

Unit Plan

The Struggle for Civil Rights

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Target Group: Tenth Grade United States History

Theme: The struggle for civil rights has been a fight that has been raging throughout history.

During the 1960's, some very brave Americans fought to help African Americans gain the rights they deserved. These civil rights activists helped changed the face of America.

Number of lessons/Duration: Five lessons lasting approximately sixty minutes each

Lessons: Day one: Introduce civil rights

Day two: Civil rights seen through the eyes of activists

Day three: Civil rights: yesterday and tomorrow

Day four: Activities of civil rights activist

Day five: Civil rights speeches

Covered Standards: 5.1, 6.1

Technology: computer, video projector, cd player, television

Instructional Plan: On day one, students will be introduced to the concept of civil rights through a dictionary definition. This definition will be compared to examples of prejudice during the pre-civil rights era. An in-class discussion over the background of civil rights will conclude day one. On day two students will read quotes from various civil rights activists discussing the movement. On day three students will be assigned one civil rights activist to research. Class will be in the technology lab and students must research their particular activist and create a timeline of his or her life. On day four students will learn about the different activities used by

activists and how each strategy was successful in its own way. On day five the teacher will let students listen to recordings of some famous civil rights speeches from a cd player.

Music played a key role in uniting people during tense moments of the Civil Rights Movement, particularly in the South. Some of the most popular songs were actually adaptations of traditional hymns sung in African American churches. Lyrics were sometimes composed on the spot during demonstrations, identifying issues and people at whom the demonstrations were directed. Strong and talented singers emerged in each community, usually from members of local church choirs. The music of the movement became a unifying force for black communities.

The music of the Civil Rights Movement played a greater political role than many people realize. In politicizing the spiritual, the movement gained a powerful but non-violent weapon in the struggle for civil rights (*African American Music*). The type of congregational singing familiar to African-American churchgoers also suited the needs of the movement. Most songs of the movement used the “call and response” method of singing (*Freedom Music*). Call-and-response connected the song leader and the rest of the group, while leaving room for the leader to improvise and insert new words or phrases as inspiration struck. Marches, like the 1963 march on Washington and the 1965 fifty-mile long march from Selma to Montgomery helped spawn new songs, many of which were written by participants during jail terms of up to 40 days. The Freedom Riders carried the songs to all parts of the nation, and their original messages of tolerant patience transformed into rallying cries for action and empowerment (*Freedom Rides*). As they were loaded into police wagons and crowded into jail cells during the sit-ins and Freedom Rides of the 1960s, civil rights demonstrators communicated with one another through music.

Like all genres of music, gospel during the Civil Rights Movement had to have a beginning. That beginning was when African Americans were being used as slaves (*Spirituals*).

During slavery workers were allowed to sing songs during their working time. Prisoners used to sing “chain gang” songs when they worked on the road. These songs were about working hard and getting the job done. Sometimes they sang “quiet songs” that expressed personal feelings.

Some songs were based on the slaves' experiences from the Underground Railroad. A couple of examples of these songs are *Wade in the Water*, *The Gospel Train* and *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*. After most slaves were free they went to churches or "praise houses" where they also sang songs. They had "shouts" in church when they would stomp their feet, sing, and dance.

Drawing from the reservoir of traditional African American songs, music provided a constant backdrop to the Civil Rights movement (*Civil Rights Movement*). Some songs were spirituals dating back to the era of slavery, others were songs taken from church traditions, and some were composed for specific events during the movement. Very few relied on accompanying instruments, other than clapping, but the common denominator in all of the music sung during the Civil Rights Movement was the theme of freedom (*Freedom Music*). Singing the music was a form of freedom during the movement.

Freedom songs were often sung as a motivating force during group demonstrations, mass meetings, and church services. Most of the singing was congregational, or communal, begun by a leader who was then joined by others who "grew" the song. Sometimes the leader issued a call, and the group would respond, often rotating leaders for different verses (*Inspirational Music*). Even children could become a leader at any time. Harmonies, rolling bass, and dissonance all gave the feeling of surging forward. Civil Rights activist Mary King says, “The freedom songs uplifted us. They bound us together, exalted us, and pointed the way, and, in a real sense, freed us from the shackles of psychological bondage. They captured and kept alive the yearning,

dreams, and fervency of a people under stress. Freedom songs both gave and reflected back the political fire and spiritual longings of countless individuals, in untold mass meetings” (*Voices*).

