

Calculated Acts: Civil Disobedience and Social Change

GRADE LEVEL: 7-9

TIME ALLOTMENT: Two 45-minute class periods (excluding homework time)

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will explore civil disobedience as a tool for social change, focusing specifically on Homer Plessy's 1892 refusal to leave a "whites only" train car in New Orleans, which led to the landmark Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The lesson will begin with a brief examination of other acts of civil disobedience in American History, after which students will develop a definition for the term. Next, students will examine some of the post-Civil War legislation that led Homer Plessy's arrest, and view a segment of *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross* to develop further understanding of the case and its outcome. Finally, students will research and report on other acts of civil disobedience, and assess whether or not these acts resulted in immediate societal changes, or were contributing factors in larger social movements over time. The lesson is best used in a larger unit on post-Civil War history, or as a precursor to studying the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, in particular *Brown v. Board of Education*.

SUBJECT MATTER: Social Studies

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- Define the term "civil disobedience";
- Provide multiple examples of civil disobedience American history;
- Describe some of the post-Civil War civil rights legislation that laid the groundwork for the act of civil disobedience central to the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*;
- Describe the key tenets of *Plessy v. Ferguson* and its outcome;
- Cite additional examples of civil disobedience in American history, and debate whether or not acts of civil disobedience are effective in isolation and/or against the larger sweep of history.

STANDARDS

From the Common Core Standards: English Language Arts, available online at <http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy>:

Common Core Standards, now adopted in over 40 states, are designed to help educators prepare students for success in college and careers by focusing on core knowledge and skills. The English Language Arts standards reflect the need for young people "to read, write, speak, listen, and use language effectively in a variety of content areas" including history/social studies. This curricular resource, developed to accompany *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross* aligns most closely with the following Common Core Standards:

RH.6-8.2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

RH.6-8.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

RH.6-8.7. Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

From the National Standards for United States History for grades 5-12, available online at <http://www.nchs.ucla.edu/Standards/us-history-content-standards>:

Era 6: The Development of the Industrial United States

Standard 2B: The student understands "scientific racism," race relations, and the struggle for equal rights.

Grades 9-12: Analyze the arguments and methods by which various minority groups sought to acquire equal rights and opportunities guaranteed in the nation's charter documents.

MEDIA COMPONENTS

The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross, Episode 3: "Into the Fire," selected segment.

Segment 1: A Calculated Act

An overview of Homer Plessy's act of civil disobedience and the resulting Supreme Court case. Access the video segments for this lesson at the Video Segments Page at www.pbs.org/manyrivers/foreducators.

MATERIALS

For the class:

- Computer with Internet access, projection screen, and speakers (for class viewing of online video segment)

For each student:

- "Calculated Acts" Introductory Activity
- "The Road to *Plessy v. Ferguson*" legislation organizer

PREP FOR TEACHERS

Prior to teaching this lesson, you will need to:

Preview the video segment used in the lesson. Prepare to watch it using your classroom's Internet connection.

Print out and make copies of the "Calculated Acts" Introductory Activity and the "Road to *Plessy v. Ferguson*" organizer for each student in your class.

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY

1. Ask your students what it takes to make big societal changes come about. For example, if they wanted to institute a new rule saying that teachers in your school would not be allowed to assign homework, what would they have to do? Would this change happen easily? Would it take a long time? What steps might they take in order to get a new rule like this in place? Can an individual make a difference?
2. Explain that throughout history, there have been times when people felt so deeply about a political or social issue, they resisted the status quo—the current state of affairs—in some manner. Some of these strategies were effective, some were not.
3. Tell your students that you will be examining different ways people have behaved in an effort to bring about big societal changes. Assign each student in your class a number from 1-4. Distribute the “Calculated Acts” document to each student.
4. Tell your students to examine the photograph or image matching the number they’ve been assigned. A hint accompanies each image and provides some additional information.

As they examine the image, write the following questions on the board, and ask them to answer them in their notebooks or on a separate sheet of paper:

- *Do you know what this event is?*
 - *What do you think these people are resisting or trying to change?*
 - *What words would you use to describe their actions?*
 - *Do you think they were successful in making a big change happen? Why or why not?*
5. Review the images as a class. Ask the students their responses to the questions they’ve been asked to consider. After you have reviewed each image, ask your students what similarities and differences they notice in the images. Did the Boston Tea Party resolve all of the American colonies’ arguments with Great Britain? Did the slaves escaping on the Underground Railroad end slavery? Did one woman’s arrest at the White House get women the right to vote? Do they think these individual acts brought about big changes? Why or why not?
 6. Explain that all of these images depict acts of “civil disobedience.” Project or write on the board the following quotes about civil disobedience:

“If the machine of government is of such a nature that it requires you to be of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law.” –Henry David Thoreau

“One has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.” –Martin Luther King, Jr.

7. Ask your students to, based on the images they've examined and these two quotes, develop a definition for civil disobedience. (A possible definition is "the refusal to uphold certain laws or meet certain governmental demands in an effort to make change happen.") Explain to your students that there are multiple types of civil disobedience (peaceful and violent, public and private, etc.), and that during this lesson, they will be looking at one example in depth.

