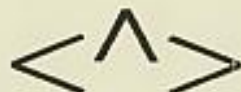


Schools for the Fifth Epoch

leaning toward the universe-aware classroom



Because a child doesn't understand a chain of reasoning,
Should adults give up being rational?
If reasonable people don't feel the presence of love
within the universe, that doesn't mean it's not there.

~ Rumi ~

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Teaching in the Universe-Aware Classroom: Components of an Approach

Goal: To create a growth-friendly environment that helps students develop nut and bolt skills, critical thought and openness to the possibility of a bigger, brighter, more meaningful universe.

1) Plan/outline courses around spiritual/universe realities:

> *Design courses around universe themes*

Sample included

> *Balance the Dark Canon with readings offering a universe in which we might deserve to belong. Sample Canon Balancers:*

* *To Kill a Mockingbird* (secondary)

visions of justice, love, courage, and a compassionate father

* *Les Miserables* (secondary)

a vision of a universe of powerful growth and progress in a compassionate universe, beginning amid suffering on earth

* *Jane Eyre* (secondary, college)

a vision of spiritual growth assisted by nature, heaven, and prayer in a responsive universe

* *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (secondary, college)

a vision of a universe in which love and goodness of heart can transcend even the legacy of earthly slavery

Harston

* *Other titles from audience?*

2) Foster classroom climate of intellectual openness to spirit

> *Quote Log* (Purpose: to expand students' perspectives and notion of community: classroom >>> school >>> city/town >>> state >>> nation >>> world >>> universe.)

Sample included

> *Inquiry Approach: Student Questions Rule*

* *Design Curriculum around students' "Big Questions"*

* *Encourage "Universe-Class" questions*

* *Question Log (Reading/discussion connection)*

* *Question-based essay assignments (Writing connection)*

> *Goethean Conversation: a conscious form of interaction from Rudolf Steiner*

3) Create Projects to Enhance Spiritual Growth

> *Sample Entry Project: The Wisdom Project*

> *Sample Exit Project: The Personal Creed Project*

Sample included

4) Share your personal growth with students

5) Meditate, pray, and prepare your feelings (*Steiner*) for students' growth

Course Description:
Changing Visions of Life and the Universe

Without the vision and the power, this learning will do no good.
Lame Deer, seeker of visions

What I do is me.
For that I came.
Gerard Manley Hopkins

What students want to learn is as important
as what teachers want to teach.
Lois E. LeBar

Welcome to your second year of high school English! I'd like to begin by wishing you a fun and challenging experience in this class. I hope you will join me in letting your hopes run high. For one of my main goals this year is to rely as much as possible on your ideas and input in decisions about how we run this class--and even what we study. I thank you in advance for your involvement and for the pleasure of being your teacher.
Cheers, Mr. C.

I. What This Class is About

A few centuries ago, human beings thought the world was a flat disk at the center of the universe. The planets, moon, sun and stars, people thought, revolved around the earth. Today we know that the world is a sphere, a ball that isn't at the center of anything to speak of, and that it orbits, spinning, around a star we call the sun. The countless millions of stars we see on a clear night away from city lights are only a small portion of the actual number of stars in the universe. Recent discoveries reported earlier this year suggest that most stars are in fact suns, centers of their own solar systems, each orbited by its own planets. So the number of planets in the universe far exceeds the number of suns, probably reaching into the trillions. Early in this century, when we had even less idea of the true size of the universe, most scientists assumed that the conditions necessary for life had come together on earth only by chance, and that it was highly unlikely that life as we know it existed on any other planet. But to many astronomers today, the idea that among all the trillions of worlds, living creatures have come into being on only one--this one--seems far less likely. To put it gently, our vision of life and the universe is changing.