It is easy to understand why many spirituals were used as freedom songs by protesters who sang them and sometimes wrote new lyrics to further emphasize their political message. The role of those songs cannot be overstated. They tied separate groups of protesters into a unified movement with a commonality of purpose and language. They gave courage and strength in the face of danger. They gave a voice to every single black community living under the oppression of segregation (*Freedom Music*). Through these songs, they were able to express their pain and frustration as well as their hopes and demands. Bernice Johnson-Reagon gave this personal account of the power of singing: "In Dawson, Georgia, county seat of "Terrible Terrell," where Blacks were seventy-five percent of the population, I sat in church and felt the chill that ran through a small gathering of Blacks when the sheriff and his deputies walked in. They stood at the door, making sure everyone knew they were there. Then a song began. And the song made sure that the sheriff and his deputies knew we were there. We became visible; our image was enlarged as the sounds of the freedom songs filled all the space in that church” (*African American Music*).

More than anything, gospel songs and hymns, and their performance practices based on call and responses, were common cultural threads for black communities across the country. This meant that not only most civil rights protesters already knew this repertoire, but also that new songs based on familiar melodies could be learned very quickly (*Spirituals*). This process is demonstrated by the numerous examples of protest songs based on traditional gospel songs, with new lyrics written especially for particular situations. For example, the spiritual *Moses* saw its lyrics changed to, "Go down, Kennedy,/ Way down in Georgia land/ Tell old Pritchett/ To let my

people go,” during the Albany Movement. When she led the congregation in singing *Go Tell It on the Mountain* in Greenwood, MS in 1963, Fannie Lou Hamer took a song which normally celebrated the birth of Christ and, while retaining the traditional verse, interjected new lyrics to reword the song in a more relevant political context. The practice of call and responses made this very easy. The song leader can vary the call of a well-known song and the congregation can respond with the traditional verse. Another great example of this can be heard when, in Selma, AL in 1963, Betty Mae Fykes introduced the line “If you miss Governor Wallace” in the song *If You Miss Me From the Back of the Bus*. The congregation, who had been singing along with her, responded “Yeah!” with renewed energy. Fykes then continued with the traditional line “You can’t find him nowhere” and transformed the end of the verse to “Just come on over to the crazy house/ He’ll be restin’ over there” (*Freedom Rides*).

Not every protest song was meant to be sung by large groups. Some of the best compositions of the era were written and performed solely by organized and rehearsed ensembles (*Spirituals*). *Governor Wallace*, named after the governor of Alabama, was written by James Orange and sung by the SNCC Freedom Singers in a doo-wop style. It later became popular during the Selma to Montgomery March. The SNCC Freedom Singers were also responsible for two of the most moving songs about the struggle for equality. Matthew Jones wrote the first, *The Ballad of Medger Evers*, after the murder of the Civil Rights leader. The second is even more powerful. After three civil rights workers disappeared in Mississippi during the summer of 1964, the White House sent a team of FBI agents to search for the missing men. The process included dragging the rivers surrounding Philadelphia, MS where the men had disappeared. The search effort led to the gruesome recovery of several other bodies, thrown in the water after being lynched or murdered. Those events were the inspiration for the song *In the*

Mississippi River by Marshall Jones. As civil rights activist Bernice Johnson-Reagon pointed out, this is an “excellent example of the sophistication of songwriting and arrangement achieved by the second group of SNCC Freedom Singers” (*African American Music*).

There were many important songs during the Civil Rights Movement. One important song of the movement was *Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing*, written by two brothers, James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938) and J. Rosamond Johnson (1873–1954). They were born in Jacksonville, Florida. Their family enjoyed singing together. Mrs. Johnson played the piano, and Mr. Johnson played the guitar. James became a school principal, and Rosamond was a music teacher. They worked together on a number of songs. James wrote the words, and Rosamond wrote the music. Later, James Weldon Johnson became one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The song encourages African Americans to sing and march until victory is won (*Freedom Music*). This song became a song of inspirations for millions of African Americans.

