"If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundation under them." —Henry David Thoreau

Young students are forever building castles in the air. Each dream, piece of writing, drawing, and experiment expresses not only what they have seen and experienced, but also what they imagine. ... figure, and writer than you? And when better to make that introduction than when the children are young and open?

D. B. Johnson introduces single bits of Henry David Thoreau’s philosophy and biography in each of his four picture books about Henry the bear and his friends. With these books and the ideas in this learning guide, you and your students can explore Thoreau’s vision in your own classroom.
In the Classroom

Henry Hikes to Fitchburg

Thoreau would maintain that going to Fitchburg was more important than getting to Fitchburg. He wrote: “Live each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influence of each.” He believed that we should take advantage of every opportunity, every moment, and that we should enjoy our journeys, not just our destinations.

Along the way on Henry’s walk to Fitchburg, he hopped a river, carved a stick, pressed flowers, climbed a tree, paddled on the river, found a bird’s nest, ate some honey, went for a swim, and ate his way through a blackberry patch. His friend, on the other hand, got to Fitchburg by working all day to earn the fare for the train. Though they both reached the destination at about the same time, who do your students think had the more enjoyable day?

Henry Builds a Cabin

Thoreau hiked thirty miles through the countryside to Fitchburg.

What would your students encounter on a thirty-mile hike from your school? Using a road map and a compass, place your school in the center and measure out a circle with a diameter of thirty miles. What are some destinations that are about thirty miles away? Pick one and plan out a route to get there. What towns will your students pass through? What natural areas will they cross? What points of interest will they encounter?

Henry Climbs a Mountain

Thoreau held strong beliefs about freedom and justice. He did not believe in obeying authority for its own sake. He wrote: “Any fool can make a rule, and any fool will mind it.” When he broke a rule he did not feel was right, he was prepared for the consequences. “Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is in prison.”

Being in the outdoors meant freedom to Henry, so in Henry Climbs a Mountain, when he was put in jail for not paying his taxes, he remembered his experiences and used his imagination to invoke the freedom taken from him. He took out his crayons, and on the wall he drew a hummingbird, a tree, and a path that crossed a river. Before he knew it his shoes were wet. He drew a mountain and climbed it, singing, “The bear goes over the mountain.” The more he remembered, the more he imagined and the more he drew. Soon the whole outside world was with him in his cell.

Have your students create a mural of meaningful things from nature. Cover a wall with drawing paper and allow them to draw one of their own outdoor experiences.

Discussion with older classes:

Henry’s drawing was an expression of freedom. In it he met a traveler on the mountain. Who is the traveler? What clues does the author give you? What did the traveler mean when he said he was walking “As far as the star in the North?” Why would Henry give the stranger his shoes? Why do you suppose Thoreau would maintain that going to Fitchburg was more important than getting to Fitchburg?
pose the traveler didn’t spend the night in town? Henry and the traveler laughed and sang more songs. One of the songs may well have been “Follow the Drinking Gourd.” You can find the lyrics to the song, along with an explanation of the text, at the NASA Quest Educational Web site:
http://quest.arc.nasa.gov/ltc/specia/mlk/gourd2.html

When Henry gets out of jail, Sam asks him, “How does it feel to be free?” He responds, “It feels like being on top of a very tall mountain.” Discuss this expression as a simile, and the title, Henry Climbs a Mountain, as a metaphor.

Henry Works

Thoreau was a writer who gathered his ideas and inspiration from the world around him. His friend Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: “The length of [Henry’s] walk uniformly made the length of his writing. If shut up in the house, he did not write at all.”

Henry’s walk to work is inseparable from his work itself. As he walks, he takes in all of nature around him. When he gets back home, he has everything he needs to do his job: to write.

Henry keeps a journal of what he sees and what he feels. Your students can do the same. With your students’ journals in hand, take a trip to your local nature preserve. Walk the paths. Sit and think. Take in the sights, noises, and smells. Experience what nature has to offer. Then, the children should go to work, just like Henry, and write about the nature they see and the thoughts that come into their minds.

Put their writings together into a class journal titled “Thoughts on a Nature Walk.”

On Henry’s walk to work, he helped his neighbors: Mrs. Hosmer, the postmaster, Emerson, Mrs. Alcott, and Mrs. Hawthorne. He also put a crossing stone in place in the river and watered the milkweed in the field. Your students can do things for their neighbors and community, as well. Organize the cleanup of a local park; visit a senior citizen center and help out; plant a flower or vegetable garden on the school grounds; participate in a walkathon or readathon in support of a community cause. Brainstorm other possibilities with your class.

The Henry Books

To genuinely appreciate D. B. Johnson’s words and pictures, have your children spend more time with the Henry books looking for details. Ask the students to keep a list of discoveries they make while examining the books slowly and deliberately. What surprises do they find? What new insights do they gain?

For example:
• How does D. B. Johnson identify the traveler Henry meets in Henry Climbs a Mountain?
• How does the author tell us or show us how Henry’s friend feels about the jobs he takes in order to earn train fare for his trip to Fitchburg?
• What might we guess about the clothes in Henry’s closet by noticing what he wears in the four books? How does that increase our understanding of his values?

Create a class list of the details your students find. How does the list change their understanding of Thoreau? How does it deepen their appreciation of the Henry books?

About the Author

D. B. Johnson grew up in rural New Hampshire and spent many hours playing in the woods on quiet, rainy days. Even before reading Henry David Thoreau’s Walden, he knew that living close to nature was the way to keep his life simple. It helped him remember what was truly important, which is why the still begins each day with a walk in the woods. He lives in Lebanon, New Hampshire, with his wife.

Teacher Resources for Henry David Thoreau

The Walden Cabin Project

What Thoreau Knew: Walden and the Meaning of Voluntary Simplicity by John Shepler
http://www.johnshepler.com/articles/thoreau.html

The Thoreau Reader: The Works of Henry David Thoreau
http://eserver.org/thoreau

The Walden Woods Project
http://www.walden.org

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