LESSON: An Opening to Transcendentalist Thought: “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” by Walt Whitman

OBJECTIVES
Students Will Be Able To:

- Relate a “hands on” transcendentalist ideal to their own lives by discussing how eating the candy was more fulfilling or different experience than describing it with on paper
- Utilize textual evidence to support the themes/ideas they gather from the poem by choosing words used to describe the lecture vs. the experience of looking at the stars and analyzing the meanings evoked by each.
- Describe transcendentalist ideas of the value of personal experience and interaction with the environment by identifying and describing their own valued experiences and relating them to what they learned about Transcendentalism.

RATIONALE
The opening activity of describing and trying to teach someone about candy vs. the actual eating of the candy will help open students’ minds to the value of personal experience vs. only learning about something academically. Reading “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” connected with this candy activity will bring out Whitman’s ideals of the speaker’s discontent with listening to an astronomy lecture contrasted with his inspiration at actually looking at stars himself outside. Group discussions of textual evidence (word choice, figurative language, sound devices) and large group sharing of these differences in the attitudes of the speaker will give students a grounding in using textual evidence to extract and support meaning. The power point will then give students a baseline of knowledge regarding important figures, ideas, and themes of the Transcendentalist movement in American Literature, and a discussion of Whitman’s poem will then reveal Transcendentalist ideas. Finally, the students’ journals telling of their own valued experiences and how those relate to transcendentalism and “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” will relate the ideas of the literary movement to their own lives and foster an understanding of this perspective of the environment. This class lesson will serve as an opening to Transcendentalism, and as a sort of foundation for the upcoming texts of Emerson, Thoreau, etc.

PROCEDURES:

1. Writing prompt will be written on the board: “Take a few minutes to write down a description of what you know about candy. Pretend you explaining “candy” to a person who has never eaten it. You may describe the process of making candy, what it is made of, or how you feel when you eat it, draw, etc.” (3 mins)
2. Pass out candy and tell students they may eat it. Pass out “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” while students are eating. (1 minute)
3. Ask students how the experience of eating the candy was different than explaining it on paper with words and pictures. (2 minutes)
4. Read “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” aloud, encouraging students to follow along. (1 minute)
5. Ask students how the meaning of this poem (speaker not wanting to learn about
stars in a lecture, but engaging in the actual experience of seeing them outside for himself), relates to their thoughts about describing vs. eating the candy (3 minutes)

6. Have students get into two groups. Assign first group lines 1-5, and the second group lines 6-8 of the poem. Ask group one to pick out the words Whitman uses to describe the experience of listening to the astronomer’s lecture. Ask group two to pick out the words Whitman uses to describe his experience of walking outside and looking at the stars himself. They may also note other things they notice like figurative language or sound devices. Walk around to make sure groups are on the right track and ask if they need any help. (5 minutes)

7. Draw dividing line on white board with “astronomer’s lecture” on one side and “looking at stars outside” on the other. Combine the two groups and ask a recorder from each group to write the words they picked out and/or literary devices they noticed on the board. (3 minutes)

8. Lead class discussion regarding how these different word and literary choices evoke the speaker’s feeling of preferring the actual experience of looking at the stars to learning about them from an educated astronomer. Point out other literary devices used in the poem if they are not written on the board (10 minutes)

9. Show PowerPoint on the Transcendentalism movement. After power point, ask class how Whitman’s “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” reflects transcendentalist ideals of the value of personal experience, especially in nature (15 minutes)

10. Closing activity: Ask students to journal: Think of something that was difficult or disengaging for you to learn about from someone else, (passively, or academically) but that you feel you learned better by actually doing it yourself. (examples: playing music, driving, cooking, sports, etc.) How does this reflect the views of the speaker in Whitman’s poem, or the Transcendentalists? Take 5 minutes to write down in journal and turn in. (7 minutes)

Total: 50 minutes

MATERIALS

-Candy for each student (keep in mind allergies)
-Poem text/copies for each student
-Power point/projector
-Paper
-Pencil/pen

ASSESSMENT

Small group discussion as well as participation in large class discussion will serve as an assessment of how the students are interacting with the elements of the text, as well as connecting the text to larger ideas in Transcendentalism. The final journal activity at the end of class asks students to describe an event that they valued more in experience than in passive learning, and to relate this experience to the Transcendentalist ideals they saw in the PowerPoint or the views of the speaker in “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer”. Reading these journal entries will show me that the students understood concepts of Transcendentalism and were able to relate them to their own lives and gain a broader picture of the literary movement.