The most famous song of the Civil Rights Movement was probably *We Shall Overcome* (*Civil Rights Movement*). The song expresses the belief that one day he or she may overcome the obstacles of freedom. The song derives from a gospel song containing the line “I’ll overcome some day.” In 1946, striking tobacco workers were singing hymns on the picket line. A woman named Lucille Simmons sang a long, slow meter version of the song as “We’ll Overcome.” The song was probably changed to “We Shall Overcome” at the Highlander Folk School. From there the song spread orally across the black community. The song became an anthem for civil rights activism (*Inspirational Music*). On March 16th, 1965, Lyndon Johnson used the phrase “We Shall Overcome” in a speech after Congress. This speech was only a few days after “Bloody

Sunday” in Selma, Alabama. When Johnson used this phrase, many African Americans felt like they were finally starting to accomplish a voice in their fight for civil rights.

Music will continue to be an important part of American culture. The music during the Civil Rights Movement helped unify African American communities across the South. Without music helping create a voice for the black community, African Americans might not have been so successful in their fight for civil rights.

Works Cited

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Civil Rights Movement. Encyclopedia Britannica. 2005. Encyclopedia Britannica Premium Service. 28 Aug. 2005 <http://www.britannica.com/eb/arti-9082763>.

Freedom Music. <sbmusic.com/html/teacher/reference/historical/civilrights.html>.

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Lesson Plan

Unit: The Struggle for Civil Rights

Title: Introduction to Civil Rights

Course: Tenth Grade United States History

Duration: 60 minutes

Standards: 5.1, 6.1

Strategies:

1. Students will be read a definition of civil rights from a dictionary.
2. A classroom discussion will be led illustrating various points about what civil rights entails.
3. Students will be read a definition of prejudice from a dictionary.
4. A classroom discussion will be led comparing and contrasting civil rights and prejudice.
5. A classroom discussion will be led introducing the basic concept of the civil rights movement.
6. Students will write a journal entry describing their initial thoughts about the civil rights period

Assessment: Journals will be graded on a participation basis.

Lesson Plan

Unit: The Struggle for Civil Rights

Title: Civil rights as seen through the eyes of activists

Course: Tenth Grade United States History

Duration: 60 minutes

Standards: 5.1, 6.1

Resource: Boorstin, Daniel. *A History of the United States*. Massachusetts: Prentice Hall, 2002.

Strategies:

1. The teacher will introduce some important civil rights activists via video projector.
2. The students will take notes on each activist.
3. The students will read quotes from each activist as listed in the textbook.
4. The teacher will lead an in-class discussion on these quotes and their meanings and impact on the culture of America.

Assessment: The students' notes will be checked upon completion.

Lesson Plan

Unit: The Struggle for Civil Rights

Title: Civil Rights: Yesterday and Tomorrow

Course: Tenth Grade United States History

Duration: 60 minutes

Standards: 5.1, 6.1

Strategies:

1. Students will be assigned one civil rights activist.
2. The teacher will take the class to the technology lab located in the school.
3. Students will research their activist via an internet search.
4. Students will be required to create a timeline on the life of the activist.
5. Each student will be required to make a brief presentation of their timeline describing the life of each respective activist.

Assessment: The presentation and timeline will be graded on a rubric.

Lesson Plan

Unit: The Struggle for Civil Rights

Title: Activities of Civil Rights Activist

Course: Tenth Grade United States History

Duration: 60 minutes

Standards: 5.1, 6.1

Resource: Boorstin, Daniel. *A History of the United States*. Massachusetts: Prentice Hall, 2002.

Strategies:

1. Students will be required to read a short section in the book about some of the activities activist used during the civil rights movement.
2. The teacher will lead an in-class discussion about the activities mentioned in the book.
3. The teacher will show students a timeline via the video projector that illustrates the various activities used by civil rights protestors.
4. The teacher will show pictures from the civil rights movement via the video projector.
5. The teacher will administer a quiz pertaining to today's discussion.

Assessment: Quizzes will be collected and graded.

Lesson Plan

Unit: The Struggle for Civil Rights

Title: Civil Rights Speeches

Course: Tenth Grade United States History

Duration: 60 minutes

Standards: 5.1, 6.1

Resource: *Sounds of an Era* CD

Strategies:

1. The teacher will introduce and discuss some famous speeches during the civil rights period.
2. The students will listen to an audio clip of Senator Price's reaction to Brown vs. Board of Education.
3. The students will listen to an audio clip of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech.
4. The students will listen to reporter Joe Louw's live report of the assassination of Robert Kennedy on June 5th, 1968.
5. The teacher will lead a in-class discussion about the impacts of different speeches in American History.
6. The students will be required to write an essay discussing how Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech affected them.

Assessment: The essay will be graded using a rubric.