United States History & Geography

Growth & Conflict

Grade 8A

Lesson Plans

“The United States Constitution”

Subject:
United States History and Geography: Growth and Conflict 8A

Level:
Grade 8

Abstract:
Students will study the Preamble to the United States Constitution and the Constitution itself. Students will write a proposed constitution to guide and cover the class for the rest of the year. Students will read and discuss the Constitution with emphasis on the meaning of the document and understanding the reasons and motivation behind its creation. A competitive game will be used to reinforce understanding about the powers of the federal and state governments, the separation of powers, the checks and balances, the election of Congress and the President, the amendment process, the Bill of Rights, and other Amendments.

Invitation:

The United States Constitution, our nation’s basic law, was written over two hundred years ago. The country has grown and changed greatly since 1789, yet the same Constitution still governs us today. What is special about this document that has allowed for this growth and change? Do you think it was difficult for the framers of the Constitution to write the document? As a class you will learn the answers to these questions. First, you will be challenged to write a class constitution, which will guide and govern the class for the rest of the year. Second, after reading and discussing the Constitution, you will play a competitive game to determine just how much you understand how the Constitution guides and checks the power of those elected to lead the nation.

Situations:
Where: The lesson will take place primarily in the classroom, and students will use computers in the classroom or computer lab.

When: This lesson will take place during Social Studies class, after studying the first attempts of creating a new government for the United States between 1776 and 1791.

How Long: This lesson will require two weeks to complete.

Tasks:
Task 1:
Students will listen to the invitation to this lesson.

Task 2:
The teacher will conduct mini-lessons and show videos, if available, on the following topics that are covered in the students' textbook or use the Internet and the following URL for information:
http://www.constitutioncenter.org/sections/basics/basics_main.asp

- The problems with the original Articles of Confederation and the need and urgency to revise them
- The Philadelphia Convention and the issues that confronted the delegates
- The need for compromise
- The struggles for ratification of the new Constitution

Task 3:
The teacher will discuss with the class why there needs to be a permanent document (constitution) that guides the political activity of a group of people. The teacher will explore questions such as why do people need a government, why do people need laws, who should make the laws, what is a good or fair law, what happens if some people don't like the laws or want the laws changed, who makes sure the laws are followed and what happens if someone breaks the laws?

Task 4:
The teacher will read the Preamble to the Constitution to the class and discuss with the class the meaning of the phrases stated in the Preamble.

Task 5:
Students will study in their textbooks about the writing of the Constitution.

Task 6:
Students will reinforce their understanding of the textbook by creating an outline or logical notes.

Task 7:
The teacher will divide the class into six groups. Each group will be a subcommittee at the class constitutional convention. The assignment for each group is to write a portion of the class constitution which will guide and govern the class for the remainder of the year. The teacher will explain to students that when the class constitution is completed, a written copy will be posted on the classroom wall. Also, that the class constitution will guide the class and be their basis for government for the remainder of the year.

Task 8:
The teacher will assign each group a particular question for the group to ponder and reach a consensus answer. The teacher will write all of the group questions on the board to serve as a visual reminder and agenda. The following questions are assigned:
Group 1) What will be included in the Preamble or purpose of the class constitution?
Group 2) Who will create the specific class rules and how will the person or group be selected for this role?
Group 3) Who will enforce the class rules and how will the person or group be selected for this role?
Group 4) Who will determine if class rules are violated and assigns appropriate penalties or punishments? How will the person or group be selected for this role?
Group 5) Once adopted, can the class constitution ever be changed? If so, how?

Task 9:
Each group will select a facilitator who will guide the discussion and keep the group focused on answering the assigned question. The facilitator will remain neutral during the discussion and not comment on whether an idea is "good" or "bad." Each group will also select a recorder who will record the key comments, suggestions, and input. Recorded comments can be kept either on butcher paper or on an Excel spreadsheet. (See the "Step Sheet: Creating a Data Table" and "Sample: Spreadsheet for Recording Data" attachments.)

Task 10:
After all ideas have been collected, the group will deliberate and discuss whether or not to keep each point. The teacher will remind students that the framers of the Constitution needed to compromise in order to complete their task. The recorder will keep track of decisions made.

Task 11:
With the teacher serving as the facilitator, the class will reconvene as a whole, and each subcommittee, in turn, will "report out" and present their consensus list of points for the class constitution. After each group has reported out, the class as a whole will vote to accept or reject the points as presented. Students can also propose changes or refinements, and the proposals will be voted upon also. The task completes when the class majority votes to accept the agreed upon points of each subcommittee.

Task 12:
The groups reconvene as subcommittees and, using Microsoft Word, create a final document representing their section of the class constitution. This consists of rewriting and organizing the accepted points from step 11 using a common font, type size, and "outline style." (See the "Step Sheet: Formatting an Outline in Microsoft Word" attachment.)

Task 13:
The whole class reconvenes to assemble the class constitution document. The teacher attaches a large sheet of butcher paper to a wall in the classroom. The butcher paper is titled "Our Class Constitution." Each group is called to the front of the class and pastes their section onto the butcher paper in proper order. The class constitution is created.

Task 14:
Each student is invited to sign his/her name at the bottom of the class constitution. The teacher will discuss with the class that not all delegates signed the United States Constitution, but once the Constitution was ratified, everyone had to obey it and no one was above the law.

