



Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago

Examining the Declaration of Independence

A Module for U.S. History
Classrooms

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Examining the Declaration of Independence

Overview

“All men are created equal” is a phrase most people recognize from the Declaration of Independence. But, what does this phrase and others in that document really mean?

This module is designed to introduce students to the main ideas about government that Thomas Jefferson included in the Declaration of Independence. It includes a background reading on the creation of the Declaration and an excerpt from the document for student study and discussion. It also features a “human graph” activity to help students discuss how they feel about the main ideas they find in the Declaration, the realities and contradictions raised by these ideas, and why these ideas are still important today.

Objectives

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- § Identify and describe important ideas about government expressed in the Declaration of Independence
- § Offer supporting reasons why the selected ideas are important
- § Examine the realities, contradictions, and importance of these ideas today

Materials

- A: Instructions: Understanding the Declaration of Independence
- B: Reading: Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence
- C: Excerpt: Paragraph 2, The Declaration of Independence
- D: “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness”—Directions for a Human Graph
- E: “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness”—Questions for a Human Graph

A: Instructions: Understanding the Declaration of Independence

For the Instructor

- § As homework in preparation for the class, assign B, “Reading: Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence.” Alternatively, the reading can be done in class with students working in pairs or in a distributed reading format (one pair is responsible for the first paragraph, another for the second, and so on).
- § Begin class by asking students how many of them have heard of the Declaration of Independence prior to the reading. Figure a rough percentage of students who are familiar with this document. Ask students “Why is the Declaration so important that ___ percent of our class has heard of it?” Encourage students to speculate, accepting all answers.
- § Explain to students that the Declaration of Independence is not law in the United States. Nor is it part of the U.S. Constitution or Bill of Rights. Instead, its words state America’s ideals and continue to speak to us about the rights of Americans and the purposes of government.
- § Next, distribute C, “Excerpt: Paragraph 2, The Declaration of Independence.” Clarify the words and phrases in the documents that students find difficult to understand.
- § Read the excerpt aloud asking a student to read the first line; the next student reads the second line until the excerpt is completed. (You may wish to show them the entire document at a later time.)
- § Place students in pairs and ask them to identify five important rights and ideas about government Thomas Jefferson included in this part of the Declaration of Independence. NOTE: Student may include “rights” as an important idea if they wish. Have students list their choices in the space provided on C. Next, tell them to choose one from their list of five that they and their partner think is the MOST important. Next, ask them to list 3 reasons why they think their selection is the most important.
- § Conclude this portion of the lesson by having each pair share their reasons with the class. Organize their reasons, by main idea, on a blackboard or flipchart for discussion.

B: Reading: Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence*

What Is the Declaration of Independence?

The declaration's opening words are "When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another. . . ." Jefferson went on to say that breaking from England was a serious step. It required an explanation.

The second paragraph argued that people had the right to change the government when it abused their rights. This paragraph set out Jefferson's most important ideas about government.

In the rest of the declaration, Jefferson listed 20 examples of when the king had abused the rights of Americans. He claimed that the king was "unfit to be the ruler of a people." Jefferson also blamed the British people. He said that they had voted for members of Parliament who had helped destroy the rights of the colonists. Jefferson ended by stating that the colonies were free and independent states.

On June 8, 1776, the Continental Congress—which represented the thirteen American colonies—voted to write a declaration of independence. It named a committee to do the writing. The committee consisted of two New England men, John Adams of Massachusetts and Roger Sherman of Connecticut; two men from the Middle Colonies, Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania and Robert R. Livingston of New York; and one southerner, Thomas Jefferson of Virginia.

Jefferson gave his draft to Congress on June 28. The members spent little time changing his first two paragraphs. Today they are the most famous parts of the Declaration of Independence.

The members did cut out most of Jefferson's attack on the British people. They took out all of Jefferson's attack on slavery and the slave trade. Members from the slave states in the South wanted this part removed. In all, they took out about 25 percent of Jefferson's words. Jefferson became angry over the changes. He later wrote that the Continental Congress had "mangled" his writing.

In 1823 Jefferson wrote that the other members of the committee "unanimously pressed on myself alone to undertake the draught [sic]. I consented; I drew it; but before I reported it to the committee I communicated it separately to Dr. Franklin and Mr. Adams requesting their corrections. . . I then wrote a fair copy, reported it to the committee, and from them, unaltered to the Congress." (If Jefferson did make a "fair copy," incorporating the changes made by Franklin and Adams, it has not been preserved. It may have been the copy that was amended by the Congress and used for printing, but in any case, it has not survived. Jefferson's rough draft, however, with changes made by Franklin and Adams, as well as Jefferson's own notes of changes by the Congress, is housed at the Library of Congress.)

