

Lesson Template for James Madison Foundation

Recommended Grade/Ability Level

Currently this practice/technique is used with sophomore (semester course) Advanced Placement Government students.

Recommended Lesson Length

This is a lesson that is initiated during the end of the first week of the semester and continues until the end of the semester (and beyond).

Central Engagement Question/Essential Question

The central theme is that of human nature. Specifically how human nature relates to Federalist #10 and Federalist #51.

Overview

A major obstacle teaching sophomore AP Government for semester duration is the implementation of outside reading and the comprehension of primary sources. Namely, the incorporation of the Federalist Papers, which are both relevant and necessary, pose a challenge for students not yet exposed to AP United States History or have limited reading comprehension.

Materials*

Federalist #10 and Federalist #51

Background Information/Homework/Pre-Learning

NOTHING

Anticipatory Activity/Bell-Ringer

NONE

Activity (Activities)

Toward the end of the first week of the semester (typically on a Friday in the last ten (10) minutes of class) I provide the class with my observations of each of them. I tell the class that collectively “you are the elites of the school...the leaders in AP and honors classes...extracurricular...student council...athletics...” While doing so I generally point to the student engaged in said activity. As I continue my explanation of my observations, I begin to call them each by name...”John, I’ve noticed this about you...Jane...definitely, Joey...each of you...Brian, Betty, etc...”(I generally have 32 students per class). As I slowly crescendo with about two (2) minutes left in the class I tell them they are extremely, unbelievable, impressively (insert your own adverbs).....SELFISH...SELF-ABSORBED...SELF-CONCERNED...full of SELF-INTEREST.

Generally, most are taken-a-back, some are shocked and offended, and one or two students agree and comment that their parents tell them that on occasion. I then tell them not to worry that I too am concerned with my self-interest.

As the bell is about to ring for the weekend I tell them to develop a defense to as why they are not selfish.

Wrap-Up

Certainly many come back and explain how they are good students, friends, sons/daughters and that they have been raised not to be selfish. Then, I start to “interrogate” each student about their stance. For example, I may ask “why do you try in school?” Students answer usually, “So I can get into a good college.” My response, “That’s selfish.” I continue along this line of questioning for 10-15 minutes slowly changing my language from “selfish” to “self-interest.” Eventually most student (never all) agree that they do put their self-interest before others most of the time, but that is what they have been taught to do.

I explain that they haven’t been taught to put self-interest first, but they are wired to do so. Usually I give the example of a crying baby in the middle of the night...they want to eat or be changed regardless of their parents need to sleep...self-interest.

I usually give the story about the brilliance of flight attendants and why I enjoy flying. During the pre-flight instructions the attendants go out of their way to let you know if cabin pressure drops to put on your mask before helping others- the lesson...if you don't take care of yourself first, you can't help others.

Of course, the lesson is consistent of what James Madison tells us...self-interest is human nature.

Assessment

For the following week I ask, "What do we know about human nature?" Response..."It's full of self-interest." As the semester continues I will periodically ask, "What do we know about human nature?" Whether we are discussing the media, interest groups, political parties, elections, Congress, Presidency, etc...I remind the students that Madison identified human nature within the Federalist Papers and constructed a government that would not eliminate self-interest, but contain it. Likewise, reminding the students about self-interest (especially 10th graders) helps put into perspective why there is divisiveness within our society.

Former student often (very often) cite this as something that ties the entire class together and allows them to bring together the many moving parts of AP Government. Given the fact that my 150 AP Government students are 10th graders and many are not enrolled in an Honors English class they need support in digesting the very complex concepts.