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ENGL 4800

Dr. Webb

Cultural Studies Unit Plan

I chose to create a cultural studies unit plan using Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. I intend to use this play to explore existentialist philosophy. As a pre-service educator, I have often been told to teach students about themes that are relevant to their lives, just as a cultural studies approach is meant to do. By using existentialist philosophy as my theme, I intend to teach students about the relevance of their lives as a whole.

Themes like identity and relationships are no doubt forefront in the minds of adolescents. Every teenager longs to understand who he or she is and where he or she belongs. But in what spectrum? School? Society? Family life? Studying literature with a philosophical approach takes the same spectrum a little bit further by asking students to consider who they are and where they belong in the world. Studying existentialism forces students to question not only why reading *Waiting for Godot* matters, but also why *they* matter and helps to create a connection between the two.

I would begin this unit with a general introduction to the origin and definition of existentialism as a movement started by Soren Kierkegaard and expanded and adapted in various ways by Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Arthur Shopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, and even Franz Kafka. We would examine how each philosopher took the stated philosophy and altered it to shape their own beliefs. As supplementary material to this detailed discussion, we would listen to a 30 minute BBC overview of existentialist philosophy, with particular emphasis on its relevance in today’s world, which can be found at [http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/console/p0054 7h8/In\_Our\_Time\_Existentialism](http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/console/p0054%207h8/In_Our_Time_Existentialism).

We would next examine how philosophical ideals are presented in literature by reading segments from *Humanistic Existentialism: The Literature of Possibility* by Hazel Estella Barnes followed by Camus’ short *Myth of Sisyphus*, a tale that chronicles one man’s task of rolling a boulder up a hill only to find it forever rolls back down, creating an endless and futile existence. We would discuss (as a general note, most of this unit is discussion based) examples of repetitive or mundane tasks within our own lives and gradually apply them to higher levels of life (ex. from brushing our teeth up to our educational career as a complete entity) and determine what has meaning and where that meaning comes from. We would attempt to make connections between personal meanings and I would introduce the concept of the human condition as a result of these connections and as a transition into reading an article titled *Existentialist Perception Of The Human Condition: With Special Reference To Sartre* by Dr.D.R.Bhandari.

From here we would begin our performance of *Waiting for Godot,* acting it out with student parts. Students watching the performance would be encouraged to take notes on existential dialogue or actions throughout the play and upon its completion (probably after 2 or 3 class periods of performance) we would have a class discussion identifying and determining the significance of existential moments in the play. We would determine Beckett’s message regarding existentialism and identify which philosophers would be most likely to agree or disagree with it and why. Our discussions would be aided by assigned critical essays: *Beckett and the Theater of the Absurd* by Martin Esslin; and *Waiting for Godot and Principles of Uncertainty* by William Hutchings.

The unit assessment would be an essay prompting students to answer the questions Who is Godot? What is the human condition? And how, if at all, are the two related? Each response would force students to consider both the context of the play and themselves as individuals in the philosophical realm of making sense of the world. By the end of the unit, students should understand the basis of existentialist philosophy and how it is applied in literature. They should be able to recognize elements of existentialism in other works, even when it’s not the central component, and most importantly, students should understand that existentialism is one of many *options* for explaining meaning and purpose, or lack thereof. This unit should encourage students to seek their own philosophies, explanations, and answers for life’s greatest questions.

If time permitted, I could extend this unit plan further by encouraging students to discover existentialism in popular culture. Modern novelist Chuck Palahniuk and poet Charles Bukowski often use existential themes in their writing and the connection between Palahniuk’s novel *Fight Club* and the corresponding film could open up possibilities for a film branch of the unit. I could ask students to choose scenes to show the class from a list of popular movies with known existential tendencies (like *Groundhog’s Day, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, Being John Malkovich, etc.*) and explain how they can be viewed as existential and how they contribute to the film’s overall theme.

