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May 2015

LESSON PLAN

Parcels for Posterity

CLASS DISCUSSION

May 18th is International Museum Day!

International Museum Day reminds us of the importance of our heritage; that museums keep our traditions, treasures, and culture safe. Connecting us with the people of our past, they also promise to do the same for our children and our children's children, creating a bridge between past and present. The theme for this year's IMD is "Museums for a Sustainable Society", celebrating museums for the public educational role they play. While keepers of our antiquity, museums also help remind its visitors to take steps to better preserve our environment as well, making them as equally invested in the future as they are in the past and present.

America is full of wonderfully kept museums, parks, and heritage sites that tell stories about different subgroups, moments in time, trends in art, battles and victories won. Few, however, are as old and respected as the Smithsonian, the largest museum and research complex in the world. Founded in 1846 by an Act of Congress, the Smithsonian is the legacy of British scientist James Smithson. Smithson was a respected scholar in Europe who traveled extensively, but never set foot on American soil. It was his dying wish that his estate – which equaled 1/66 of the Federal budget at the time – be entrusted to the United States to establish "at Washington, under the name of the Smithsonian Institution, an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge." Few understood the reasoning for Smithson's generosity; some believed that he appreciated America's "experiment" with democracy; others thought he embraced the values of the Royal Institution, which promoted scientific knowledge as a tool to better the human condition.

Lesson Plan Continued



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Regardless, Smithson's contribution went on to have an astounding impact on the cultural landscape of America, and thousands upon thousands of museums throughout these United States.

ACTIVITY

Write a letter to Mr. Smithson telling him about a favorite object you've seen in a museum, and then introduce him to an item from your life that you'd like to see preserved.

With your class, have a discussion about museums, what they are, and why they're important. Perhaps you've visited one on a recent fieldtrip. What was the purpose of that – or any – museum?

During a class writing session, ask students to try to remember one item they've encountered in a museum that struck them. Ask them to answer the following questions about it on a sheet of paper:

1. Name the item.
2. What was this item used for and why do you think someone created it?
3. Where and when was this object employed, seen, or celebrated?
4. Who created this object (if it's artificial); who used or enjoyed it?
5. Most importantly, why do you think this item was in a museum? Perhaps it was:
 - Artistic or beautiful
 - Religious or sacred
 - An example of everyday life
 - A possession of an important person
 - An example of breakthrough technology or engineering.

Next, your students will consider one item that is significant to themselves or their families. Perhaps this item is deep and sentimental, like an heirloom, or perhaps it has less substantial meaning, like an iPad or a video game system. Regardless, ask them to compose a letter to Mr. Smithson introducing him to today's world and proposing that he install the student's item in his museum. Ask students to answer the following questions:

1. Name your item.
2. Explain its purpose. Why was it created?
3. How old is this object? Is it timeless and important? Or is it something that will inevitably be replaced or updated?
4. To whom does this object relate? Are you the only one who enjoys it, or is it something your family or other kids your age enjoy?

5. Finally, tell Mr. Smithson why this object belongs in a museum. Perhaps it is:
 - A reflection of pop culture or current artistic trends
 - Religious or sacred; perhaps it holds important patriotic significance
 - Representative of every-day life in the 21st century
 - An example of current technology.

Students should read letters aloud in class. Consider executing this activity as part of a "show and tell" program.

DESIRED OUTCOME

The International Council on Museums reminds us that one of the most critical challenges presented to museums is time. As institutions founded on the principal of preservation and maintenance, they are threatened by a universe that is becoming increasingly less tactile and far more conscious of a carbon footprint. Another vital component to a museum's success is interest: in a world that faces such a turbulent and fickle social climate, how can we ensure that people will still care, value, and appreciate the heritage museums strive so hard to protect? In this lesson plan we hope to spread the message of this year's IMD by helping your students understand the importance of preservation. While context and history is vital to a museum artifact, respect and curiosity for that history is timeless. Your student's Xbox is just as important as a 15th-century doll, because it is an icon of childhood. It, in a sense, is a sociological treasure.

CURRICULUM STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.1

- Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.
- Introduce a topic or text clearly, state an opinion, and create an organizational structure in which ideas are logically grouped to support the writer's purpose.

National Council for the Social Studies

- I. Culture
 - a. "Culture" refers to the behaviors, beliefs, values, traditions, institutions, and ways of living together of a group of people.
 - b. Concepts such as: similarities, differences, beliefs, values, cohesion, and diversity.
- II. Time, Continuity, and Change
 - a. The study of the past is the story of communities, nations, and the world.
 - b. Concepts such as: past, present, future, similarity, difference, and change.