

THE SELF-EMPOWERMENT OF HARRIET JACOBS

A SOCIAL STUDIES LESSON PLAN

GRADES 6-8

Overview

Born into slavery in 1813 in Edenton, North Carolina, Harriet Jacobs wrote one of the most famous slave narratives of all time, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Using the pseudonym "Linda Brent," Jacobs tells the dramatic story of her resistance to and escape from her cruel, obsessive master. For seven long years, Jacobs hid in a 9'L x 7'W x 3'H crawlspace above the porch of the home of her grandmother, a freed black, in the heart of Edenton. Her survival in her hiding place is the focal point of this lesson, which explores how Jacobs created opportunities for personal freedom, self-empowerment, and control while living in physically restrictive, oppressive, and disempowering circumstances. Students "experience" a limited physical space with the exact dimensions of Jacobs's crawlspace or they draw their own image of the space. They analyze the ways Jacobs was able to empower herself while living under such inhumane conditions and they learn to think "outside of the box" to develop strategies to gain greater control and empowerment when confronting restrictive or disempowering circumstances in their own lives.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Recall information about the life of Harriet Jacobs.
- Explain what slave narratives are, in their own words.
- Describe the space where Harriet Jacobs lived for seven years and the limitations of her conditions.
- List at least five ways Jacobs was able to empower herself and gain some control in spite of restrictive and harmful conditions in her hiding place.
- Describe the role of Jacobs's family when she was in hiding.
- Reflect on life experiences that are oppressive or restricting and think "outside the box" to find opportunities for self-empowerment within the situations.

Guiding Questions

How did Harriet Jacobs "make a way where there was no way?" How can humans find "spaces" for freedom and personal empowerment when experiencing oppressive, limiting, and disempowering situations?

Suggested Time

1-2 class periods

Preparing to Teach the Lesson

1. If you are unfamiliar with *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, you may read it at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/jacobs.html> or familiarize yourself with the brief summary of the work at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/summary.html> and the overview of Jacobs's life at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/bio.html>. You must read at least chapter XXI of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as this is the focus of this lesson. You should also review and print Teacher Tool 1, which is a brief overview of the life of Harriet Jacobs.
2. View the short video, *9 Feet Long and 7 Wide*, which focuses on Jacobs's dramatic escape from slavery and the years she spent hiding in a crawl space. If possible, be prepared to show this video to your students in class.
3. Review and print Teacher Tool 2. Teacher Tool 2 highlights some of realities of Harriet Jacobs's life in the crawl space, focusing on the information provided in chapter XXI: Loophole of Retreat in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.
4. A unique part of this lesson is having students "experience" a space of the same dimensions as the hiding space in which Jacobs lived for seven years. A simple way to do this is to use masking tape or chalk to mark a 9'L x 7'W space on the floor or somewhere on the school grounds. Indicate the 3-foot height of the space with a yardstick or by some other means. You may also have students draw their own idea of the hiding place, using the dimensions (with attention to the proper scale) and description provided by Jacobs. Another way to create a similar space is to find several large cardboard boxes and modify them to the dimensions of the space in which Jacobs lived. If you use cardboard boxes, be sure to leave an entrance for students and a peephole that is one-inch square like the one that Jacobs looked through.
5. Review and print Student Handout 1. Student Handout 1, titled "How Harriet Jacobs Empowered Herself," is intended to help students understand the forces over which Jacobs lacked control and those over which she had (and created) control.
6. Review and print Teacher Tool 3. Teacher Tool 3, titled "Discussing Harriet Jacobs's Self-Empowerment," provides possible responses that students might have as they complete Student Handout 1.
7. Review and print Student Handout 2. Student Handout 2, titled "Strategies for Empowerment," is intended to help students apply some of the valuable lessons from Harriet Jacobs's story to their own lives. It helps them examine difficult situations in their own lives (or the lives of loved ones) and to come up with ways to create power and control within the challenging realities they face.

Teaching the Lesson (Suggested Steps)

1. Using the information provided in Teacher Tool 1 or your own previous knowledge, tell your students the story of Harriet Jacobs or have them read the narrative summary and the overview of Jacobs's life on the Documenting the American South website. They will see that the story of "Linda Brent" is the autobiography of Harriet Jacobs.
2. Use Teacher Tool 2 to describe the 9'L x 7'W x 3'H space where Harriet Jacobs hid for seven years.
3. Show the short video, *9 Feet Long and 7 Wide*, to engage your students in Jacobs's story.
4. Use one of the three suggested methods for recreating the space in which Harriet Jacobs hid for so many years. If you use masking tape or chalk to mark the dimensions

of the space or you use a cardboard box, ask students to “get inside” to increase their understanding of the limitations she faced. If you choose to have them draw the space, you might ask them to try to draw how a person would be confined within that space and to think about how that differs from their homes or rooms.

5. Distribute Student Handout 1. Ask students to work in small groups to list the forces and circumstances working against Harriet Jacobs in the left column and the ways in which she empowered herself and gained control in the right column.
6. Bring the whole class together and discuss the ways that Jacobs empowered herself and gained some control in her hiding place. Use Teacher Tool 3 in this discussion.
7. Distribute Student Handout 2. Ask students to think about a situation in their own lives (or in the life of a loved one) that presents obstacles and challenges over which they feel they have little control. Ask them to list the challenges they (or their loved one) face. In the column that focuses on gaining control, ask them to list some of the ways that they (or their loved one) can empower themselves and gain some control despite the obstacles and forces working against them. Use Harriet Jacobs’s story as an inspiration.
8. Ask students to write a creative short story, a few paragraphs in length, about a person they know who feels disempowered in their life. Following Harriet Jacobs’s example, have them use a pseudonym. Ask them to explain why their characters feel that they lack power or control. Using Harriet Jacobs as an inspiration, ask students to focus on ways that their characters can find/create power and control in their situation.

Assessment (Optional)

Review the Assessment. If you decide to use it, print the document for distribution to your students. For the assessment students are asked to recall information about the life of Harriet Jacobs and how she was empowered. An answer key is provided.

Extending the Lesson

Exploring the Loophole of Retreat

Read your class the dictionary definitions of the words “loophole” and “retreat.” Lead a discussion about how these terms apply to Harriet Jacobs’s hiding place. Note that Jacobs has found a way to “get out of” her legal obligations as a slave. She has also made a small “peephole,” like a “loophole,” that provides sunlight into her tiny space and has enabled her to look outside at activity in the street and to hear private conversations without being detected. The military definition of retreat applies because the space in which Jacobs hides allowed her to physically withdraw from her “war” with her master.

Learning from Harriet Jacobs’s Parenting

Have students read Harriet Jacobs’s narrative and write down some examples of ways that she was able to parent her children even though she was not able to be with them physically. The following are some examples of her parenting while in hiding: making them clothing and toys, monitoring them through a peephole, and taking a great risk in coming out of her hiding place to request the emancipation of her children.

Ask your students to think about ways that parents today can nurture their children without actually living with them. Some examples include: writing letters, e-mailing, sending text messages, talking on the phone, communicating with adults in their child's life, taking their children places, helping to support them financially, helping to support them emotionally, etc.

Ask your students to write a story about a father or mother who does not live with his/her child. Have them explain how this parent is loving and responsible although he/she does not live with his/her child. Students could write about parents who live in a different state or country than their children, parents who are hospitalized, or parents who are in prison.

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