Designing a Class Constitution Lesson Plan
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Grade Level(s)
Grades 3 and up

Lesson Overview

The lesson provides an overview of the U.S. Constitution and the process the new country of the United States of America went through to create it. Then, students will develop classroom agreements “to create the best-running classroom we possibly can.” Students will develop (using the Empathize, Define, and Ideate processes) statements for the agreements, and then ratify the agreements. After a presentation on the three branches of the U.S. government, students will establish procedures and roles for testing, sustaining, and amending the agreements.

Learning Objectives

● Students will feel empowered as participants in creating the type of classroom that will support them through the school year.
● Students will be able to identify the three branches of U.S. government and the basic purposes they serve. They will make comparisons between our class constitution and the U.S. Constitution.
● Students will identify what behaviors and expectations make for a successful classroom.
● Students will be able to reflect on their own ability to respect classroom agreements as well as determine what will support them in being able to better follow classroom expectations.

Standards

California History Standard 5.7: Students describe the people and events associated with the development of the U.S. Constitution and analyze the Constitution’s significance as the foundation of the American republic.

1. List the shortcomings of the Articles of Confederation as set forth by their critics. Explain the significance of the new Constitution of 1787, including the struggles over its ratification and the reasons for the addition of the Bill of Rights.
2. Understand the fundamental principles of American constitutional democracy, including how the government derives its power from the people and the primacy of individual liberty.

3. Understand how the Constitution is designed to secure our liberty by both empowering and limiting central government and compare the powers granted to citizens, Congress, the president, and the Supreme Court with those reserved to the states.

4. Discuss the meaning of the American creed that calls on citizens to safeguard the liberty of individual Americans within a unified nation, to respect the rule of law, and to preserve the Constitution.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.5: With guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

**Preparation**

Prepare five large pieces of paper (chart paper or long sections of butcher paper) as graphic organizers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I have a right to:</th>
<th>I am responsible for giving others that right by:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After Activity 2, prepare poster of class constitution (list of the developed agreements), leaving lots of space at the bottom for students to sign it.

**Materials and Resources**

- Large post-its
• Markers
• Chart paper or butcher paper for large graphic organizer sheets and final list of agreements
• Poster showing structure of the U.S. Government
• Image of the ratification of the U.S. Constitution

Activity 1: A More Perfect Union (20 minutes)

1. Tell students that this year we will be studying how the United States was created, how a number of people were tired of being ruled by the British and wanted to make their own country. They created something called the Constitution that was a set of agreements to make sure that everyone who lived in the U.S. had certain rights and that no person or part of the government got out of control or had too much power. Say: “We have the opportunity at the beginning of this school year to create our own rules that will help us all get along. It is kind of like we are starting our own country! We need to create our own constitution that we ALL can agree on to make that happen. We still need to follow a few rules of the school:"
   ● Stay Safe
   ● Learn
   ● Have Fun
   “The rest is really up to us. What do you need to have a great school year?”

2. Have students turn to an elbow partner to generate some empathy, and ask each other what their basic needs are for feeling safe and respected in their classroom.

3. Have students share out on post-its and put on the board under the heading: “To create the best running class (Country) in the world we would…” Take all ideas, but remind students to ask if their ideas are aligned with our basic school requirements. Prompt students to consider relevant situations, e.g., “What if we are all talking at once?”

Activity 2: Developing Agreements (40 minutes)

Students categorize ideas they brainstormed and develop their first agreement statement.

1. Refer to post-its of student ideas on board from Activity 1.
2. Working together (students come up to board to move post-its) group the ideas into 4 or 5 groups.
3. Give each grouping a title (examples: “Help each other learn,” “Take care of our environment.”)
4. Choose one grouping of post-its to develop a statement for. Put up the large graphic organizer poster near the group of post its, and tell students they asked for a right to a “clean environment” for example.
5. Tell students that for each of you to have that right, you also have a responsibility. **You** must keep a clean classroom for all the other students.
6. As you write up each right, also ask students to share what their personal responsibilities are to the whole class to be sure that every other student is assured that right as well.
7. **This will probably be a good stopping point.** The remaining 3 or 4 agreements can be developed in 20-minute chunks during the following day or two.

**Activity 3: Ratifying (Agreeing On) Our Class Constitution (20 minutes)**

Students agree on the class constitution they've created together.

1. Showing an image of the signing of the U.S. Constitution, give a brief overview of the history of it's creation and ratification. “The U.S. Constitution was designed over a three-year period. During many conventions (meetings) delegates from all the states that were then part of the country worked to agree on and write the Constitution, in a process that was fairly messy. The constitution was written during the last of these conventions, from May 25 to September 17, 1787. The constitution was signed on September 17, 1787, but after that each state needed to ratify (agree on) the constitution. This process took over three years. It was ratified by the final state on May 29, 1790.”

2. Say, “We need to ratify (agree on) our constitution now.”
3. Put up posters with all the agreements written on them.
4. Ask for volunteers to read out each of the agreements.
5. With a degree of ceremony appropriate to the context, each student comes forward to sign the constitution.
6. The signed constitution is hung in a spot in the classroom where it can be referred to.

**Activity 4: Our Government (30 minutes)**

1. Explain to students that the Constitution was set up so that no person or government had too much power. There are three “branches” of government. Each one has a little bit of power of the others so that they can make sure everyone is being fair. We will get more into detail about this later in the year. Right now you need to know that:
   - **The Executive branch** (President) is kind of like the teachers. We make a lot of decisions but we need you to make sure we don’t get out of control.
   - To do this we are going to appoint two students to be **The Congress**. The Congress’s job is to represent the people of the country (or class). Students can talk or write to the Congress and let them know what they need or how they feel about the class. The Congress will meet with the President (teacher) to let them know what the class is feeling or needing, or suggest new class agreements. The President must pay attention to these needs, or else he/she will become unpopular.
   - We will appoint two students to be the **Judicial Branch**. The job of the Judicial Branch is to make sure that the laws (or agreements) we made are being used fairly. The Judicial Branch can talk to the other branches of government to determine if the laws or agreements are fair, are aligned with our school rules and are being used fairly.

**Activity 5: How’s it going? (ongoing)**

1. After students have ratified the agreements of the class constitution, they can reflect on their effectiveness. Ask students periodically to reflect on how they are doing with one of their agreements, e.g. “Don’t talk when others are sharing.”
2. Have students give a thumbs up, thumbs horizontal, or thumbs down about how they are personally doing following the agreement.
3. Reflect with the Congress about whether they think a new agreement would help our class run more smoothly. Do we need consequences? Ask the Judicial branch, “Would these consequences be fair and aligned with our common needs as a class?”
4. Ask all students to contribute to this conversation.

**Assessment**

Is the classroom running smoothly?

Give a little worksheet asking students to describe what the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of our classroom government do.