What does it mean to live in a universe as vast as this one now seems to be? What has been said, what is being thought about such things? What exactly *is* the universe, anyway? Does it exist only outside us, or inside us as well? Is it like the earth, only bigger--vaster expanses of injustice and suffering, loneliness, greed and war? Or is it a place of love and compassion? Are we to be forever separate from it, disconnected, lost, abandoned? Or is the universe reaching even now to each of our hearts, helping us to recognize ourselves as its children, treasured beyond our present ability to understand? Is American High School part of the universe? Is how we answer this question important in our lives? This class--the reading and discussions, the thinking and artwork, the drama and writing we will do together--will be about helping each other ask and explore questions like these.

Sample Quotes for the Universe-Aware Classroom

"The higher a [person's] education, the more respect he or she has for the knowledge, experience, and opinions of others." *O. H. de Uversa*

"One who learns from a learner drinks from a swiftly flowing river."
Indian proverb

"It's not the knowing of the truth that is important, but the searching for it."
T. Tarkas

"Driven by anxiety, we build prisons; driven by hope we build schools."
NPR report

"Only the strong are truly tolerant."
T. Ham

"You can't pull up a flower to see how the roots are doing."
S. Covey

"To every problem there is one solution, which is simple, neat, and wrong."
H.L. Mencken

"Failure is simply an educational episode, a cultural experiment in the acquisition of wisdom." *M.D. Wayer*

"What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the rest of the world calls a butterfly." *Richard Bach*

"You must be the change you wish to see in the world."
Mahatma Gandhi

"Much of human experience is learning that your life is only a transition."
T. Ham

"You will learn that you increase your burdens and decrease the likelihood of success by taking yourself too seriously." *A. R. Changel*

"We can't prevent birds of sorrow from flying overhead. We can only prevent their building nests in our hair." *Chinese proverb*

"Do not fear that your life will fall apart as you tend to others' needs, for the opposite will result." *T. Elyon*

"Computers are useless. They only give you answers." *Pablo Picasso*

Personal Creed Project

Spring 1999

"If you don't stand for something,
you just might fall for anything."

Vern Bennom Grimsley,
radio commentator

Dear English 10 Student,

With this quote, we kick-off the first of the year's two final projects: your Personal Creed Project. One thing I hope this course will do for you is to help you begin to understand the surprising way our lives flow directly from our vision of reality. Your personal vision is like the headwaters of your life. Not far downstream from your vision of life your values form, further along your viewpoints, then your attitudes and, only then, bobbing along sometimes far from their source, your actions.

I hope you can see how important it is for each of us to devote some time and care to the search for a personal vision. (Remember the title of this course?) If it is to serve us well, a vision of life must help us harmonize the conflicting outer realities of our world and universe with the inner realities of our hearts, minds, and spirits. If this course does anything to help spark or renew your interest in your own personal search, I am grateful, and my hopes are fulfilled.

Two main purposes drive this assignment. The first is to offer you the chance to think back over your life so far, including this year we've spent together reading books, writing, and discussing many things under sun and stars. You'll reflect--that is, think back--on characters in books, characters who have made some impression on you. You'll reflect on family members, friends, neighbors, community members--real people in your life who have influenced you in various ways. You'll consider whether your life has been impacted by public figures like sports and entertainment personalities.

You will then ask yourself the question:

What visions of life, what values, do these literary characters, these real people, these public figures, seem most to stand for?

You'll reflect on which characters and real people, which visions and values you admire and which not. You'll think about characters and people whose visions or values you've seen *change*. You'll consider what forces and conditions cause *our* visions of reality and *our* characters to change.

With these characters and real people in mind, the second purpose of the project is to provide an occasion for you to ask yourself some simple questions about how you yourself see reality. You will then form a tentative statement of your own values--your personal creed. I say *tentative* (meaning "for the time being"), because it takes time to develop ideas you feel strongly enough about to base your life on. Actually, creating your own personal vision and value system is a lifelong process. As your vision develops, some of your values will change; others will remain constant.