Jefferson's account reflects three stages in the life of the Declaration: the document originally written by Jefferson; the changes to that document made by Franklin and Adams, resulting in the version that was submitted by the Committee of Five to the Congress; and the version that

* adapted from: Marshall Croddy et al., *Project History: US History for Middle Schools* (Los Angeles: Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2003). Reprinted with permission.

was eventually adopted. (The Declaration of Independence, A History, National Archives http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/declaration_history.html)

On July 1, 1776, Congress reconvened. The following day, the Lee Resolution for independence was adopted by 12 of the 13 colonies, New York not voting. Immediately afterward, the Congress began to consider the Declaration. Adams and Franklin had made only a few changes before the committee submitted the document. The discussion in Congress resulted in some alterations and deletions, but the basic document remained Jefferson's. The process of revision continued through all of July 3 and into the late morning of July 4. Then, at last, church bells rang out over Philadelphia; the Declaration had been officially adopted. There would be no turning back now.

Jefferson's Ideas in the Declaration

In the second paragraph of the declaration, Jefferson stated his key ideas. He wrote that "all men are created equal." He also wrote that they have "unalienable rights." These rights are "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." He wrote that governments are set up to protect these rights and that governments get "their just powers from the consent of the governed." In other words, the people run the government. The goal of government should be to guard everyone's rights.

These ideas broke from the past. According to Jefferson, the purpose of government was not to serve the rulers. It was to serve the people and uphold their rights. Where did Jefferson get these ideas?

Jefferson knew British history and political thought. He also had read statements of independence by other colonies. He knew well the writings of fellow Americans like Thomas Paine and George Mason. In writing the declaration, Jefferson used the format of the English Declaration of Rights, written in 1688.

Jefferson modeled the most famous ideas in the Declaration on those of the English writer John Locke. Locke wrote his book *Second Treatise of Government* in 1689, right after England's Glorious Revolution, which had overthrown King James II. Locke's book gave reasons why overthrowing a king could be the right thing to do.

Locke believed that long ago, before there were any governments, people lived in a state of nature. Even in the state of nature, people had rights. Locke wrote that all men are equal. They are born with "unalienable" natural rights. In other words, they have God-given rights that should never be taken away. Among these natural rights, Locke said, are "life, liberty, and property."

According to Locke, the state of nature could be dangerous. People might kill one another and steal from each other. So people formed governments to protect their natural rights.

Locke wrote that a contract exists between the government and the people. The government must guard people's natural rights. In turn, the people must obey the law. But, Locke said, if a government wrongs its people with "a long train of abuses [wrongs]," the people have the right to resist that government. They can change it or even get rid of it and create a new one.

Locke believed that life itself is a natural right. He said that people have both a right and a duty to save their own lives. Killers, however, lose their right to life since they don't respect the life of others.

Liberty was another natural right. Locke said that people should be free to decide how to live. But they must not hinder the liberty of others. Locke strongly believed in freedom.

By “property,” another natural right, Locke meant more than owning things. He also meant owning oneself. This included a right to personal well-being. In place of “property,” Jefferson used another phrase from Locke—“pursuit of happiness.” Locke and others had used this phrase to mean the freedom of opportunity and the duty to help those in need.

How Could Jefferson Say that “All Men Are Created Equal”?

The Declaration of Independence stated that “All men are created equal.” This meant that everyone had the same God-given rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But how could Jefferson and the other signers believe this? After all, slavery existed in the colonies. Some slave owners argued that slaves were not equal. But Jefferson, also a slave owner, did not agree.

From an early age, Jefferson had hated slavery, but he saw no way to end it. If the slaves were freed all at once, Jefferson feared a bloody war. He worried that if slaves were freed one by one, they would have no way to survive. Of course, Jefferson and other Southern landowners depended on slave labor.

Jefferson came up with a plan. He wrote that slave children should be taken from their parents and put in schools to learn a trade. When they grew up, they would be moved to a colony somewhere. There they would be given tools and work animals to start a new life. They would be “free and independent people.”

Jefferson’s plan never gained much support and nothing came of it. It would be nearly 100 years before slavery ended and still another 100 years before the United States made progress toward achieving the goal of equality for all.

The promise of equality set forth in the Declaration of Independence remains one of our nation’s most ambitious ideals and its achievement one of our nation’s greatest challenges.

Selected Sources on the Declaration of Independence

The Avalon Project
www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/declare.htm

Center for Civic Education
<http://civiced.org>

Constitutional Rights Foundation (Los Angeles)
<http://www.crf-usa.org>

National Archives and Records Administration
http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/declaration_history



C: Excerpt: Paragraph 2, The *Declaration of Independence*

1 “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created
2 equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain
3 unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the
4 Pursuit of Happiness—That to secure these Rights, Governments are
5 instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent
6 of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes
7 destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to
8 abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on
9 such Principles, and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them
10 shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness”

Vocabulary		
abolish: end or destroy	consent: agreement	deriving: receiving
endowed: given	ends: purposes	instituted: established
self-evident: easy for anyone to see	unalienable rights: basic or natural rights that cannot be taken away	

Identifying Rights and Important Ideas About Government

In pairs, identify 5 rights and important ideas about government Jefferson included in this part of the Declaration of Independence. You may include more than one “right” on a line such as “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____

Choose 1 from your list above that you and your partner think is the MOST important. List 3 reasons that support your choice. Be prepared to read your reasons to the class.