LEARNING ACTIVITY

1. Tell your students you will now be examining an 1892 decision by a man named Homer Plessy that led to the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Remind your students that civil disobedience requires people to stand up against laws they feel are unjust. Explain that Homer Plessy's act was a reaction to a number of laws going back nearly 30 years.
2. Distribute "The Road to *Plessy v. Ferguson*" organizer to your students. Explain to your students that American laws have changed and grown over time; once a law is made, it isn't always necessarily permanent.

As a class, review the four key pieces of legislation that were critical to the case. Ask your students to complete the organizer as you review it. The legislation includes:

- *The 13th Amendment*: which abolished slavery in the United States and its territories, a tremendous advance in African American civil rights.
 - *The 14th Amendment*: which defines United States citizenship and prohibits state or local officials from denying rights to its citizens. The 14th Amendment is one of the most litigated and debated parts of the Constitution, and has formed the basis of cases as diverse as *Roe v. Wade* and *Bush v. Gore*. The amendment represented an advance in African American rights, but its interpretation has varied over time.
 - *The Civil Rights Act of 1875*: which guaranteed African Americans equal treatment in public accommodations, transportation, and prohibited exclusion from serving on a jury. The Act represented a significant advance in African American civil rights.
 - *The "Civil Rights Cases" Supreme Court Ruling of 1883*: which declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional. The Court ruled that the 14th amendment prohibits discrimination by the state, but it does not give the government power to prohibit discrimination by individuals, organizations, or businesses. The Court also ruled that the 13th Amendment eliminated "the badge of slavery," but did not prohibit discrimination in public accommodations. This decision was changed by subsequent cases and laws over many years.
3. Tell your students they will now examine Homer Plessy's act of civil disobedience in 1892. They will be watching a segment from the PBS series *The African Americans*:

Many Rivers to Cross. As your students watch the segment, ask them to consider what the results of Homer Plessy's act of civil disobedience might be for his act, based on their knowledge of civil rights laws at the time.

4. Play the segment "A Calculated Act." (Access the video segments for this lesson at the Video Segments Page.) Pause the video when you see the steps of the Supreme Court building, and after Dr. Gates says, "the case did make it to the Supreme Court."

Ask your students what would happen if the Court ruled in favor of Homer Plessy (*Public transportation and accommodations would be desegregated under the Fourteenth Amendment*). Ask your students what would happen if the Court ruled against Homer Plessy and upheld Louisiana's segregation laws. (*Public transportation and accommodations would remain legally segregated.*) Ask your students to predict what the Court's decision was. (*The Supreme Court ruled against Homer Plessy and upheld Louisiana's segregation laws.*)

5. Play the rest of the video segment. Ask your students if Homer Plessy won his case (*No.*) Ask your students what they think Dr. Gates meant when he said, "The United States Constitution was no longer colorblind." (*Plessy vs. Ferguson made segregation, and "separate but equal," law.*) Ask your student what they think "separate but equal" means. (*Under the separate but equal doctrine, services, facilities and public accommodations were allowed to be separated by race, on the condition that the quality of each group's public facilities was to remain equal.*)
6. Explain that, as mentioned in the video segment, "separate but equal" laws segregated schools, transportation, restaurants, hotels, and many other aspects of American life for more than fifty years after *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Ask your students if any of them know the Supreme Court case that overturned *Plessy vs. Ferguson* as it applied to public education. (*Brown v. Board of Education.*)
7. Ask your students if they think Homer Plessy's act of civil disobedience was effective, if it took over fifty years for segregation laws to change (*Student answers will vary.*) Remind students of the acts of civil disobedience they examined at the beginning of the lesson. Did those acts produce immediate results? Did social change happen later? Was it the direct result of civil disobedience or a result of many other factors? (*Accept all answers.*)

CULMINATING ACTIVITY

1. Ask each of your students to select another act of civil disobedience from American History to examine more closely. Potential topics include:
 - Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott
 - 1934 General Strikes in San Francisco, Minneapolis, and Toledo
 - The Freedom Riders
 - The Boston Tea Party
 - Women's suffrage voting arrests (including Susan B. Anthony)
 - Student sit-ins against Vietnam
 - Antiwar protests
 - Abortion rights advocates and opponents
 - The 1960 Greensboro and Nashville Sit-Ins
 - Occupy Wall Street
 - The Underground Railroad
 - The Anti-Nuclear Movement
 - Same-Sex Marriage protests
2. Ask your students to research and report on a) who the key players were in the act of civil disobedience, b) what was the act of civil disobedience they committed, what laws or policies the civil disobedience was seeking to change, c) whether or not the civil disobedience created immediate social or legal change, and d) whether or not the law or policy ultimately changed.
3. After your students have completed their reports, debate the question "Are acts of civil disobedience in American history effective in isolation, or one of many contributing factors that contribute to social change?" Ask them to cite specific examples from this lesson and their research in their responses.