The assignment will give you a chance to consider what values you now hold in highest esteem. It will help you decide what values you believe are also important, which ones you feel no longer fit your vision, and which you might set out on the curb someday and recycle. Once you have a preliminary statement of your creed, I will ask you to examine it critically in preparation for your project paper and your creative visual presentation. More later on these. As always, I'll appreciate any input you offer along the way.

Steps I through IV below will be extended inquiries, each one *a full page to a page and a half in length*. Respond to your choice of the questions accompanying each set of instructions. *Idea for a creative alternative?* Please discuss with me first.

I - Influences and Inspirations: Real People and Literary Characters--

Make a list of seven to ten people in your life--real people like family, friends, neighbors, community members, public figures (celebrities, singers, athletes), and fictional characters from books--who have influenced or inspired you in some way, positively or negatively. Try to include at least one person you feel may have influenced you negatively. At least three of them should be literary characters.

Following each character or person in your list, identify the main values each stands for in your mind. How do you think this person or character sees life? *What does she or he stand for?* (To help you get started, respond to your choice of the questions below.)

Does the person see life as a place where might makes right, where only the best fighters or the cleverest operators survive? Or does this person see the world as a place in which we each must stand for something beyond ourselves? Does he or she see life as a struggle to "get yours" before someone else gets it, or as a place where you get what you need in life by serving others? Does this person believe "life is hell and then you die"? Or does she or he see this life as a first taste of an endless life in a universe permeated by the love of a caring God? These are only some of the possibilities.

Which characters or people do you know have gone through *a change in values*? Compare the *causes* of these changes, if you know them. *What conditions and forces do you think cause a person's vision of life and, thereby, values to change?*

II - Most and Least Admirable--

Look over your list from Step I above. Which of these characters or real people do you *most admire* for her or his vision or values? Why? Give specific examples. What other characters from your list do you admire?

What person or character do you *least admire*? Explain, giving specific examples. What other characters or people from your list do you *not* admire much? Why?

What do you suppose your choices of most and least admirable person say about your own values?

III - Preliminary Creed Statement--

Write a preliminary statement of your personal creed--the vision/values you hold at this point in highest regard. Incorporate values you have learned from your family, religion (if you profess one), peers, personal experience, books, music, films, or any other source including literature you have read.

Re-read your last paragraph in Step I. Which of your own values do you feel are probably constant (unchanging)? Which do you predict may change in time? Explain, using examples.

How would you describe your current vision of reality? Do you see yourself as having a purpose here on earth? If so, how would you express it? Are you here to get what you can grab before you die? Or are you here to learn about yourself and learn to be tolerant of others? Are you here to accumulate wealth and security? Or are you here to learn what it means to serve others? Are you here to survive as comfortably as possible? Or are you here to leave the world a better place for your having lived here? (*Again, answer your choice of the questions above. Feel free to explore your own questions too!*)

Create or find a saying that reflects your personal creed. (For one good example, see the saying at the top of page 1 of these instructions. Tip: try your Quote Log.)

IV -Your Arch Critic Speaks--

Imagine someone whose values are *opposite*, nearly opposite, or at least very different from your own. Imagine this person as clearly as possible, down to clothes, facial expression, how his or her voice sounds. Write a detailed physical description of how you imagine him or her. What criticisms and objections do you suppose this person would make about the values you expressed in your preliminary creed statement (Step III)? Express these objections in a newspaper editorial, a television political advertisement, a speech, a poem, or any other creative way that comes to you. *Create a critique, that is, of your own vision or values.*

Student Comments on Personal Creed Project

(and other components of an approach to teaching for expanded insight)

June 1998

I would say to keep the Creed Project & Portfolio. I really liked them because I got to explore myself and my belief. I never really thought of my beliefs or needed to for school, so these projects you should keep.

The only thing I think you should change is the presentation of our creed projects. I get way too nervous around a lot of people, making presentations, so I wouldn't want others to almost embarrass themselves like me.

(Harvin Toledo, chief class disrupter)

During this course I like doing the creed project. The only time I can get to my inner self is during church and church camps.