Task 15:
Students will read the United States Constitution, including its 27 amendments.

Task 16:
The teacher will conduct mini-lessons explaining and discussing the meaning of each of the Articles in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Task 17:
The teacher will divide the class into six teams. Each team will be assigned a topic. (See the "Handout: How to Play the Constitution Game" attachment.)

Task 18:
Each team of students will meet, discuss their topic, and appoint a team recorder. The team will reach consensus on at least 10 game show style quiz questions (with answers) that best represent the key points of their topic. The team recorder, using Microsoft Word and a Storyboard Organizer, types the questions and answers and prepares the team's document. (See the "Step Sheet: Creating and Using a Storyboard Organizer in Word for Questions and Answers" and "Sample: Game Questions with Answers" attachments.)

Task 19:
Teams will submit their questions and answers and the teacher will prepare the Constitution Game Board. (See the “Step Sheet: Preparing to Play the Constitution Game” and “Template: Constitution Game” attachments.)

Task 20:
The class will assemble as a whole and student teams will compete in the Constitution Game.

Interactions:
Full Class: The teacher will introduce the lesson and conduct mini-lessons, present videos, and initiate full-class discussions on the early government of the United States and the need for a stronger federal government. The teacher will facilitate a class discussion on what should be included in a class constitution and help students compile the completed document. After students have read the Constitution of the United States, they will discuss the three branches of government; federal powers, state powers, and powers shared by both the federal and state governments; separation of powers; checks and balances; and the amendment and ratification processes of the United States Constitution.

Groups: In groups, students will write the points their group feels should be included in the class constitution. Students will sort through student input and come to a group consensus, which will be shared with the class. Students will also be assigned to groups or teams to write questions and answers for the Constitution Game. In teams, students will compete in the constitution game.

Individual: Each student will participate in class discussions; listen to the teacher and other students; read assigned materials; and actively participate in group work on the class constitution and the Constitution Game.

Standards:
History-Social Science: Grade 8 United States History and Geography:
8.2: Students analyze the political principles underlying the U.S. Constitution and compare the enumerated and implied powers of the federal government.
3. Evaluate the major debates that occurred during the development of the Constitution and their ultimate resolutions in such areas as shared power among institutions, divided state-federal power, slavery, the rights of individuals and states (later addressed in the Bill of Rights), and the status of American Indian nations under the commerce clause.
6. Enumerate the powers of government set forth in the Constitution and the fundamental liberties ensured by the Bill of Rights.

7. Describe the principles of federalism, dual sovereignty, separation of powers, checks and balances, the nature and purpose of majority rule, and the ways in which the American idea of constitutionalism preserves individual rights.

Assessment:

- "Group Class Constitution Assessment Rubric:" To be used by the teacher to determine the groups' quality and depth of thought in writing the class constitution.

- "Group Game Assessment Rubric:" To be used by the teacher to determine the team's storyboard organizer and quality of questions and answers for the Constitution Game.

- "Individual Participation Rubric:" To be used by the teacher to determine the individuals participation and understanding of the lesson on the United States Constitution.

Tools:

- Microsoft Excel
- Microsoft Word
- Microsoft Internet Explorer
- LCD projector

Project Tips and Alternatives:

Tip #1:

The teacher, using Microsoft Word, can use the font style "Brush Script MT" in font size 72 for the title of the class constitution that will be hung on the classroom wall.

Tip #2:

Students, using Microsoft Word, can use the font style "Brush Script MT" in font size 36 or 42 for their portion of the class constitution they are preparing for classroom display.

Tip #3:

After each mini-lesson about the Constitution, the teacher can have a fill-in-the-blank worksheet for students to complete as the teacher guides the discussion.

Tip #4:

Students can find a copy of the Constitution online at http://www.house.gov/Constitution/Constitution.html

Tip #5:
When students are typing their questions and answers using Microsoft Word and the storyboard organizer, the teacher can direct the class to use the font color blue when typing questions and to use the font color red when typing answers.

Alternatively, if the class is unable to print color documents, normal font can be used for the questions, and italics font for the answers.

Tip #6:
Have students read the Biographies of the 39 delegates who signed the Constitution online at
http://www.nara.gov/exhall/charters/constitution/conmain.html

Tip #7:
Have students play one of the online games or quizzes at the following URLs:
http://www.constitutioncenter.org/sections/kids/kids_main.asp
http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/conlaw/marry.htm
http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/conlaw/LIN_QUZ.HTM
http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/conlaw/GOLF.HTM

Attachments:

- "Step Sheet: Creating a Data Table"
- "Sample: Spreadsheet for Recording Data"
- "Step Sheet: Formatting an Outline in Microsoft Word"
- "Handout: How to Play the Constitution Game"
- "Step Sheet: Creating and Using a Storyboard Organizer in Word for Questions and Answers"
- "Sample: Game Questions with Answers"
- "Step Sheet: Preparing to Play the Constitution Game"
- "Template: Constitution Game"
- "Group Activities and Individual Participation Rubrics"

Web Resources – Content:
A list of linked web resources related to the content of this lesson can be found on the Lesson Page.

Web Resources – Excel:
A list of linked web resources for Excel can be found on the Excel Resources page.

Assistive Technology:
Please refer to the Assistive Technology section for information on methods and devices to help ensure that all students have access to the curricula in the least restrictive environment.