More on Common Core
Adding Citizenship to the Common Core Standards
Teaching Writing is Teaching Thinking
Common Core Lesson Ideas:
Armenian Genocide, World War I & Women Workers

Effective Social Studies Teaching
How Social Studies Can Survive in Elementary School Classrooms
Measuring Effective Teaching in Social Studies
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Teaching Ideas and Materials
New Jersey Hall of Fame • Multiculturalism
Economic Recovery • Nuclear Energy • Comfort Women

Women of New York and New Jersey
The Struggle for Women's Rights in the 19th Century
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Do the Advantages of Nuclear Energy Outweigh the Risks?

by Ashley Wagner, Philip Mavrikis, and Laura Dull

The authors would like to thank Matt Grande and his eighth grade classes, as well as the administrators, faculty, and staff at Rhinebeck Central Schools, for making this project possible.

The Indian Point Nuclear Power plant has been a source of concern for citizens of New York since it was opened in 1962. Located just 38 miles north of New York City, any meltdown would be catastrophic for the region that includes millions of city residents, in addition to the farmers and other inhabitants of the lush and vibrant Hudson River valley. With one of the plant’s original 40-year operating licenses due to expire in 2014, citizens are taking another look at the costs and benefits of having this plant provide power for the region.

As part of their coursework, SUNY New Paltz students in methods classes teach current events lessons at a local middle school. Ashley Wagner and Philip Mavrikis hoped to stimulate debate and generate understanding about the Indian Point power plant by teaching the lesson described in this article. Since the school’s village would be subject to nuclear contamination should there be a breakdown at the plant, Ashley and Phil felt this issue would be of great interest to the students. By sharing our lesson here, we offer a way for other teachers to spend some time on this important issue.

To start the lesson, Ashley and Phil created a “do now” (see attached chart) for students to list what they believed were the advantages and disadvantages of different sources of energy, including solar, wind, coal, and oil. The class was given a few minutes to jot down their ideas. During the ensuing discussion, students became aware that all energy sources have both positive aspects as well as negative ones. The teachers then revealed to the class that the day’s lesson would be about a source of energy that has caused major debates in the Hudson Valley. They displayed a slide with a split screen image, half of which was a grim photo of a devastated landscape from Chernobyl, while the other half featured a field of flowers growing in front of a nuclear power plant. The teachers also showed a clip wherein a character of the Simpsons show, Bart Simpson, takes a trip to the nuclear power plant (http://www.hulu.com/#/watch/29838) and is shown an educational video about nuclear energy. The narrator of the video talks about how “our misunderstood friend” (nuclear energy) works, cheerily sweeping the issue of radioactive waste under a rug.

Along with these engaging images, the teachers shared the essential question that framed the lesson: Do the advantages of nuclear energy outweigh the risks?

In the next part of the lesson, the teachers provided students with statistical information about the advantages of nuclear power, including the fact that it does not contribute to air pollution and is a renewable energy source (see Schrope, 2013), as well as the disadvantages of nuclear power, with the main concern being the potential for meltdowns at plants and the resultant harm caused by radiation. The teachers informed students of the nuclear disasters in Chernobyl and Fukushima, using Google Maps to walk the class through a town near Fukushima that was evacuated and has remained deserted out of necessity. The students also watched a news clip about Chernobyl’s meltdown showing how dangerous levels of radiation persist even after twenty years.

Indian Point

To introduce the lesson’s main activity, the teachers asked the students if they were familiar with Indian Point. Only one student claimed to have ever heard of Indian Point prior to this lesson. Ashley and Phil noted that Indian Point is a nuclear power plant located in the Hudson Valley that provides a
significant amount of electricity to New York City and the region, which helps to keep electricity costs down using a low polluting source. They also showed students a map of two emergency zones surrounding Indian Point on which they indicated the location of the students' school. The first zone, called the plume exposure pathway zone, encompasses the ten mile radius surrounding the nuclear reactors and would require evacuation of all people within the zone should a meltdown occur. The second zone, called the ingestion pathway zone, has a fifty mile radius surrounding the nuclear reactors and indicates that if a meltdown were to happen, the food and water located in this area would be considered radioactive material and could not be ingested. The students were shocked when they saw that their school was located within the ingestion pathway zone, and some commented that "we'd be done for" if a nuclear meltdown did occur.

The teachers then broke the students up into groups of three and provided each group with a list of advantages of Indian Point presented by the company that owns the plant (http://www.safesecurevital.com/), as well as a list of disadvantages of keeping the plant running compiled by a well-known opposition group (http://www.riverkeeper.org/). The students were informed that Indian Point's operating licenses are set to expire beginning in 2014 and that the community was soliciting their opinions on the debate on whether the plant should be allowed to continue to operate. In their groups, students reviewed the lists to formulate their decisions about the future of Indian Point. Each group was asked to create a picket sign displaying their stance on the issue that they could bring to a class "rally." When the signs were completed, the students held them up for the other groups to see and took turns stating the major reasons why they chose their position.

The teachers presented this lesson to two different classes. In the first class, two of the four groups argued in favor of keeping the plant open, with the others arguing to shut it down. In the next class, all the groups opposed re-licensure of the plant. The posters in both classes were extremely creative, with detailed drawings of radioactive waste and fallout signs, and catchy slogans such as "Save our town, shut it down!" and "Indian Point saves money and lives!" When the students revealed their picket signs to each other, their classmates were eager to comment on each others' signs. The groups' explanations of their decisions displayed a good initial understanding of the topic and its importance in the Hudson Valley region and beyond.

The teachers closed the lesson by telling students to stay aware of what would happen in the coming months with regards to Indian Point, paying close attention to the outcome in 2014. When asked what they had learned, several students noted that they had never learned anything about nuclear power prior to this lesson. Given that nuclear meltdown is a real possibility, with all the potentially catastrophic and long-term effects for our state and region, we hope that other teachers will find time to introduce and debate this topic with future citizens.