I also like it because we got to film it.

(David Leslie, son of Episcopal priest, assistant class disrupter)

One project I enjoyed was the Creed Project. I had a great time working in my group. One thing I would change is if I had a chance to do the creed project next year I would probably do the presentation by myself, just so I can express some of my own thoughts and be recognized for them.

(Corina Haralson, a shy student)

The Creed Project was the best because it lets out all your feelings so you can just cry it all out.

(Haseeb Halimi)

I feel you should keep the Creed Project, the Portfolio Project, and the quote logs.... The creed makes you search yourself and also tells everyone what you believe in. The portfolio because you get to pick out all your favorite writings, and share them with other people.

And the quote log because the class discussions are good, it brings the class close together and you discuss what you feel about each quote.

(Amy Gibson)

My Personal Creed and Mission

Written at the request of a class

J. Creger, 6 June 1998

1. The universe is like a mountain; each of us is finding a path to the top.

2. Your path and my path are like our inner natures, unique--
unlike any other. There are as many paths as people to walk them.

3. Life is about finding and walking our paths.

4. Many things can help us: religious traditions, philosophies, life experience,
friendships, knowledge, an openness to finding our way.

But these things are not our path.

Religion, for me, is like my roots. Spirituality is like my flower.

The religions of the world can help nourish me, but a tradition is not
my goal. My goal is to grow spiritually, to find my path and walk on it.
As I see it, the goal for each of us--in our own unique way--is to bloom,
and, in blooming, more and more to come to love others and ourselves.

5. Two great adventures help us find and walk our paths. One of these
is the adventure of coming into our gifts. Each of us has a unique combination of
gifts from the universe, or God. Our lives are a process
of discovering and developing these gifts that often lie hidden inside us.

6. Another great adventure along our paths is friendships--relationships.
Relationships with others--family, friends, coworkers, acquaintances, teachers of
all kinds--is one of the main ways we become ourselves. Learning about others
and their paths helps us stretch ourselves
into new shapes. To do this takes a lot of love.

7. My creed is to discover and develop my own gifts, and help friends I meet along
the path find and cultivate theirs. My mission is to do these things with a calm
and thankful heart.
And a lot of love.

A Testimonial

Note: A year ago Nicole Verser began spring semester chronically late, sleeping in class, and did failing work most of the way through. In the end she managed to earn a passing grade. Largely, I think, she slowly began to see value for herself in the Creed Project, Quote Log, and other elements of the course described earlier.

I share her course evaluation here not only to boast shamelessly, something teachers need to do more of, but to offer what I feel is an especially credible student voice in support of the approach I am attempting to develop and describe, and other approaches like it. Thank you, Nicole.

"I found this course interesting and certainly an exciting experience. Many people thought your work was too abundant but I find you a fantastic teacher and your intentions for your students full of your soul. I can't remember a teacher I have enjoyed as much as I did you. Your organization and comfort made me want to learn. I enjoyed your course and your next year's student are truly lucky. Thank you and have a good summer!"

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Rumi. *The Essential Rumi*. Trans. Coleman Barks. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995.

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Steiner, Rudolf. *Balance in Teaching: Meditatively Acquired Knowledge of the Human Being*. Spring Valley, N.Y.: Mercury, 1990. Four lectures delivered in Stuttgart, 1920.

The Urantia Book. Chicago: Urantia Foundation, 1955.

Closing Journal

What have you learned in this workshop that you feel is of value?

Schools for the Fifth Epoch:

Leaning Toward the Universe-Aware Classroom

Workshop Evaluation

I came here expecting:

I actually experienced:

I most value:

I least value:

I make the following suggestion/comment:

Please add me to your mailing list for information on forthcoming "Universe-Aware" workshops and materials.

[Project pending: "Quotes for the Universe-Aware Classroom" (booklet).]

name: _____

address: _____

email: _____

*Please tear off and leave this evaluation with me.
Thank you for participating!*