

Hand out writings of Jefferson without the passages underlined. Ask the students to write down in their commonplace books what they consider to be the important lines and why they think the words they chose are important to them.

Writing number three:

“From the practice of the purest virtue, you may be assured you will derive the most sublime comforts in every moment of life, and in the moment of death. If ever you find yourself environed with difficulties and perplexing circumstances, out of which you are at a loss how to extricate yourself, do what is right, and be assured that that

will extricate you the best out of the worst situations. Though you cannot see, when you take one step, what will be the next, yet follow truth, justice, and plain dealing, and never fear their leading you out of the labyrinth, in the easiest manner possible. The knot which you thought a Gordian one, will untie itself before you." From a letter to Peter Carr, August 19, 1785

Discuss with the students this selection and what they wrote and why.

Final selection:

"If he was urged to announce an opinion, he did it rather by asking questions, as if for information, or by suggesting doubts. When I hear another express an opinion, which is not mine, I say to myself, He has a right to his opinion, as I to mine; why should I question it. His error does me no injury, and shall I become a Don Quixot to bring all men by force of argument, to one opinion? If a fact be misstated, it is probable he is gratified by a belief of it, and I have no right to deprive him of the gratification." From a letter to Thomas Jefferson Randolph, November 24, 1808.

Again discuss with the student their selections and reasoning.

Conclusion: Remind the students that as they study American history they are going to hear famous quotations and read other pieces of information that could be very useful to them now, for example on tests, and in the future as a body of general knowledge all American citizens should have. As Jefferson has demonstrated by his use of commonplace book learning isn't just a school place "thing" and successful people never quite studying and know they can never learn enough.

Evaluation: Student commonplace books will be collected and graded for entries made at the end of each week.