This unit plan will undoubtedly present challenges in the classroom, the first in mere content. Modern existentialists are atheists (and *Waiting for Godot* is often decoded as waiting for a God that never comes). It is for this reason that I would introduce existentialism from its very origin, which according to Kierkegaard, was theistic. A branch of theistic existentialism does exist and its transformation to its modern form occurred based on the beliefs of individual philosophers. It is important to stress that existentialism is a philosophy, a developed explanation for existence that anyone can choose to accept or deny, but its relevance to the context of the play is extremely important, whether a student believes in the actual philosophy or not.

A second concern is the difficultly of the material. I have no doubt that high school juniors and seniors would be able to comprehend the material with much work and many questions, but this unit plan may be overly complex for freshman and sophomores. The reading in itself is tedious and meticulous, and the comprehension of the content even more so. It is for this reason that every supplemental reading assignment is preceded or followed by open discussion. It is my hope that with little guidance, students can build off their various small understandings to create cohesive comprehension. I think the content of the material is relevant and interesting enough that students will want to work to understand it. It will be a challenge but by the time their final papers are written, they will see how much their ideas have grown and how many more answers are out there waiting for them. Following is a list of Michigan Content Standards this unit will fulfill:

**CE 1.2.1** Write, speak, and use images and graphs to understand and discover complex ideas.

**CE 1.2.2** Write, speak, and visually represent to develop self-awareness and insight

**CE 1.3.2** Compose written and spoken essays or work-related text that demonstrate logical thinking and the development of ideas for academic, creative, and personal purposes: essays that convey the author’s message by using an engaging introduction (with a clear thesis as appropriate), well-constructed paragraphs, transition sentences, and a powerful conclusion.

**CE 1.3.3** Compose essays with well-crafted and varied sentences demonstrating a precise, ﬂexible, and creative use of language.

**CE 1.3.4** Develop and extend a thesis, argument, or exploration of a topic by analyzing differing perspectives and employing a structure that effectively conveys the ideas in writing.

**CE 1.3.7** Participate collaboratively and productively in groups, fulﬁlling roles and responsibilities, posing relevant questions, giving and following instructions, acknowledging and building on ideas and contributions of others to answer questions or to solve problems, and offering dissent courteously.

**CE 1.5.1** Use writing, speaking, and visual expression to develop powerful, creative and critical messages.

**CE 2.1.1** Use a variety of pre-reading and previewing strategies to make conscious choices about how to approach the reading based on purpose, genre, level of difficulty, text demands and features.

**CE 2.1.4** Identify and evaluate the primary focus, logical argument, structure, and style of a text or speech and the ways in which these elements support or confound meaning or purpose.

**CE 2.1.7** Demonstrate understanding of written, spoken, or visual information by restating, paraphrasing, summarizing, critiquing, or composing a personal response; distinguish between a summary and a critique.

**CE 2.1.11** Demonstrate appropriate social skills of audience, group discussion, or work team behavior by listening attentively and with civility to the ideas of others, gaining the ﬂoor in respectful ways, posing appropriate questions, and tolerating ambiguity and lack of consensus.

**CE 2.2.1** Recognize literary and persuasive strategies as ways by which authors convey ideas and readers make meaning.

**CE 2.2.2** Examine the ways in which prior knowledge and personal experience affect the understanding of written, spoken, or multimedia text.

**CE 2.2.3** Interpret the meaning of written, spoken, and visual texts by drawing on different cultural, theoretical, and critical perspectives.

**CE 3.1.1** Interpret literary language while reading literary and expository works.

**CE 3.1.2** Demonstrate an understanding of literary characterization, character development, the function of major and minor characters, motives and causes for action, and moral dilemmas that characters encounter by describing their function in speciﬁc works.

**CE 3.1.3** Recognize a variety of plot structures and elements and describe their impact on the reader in speciﬁc literary works.

**CE 3.1.4** Analyze characteristics of speciﬁc works and authors and identify basic beliefs, perspectives, and philosophical assumptions underlying an author’s work.

**CE 3.1.8** Demonstrate an understanding of historical, political, cultural, and philosophical themes and questions raised by literary and expository works.

**CE 3.1.9** Analyze how the tensions among characters, communities, themes, and issues in literature and other texts reﬂect human experience.

**CE 3.2.3** Identify how elements of dramatic literature illuminate the meaning of the text.