D: “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness”—Directions for a Human Graph

For the Instructor

Tell students that they are going to get a chance to really think about the ideas in the Declaration of Independence and to share their thoughts with others.

Explain that the purpose of the Human Graph is to help them see and discuss what other people think about a series of statements based on the ideas they have read in the Declaration of Independence.

Then create a line – either by pointing from one end of the room to the other, drawing one on the board or putting tape on the floor. One end of the line is “Agree Very Much,” the mid-point is “Not Sure/Undecided,” and the other end of the line is “Disagree Very Much.”

Agree Very Much

Not Sure/Undecided

Disagree Very Much

Ask for five volunteers from the class. Tell them that they will serve as a “human graph.”

Explain that you will ask them a series of statements and that they will react to each statement by standing in front of the part of the graph that corresponds to their opinion. Be sure to point out they are responding based on their reading of the excerpt from the Declaration.

Instruct the class that the members of the human graph are not allowed to speak; therefore, the class will have to interpret their thoughts for them.

Select a few statements from the list on E: “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness—Questions for a Human Graph.” After each statement, allow time for the “human graph” to understand the statement and react by physically moving to a position on the line. Then ask the rest of the group to explain why they think the participants in the human graph are standing where they are. You may choose to let the human graph students explain their position after all of the students have commented.

The human graph students should feel free to move about on the line, changing their opinion if an argument seems persuasive to them. Continue with this process until all statements have been evaluated and discussed. Select additional groups of five for other questions.

Note: This activity can also be done with the entire group along the line. When the whole class is the graph, students in the class may ask questions about why their peers chose to stand where they stood.

For Discussion

After the “human graph” has finished representing the questions, have students get into pairs. Ask them to consider what surprised them about the human graph?

Next, engage students in a discussion on the philosophy of government expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Raise such questions as:

1. What was the purpose of the Declaration of Independence?

[The Declaration of Independence was written to justify the American Revolution against the British Crown. The document includes the ideas that all men are created equal and that they all have certain basic rights; ideas about the relationship between people and their government; reasons for declaring independence from England; a list of complaints against the King; and a conclusion]

2. Why is the Declaration of Independence important, even though it is not law or part of the Constitution?

[The Declaration of Independence provides the first official statement of the philosophy for the kind of government that would be eventually be established by the Constitution.]

3. What is the philosophy of, or reasoning behind, our government according to the Declaration of Independence?

[Government is not for the rulers, but for the people. Government should protect the basic (natural, “unalienable”) rights of the people. If a government does not respect the rights of the people or does not represent their interests, the people have a duty to change their government.]

4. What do you think is meant by the phrase, “all men are created equal?” In 1776, who was included? Who was not? Why?

[Accept answers students are able to support with sound reasoning.]

5. What challenges do you see in making sure all Americans are guaranteed the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence?

[Accept answers students are able to support with sound reasoning.]

Extension Activity

After their examination of the excerpt from the Declaration of Independence, as students study the Constitution, challenge them to find specific links between the two documents. These include the idea of a representative government, limited government that protects people’s rights, unalienable rights, and equality under the law.

It has been said that the Declaration of Independence was the promise of representative government, while the Constitution was the fulfillment of that promise. Based on their analysis, do students agree or disagree? Why?

E: “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness”—Questions for a Human Graph

Directions

To introduce each of the statements for the Human Graph, begin by saying

“Based on your reading of the Excerpt from the Declaration of Independence...”

Ask the first question in the pair below. Then ask the second question in the pair to demonstrate what the human graph looks like when participants move on the line.

- § People should be able to do whatever they want. [unalienable rights, liberty]
- § People who disagree with the government should be limited in what they can say and where they can say it. [unalienable rights, liberty]

Now select 4 to 6 statements from the following list.

- § By creating a government, people agree to give up some of their rights and freedoms so that everyone may enjoy them. [to secure basic rights, governments are instituted and people are no longer in a state of nature]
- § Gay people should be able to adopt children. [life, liberty, pursuit of happiness; all men are created equal]
- § People under the age of 18 should not be allowed into theaters showing X-rated movies. [all men are created equal]
- § Girls should be allowed to play on all-boy athletic teams if an all-girl team is not available. [all men are created equal]
- § All students should be drug tested in public schools. [consent of the governed]
- § People should be able to do whatever they want. [unalienable rights, liberty]
- § Education is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms. [pursuit of happiness, opportunity, all men are created equal]
- § Religious symbols worn in school should be no larger than an inch and if worn on a chain, the chain should not be more than an inch thick. [freedom of expression-unalienable rights, pursuit of happiness]
- § People who disagree with the government should be limited in what they can say and where they can say it. [unalienable rights, liberty]
- § All people are created equal. [unalienable rights, all men are created equal]
- § When, or if, government becomes destructive, the people have a right to change it. [right of the people to alter or abolish a corrupt or destructive government]