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ACTIVITY AND ASSIGNMENT - Imagine Your Democracy— Creative Writing Responses

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ACTIVITY AND ASSIGNMENT

Imagine Your Democracy— Creative Writing Responses

OVERVIEW/ HANDOUT

As English philosopher Colin Wilson wrote, “Imagination should be used, not to escape reality, but to create it.” Walt Whitman (1819–92), the American poet, referred to democracy as an “unfinished experiment.” Keep in mind that creative writing is also an experiment: we are playing with language in order to see what happens and find out what we learn in the process. This activity is not meant to test knowledge or skills; it’s about exploring what we know and don’t know, experimenting, tapping into creativity, and reflecting on the process.

For this assignment, students will engage with a variety of primary sources related to American democracy: poems, songs, interviews, and documents. They will use these sources as inspiration for making their own creative and personal response (song, poem, story) to the explored concepts of democracy. We will be using American texts, but keep in mind that the United States is one of many democracies across the world and history. For your assignment, you may choose to respond to texts, people, or ideas from a different country.

At the end of this unit’s activities, students will share one of their Creative Responses in a Class Gallery (pieces will be shared anonymously) and turn in a written reflection about the Creative Response.

CREATIVE RESPONSES (CHOOSE ONE):

- Your own national anthem or Pledge of Allegiance.
- A poem or story about your “president.”
- An erasure poem using a primary text related to democracy (i.e., Bill of Rights, presidential speech, letter, etc.).

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Synthesize concepts related to democracy in imaginative ways, taking risks towards creative thinking/discovery.
- Connect personal experience/ideas to concepts/documents/principles, etc., related to democracy.
- Learn about primary sources in their original context.
- Interpret and analyze texts.
- Critically reflect on own process/experience/learning and how these might apply in different contexts.

GRADING

This assignment is meant as an early, “pump-priming” activity, to get students thinking about elements of democracy (power, leadership, representation, responsibilities), to introduce them to some primary source documents related to American democracy/history, and to use creative inquiry to connect some of these ideas to their own values, experiences, and concerns. As such, grading should be a complete/incomplete or P/F based on whether or not they completed all elements of the assignment.

KEYWORDS

activity, assignment, flexible, sequenced/scaffolded assignment, in-class, research-based, creative writing, general education, civic learning, introductory course

Part 1/ Option 1: My President/National Anthem Activity

The instructor can decide whether to do both or either Part 1 and/or Part 2 for students' projects for the gallery.

OVERVIEW/ HANDOUT

Instructor shares the Imagine your Democracy Handout (see above).

IN-CLASS ACTIVITY: PRESIDENTS, ANTHEMS, PLEDGES, RESOLUTIONS

1. Instructor introduces the activity, and the class reads/listens to each of the following texts. Talk about how some of these pieces respond to or use primary sources as inspiration. Go over the primary sources as well. Readings can also be assigned ahead of time to be reviewed during class.

WATCH/ READ:

- [“My President”](#) (2020. Lift Every Voice) by Danez Smith ([text](#))
- [“The New American Anthem”](#) (2021. The Climate Museum. YouTube) by Ada Limon
- [The US National Anthem: “The Star Spangled Banner”](#) (Smithsonian. “The Lyrics.” Accessed April 13, 2024.)
- [“Lift Every Voice and Sing”: Black National Anthem](#) (2020. NAACP. YouTube)
- The Pledge of Allegiance
- [I Pledge Allegiance to the Republic](#) by Yasmine Ameli (2022. The Sun)

HAVE STUDENTS TAKE NOTES WHILE LISTENING:

- what do you notice?
 - what lines stand out to you?
 - what questions arise?
 - what themes or ideas do some/all of these have in common?
 - how are they different from one another?
 - what else do they remind you of?
2. **Think/Pair/Share** ideas from note-taking.
 3. **In Class or Homework Writing Prompts:**
 - What does it mean to be “the president?” If you could choose anyone from your life to be “president,” who would you choose and why? What would they be president of? Write a poem or tell a story about them that shows why they should be president.
 - Write your own national anthem or “pledge of allegiance.” Who/what do you pledge allegiance to and why? Or write an antipledge or anti-anthem, including why you reject an anthem or pledge.

ADDITIONAL SOURCE

[Video on the Pledge of Allegiance: “One Nation, Under God”](#) (2015. NPR)

Part 2/ Option 2: Blackout Poem of Primary Sources

PREP FOR BLACKOUT POEM ACTIVITY

1. Read/listen to [“Declaration” by Tracy K. Smith](#) (2018. Poetry Foundation)
2. Watch video on [Blackout Poem Process](#)
3. Read the primary sources on your own. Take a few notes about which ones are the most intriguing to you and why.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Note: Instructors can choose from the list below or find their own primary sources to work from. [DocsTeach](#), from the National Archives, is an excellent resource. It’s best to use short texts or excerpts for this assignment.

- [The Bill of Rights](#) (Amendments to the US Constitution) (DocsTeach, National Archive. Accessed April 13, 2024)
- [“The Star-Spangled Banner” \(US National Anthem\)](#)
- [Executive Order 9066 authorizing Japanese American Internment Camps](#) (DocsTeach, National Archive. Accessed April 13, 2024)
- [List of Banned Books](#) (2020. “Top 100 Most Banned and Challenged Books: 2010–2019,” American Library Association)
- [Harvey Milk’s Speech at Gay Freedom Day Celebration in San Francisco](#) (DocsTeach, National Archive. Accessed April 13, 2024)
- [Printed Pamphlet Against Suffrage](#) (DocsTeach, National Archive. Accessed April 13, 2024)
- [Affidavit of Tul-lux Hol-li-quilla regarding the treaties of 1855 and 1865](#) (DocsTeach, National Archive. Accessed April 13, 2024)

ADDITIONAL SOURCES FOR CONTEXT

US Constitution History (National Archive. Accessed April 13, 2024)

IN CLASS ACTIVITY: ERASURE POEM

Materials: pencils and felt-tip pens. Extra pieces of paper, scissors and glue sticks or tape. Multiple printed copies of primary sources (see above).

1. If needed: Re-Watch [Blackout Poem Process](#)
2. Have students pick a page from one of the primary sources.
3. Create blackout poems in the classroom, or as homework.

Part 3: In Class Activity: Write Your Own Democracy Gallery

IN CLASS ACTIVITY

Materials: tape, sticky notes

1. Prior to class, give students time to revise and finish the Imagine Democracy piece they'd like to show in the gallery.
2. During class, collect the (unsigned) pieces and hang them around the room.
3. Invite students to peruse the gallery and post sticky notes commenting, or writing questions, about the pieces.
4. End with a large group discussion: impressions and reactions to individual pieces and/or the assignment in general.

HOMEWORK TO BE TURNED IN WITH CREATIVE RESPONSE FOR GRADING:

Write an "artist's statement" (100–200 words) to accompany your creative piece. In your statement address some, or all, of the following questions:

- What is it? Why did you choose it?
- What inspired you?
- What was it like making it?
- What do you know now that you didn't before making it?
- How was making it different from writing a summary or report about democracy?
- If you had more time to work on it, what would you change?

OPTION/ ADDITION

After writing their piece, but before completing the artist statement, have students do some background research on the primary source they chose.