Grades: Fifth, High School
Subject: Social Studies, U.S. History, Tennessee History, English Language Arts
Time Required: 1 60-minute class periods
Author: Teaching with Primary Sources—MTSU

OVERVIEW

Founded in the 1930s by Myles Horton, Highlander Folk School served as an adult education center, an organizing center for labor in the region, and a place to explore strategies for community uplift. Beginning in the mid-1950s, Highlander shifted its focus to address racial injustice with a focus on school desegregation in the wake of the Brown decision. Between 1954 and 1962, many of the key leaders of the civil rights movement including Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Diane Nash attended workshops at Highlander. During this time, anti-segregationist including those in state government targeted Highlander. In 1962, the State of Tennessee revoked the school’s charter and confiscated their property. Highlander staff reformed the school for a short time in Knoxville and in 1972 moved to their current location in New Market.

UNDERSTANDING GOAL

Students will understand the role of Highlander Folk School in building the modern civil rights movement. They will understand the Highlander process, major cultural contributions to the movement, and how and why anti-segregationist targeted Highlander in the early 1960s.

OBJECTIVES

Students will analyze excerpts from oral histories, a Highlander publication, and a letter to answer the investigative question.

INVESTIGATIVE QUESTION

What role did Highlander Folk School play in building the modern civil rights movement? What were the consequences to Highlander’s work?

CURRICULUM STANDARDS

Social Studies

5.50 Identify Tennessee’s significant contributions to the Civil Rights Movement, including: Highlander Folk School...

U.S. History

US.80 Describe the significant events in the struggle to secure civil rights for African Americans, including: Highlander Folk School...

Tennessee History

TN.56 Describe Tennessee’s role in the Civil Rights Movement (e.g., sit-ins and Diane Nash, Highlander Folk School, Tent City Movement of Fayette County, Columbia Race Riots, and the Clinton Twelve).

English Language Arts

11-12.RI.KID.1 Analyze what a text says explicitly and draw inferences; support an interpretation of a text by citing and synthesizing relevant textual evidence from multiple sources.

5.RI.KID.1 Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
CURRICULUM STANDARDS CONTINUED

English Language Arts

11-12.RI.CS.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text.

5.RI.CS.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text relevant to a grade 5 topic or subject area, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings.

11-12.SL.CC.1 Initiate and participate effectively with varied partners in a range of collaborative discussions on appropriate 11th - 12th grade topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing one’s own ideas clearly and persuasively.

5.SL.CC.1 Prepare for collaborative discussions on 5th grade level topics and texts; engage effectively with varied partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing one’s own ideas clearly.

11-12.W.TTP.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to analyze, synthesize, and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection and organization of content.

5.W.TP.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information.

MATERIALS

- Worksheet
- Excerpted Primary Sources—pgs. 6-10

RESOURCES

- Candie Carawan and Guy Hughes Carawan oral history interview conducted by Joseph Mosnier in New Market, Tennessee, 2011-09-19.
- Dorothy Foreman Cotton oral history interview conducted by Joseph Mosnier in Ithaca, New York, 2011-07-25
- Highlander Folk School—Tennessee Encyclopedia
- We Shall Overcome Performed by Pete Seeger
PROCEDURE

Step 1  Begin by asking students what strategies civil rights activists employed (i.e. music / singing, grassroots organizing, nonviolent direct action that lead to arrest, boycotts). Next, introduce them to some basic information about Highlander Folk School including its location, founder, and initial work. You may wish to share with them the article about Highlander from the Tennessee Encyclopedia or play for them music such as We Shall Overcome.

Step 2  Share with them the investigative questions:

- What role did Highlander Folk School play in building the modern civil rights movement? What were the consequences to Highlander’s work?

You may wish to display the question in the front of the class so students can refer to it throughout the lesson. Ask them to make some predictions.

* For fifth grade, you may do this as a class discussion. For high school, have them write their predictions.

Step 3  Set up each of Sources 1-3 as individual stations and provide each student with a worksheet. Depending on the size of your class, you will need to vary the number of stations. Ideally, you want to have no more than three students looking at an individual source at a time. Have them answer the questions on the worksheet.

* For fifth grade, you may choose to have students work through the stations in pairs or small groups.

Step 4  Have the student’s consider the first part of the investigative question and their earlier predictions. How would they answer the investigative question based on their responses to the worksheet questions? Allow them time to write a new response.

* For fifth grade, you may elect to do this as a class discussion.

Step 5  Allow students to select one source from sources 3-5. Have them analyze the source and answer the second part of the investigative question. Citing evidence from their chosen/assigned source, have them write a brief response to the investigative question. This may be assigned as homework.

Teachers may elect to assign students to one of these three sources to better align with learning and reading abilities. For students who choose source 3, have them focus on text highlighted by the blue arrows and the blue star.
EVALUATION
Worksheet one – 40%
Written responses – 40%
Class participation – 20%

EXTENSION
• Freedom songs were sung by activists during marches, mass meetings, and while jailed for their actions. Music and singing promoted unity, uplifted the spirit, and created a unique culture within the Civil Rights Movement. Have your students identify popular freedom songs from the early years of the Civil Rights Movement. Play them for the class analyzing the lyrics. What are the messages within these songs? How might these have provided activists with motivation and the courage to fight racial injustice and violence? Many freedom songs can be found on YouTube. You may wish to use the Library’s Thinking About Songs as Historical Artifacts worksheet to prompt discussion.

• The Civil Rights Movement played out during the height of the Cold War, and Cold War politics impacted strategies for both those supportive of the movement and those who opposed it. Have students analyze source one and five again. This time have them look for language that highlights the linkages between the Civil Rights Movement and Cold War politics. What can we infer about the linkages between the movement and the Cold War from these two sources? For more resources on the Cold War, check out our November 2013 newsletter and our Cold War lesson plans.
Highlander Folk School Worksheet

Source 1:
1. Basic Analysis: What are some things that you see? What questions do you have about this source?

2. What does a demonstration of democracy mean? (blue arrows)

3. How did Highlander approach developing community leadership and creating a model for community uplift? (red arrow)

Source 2:
1. Basic Analysis: What are some things that you see? What questions do you have about this source?

2. How did music factor into Highlander’s work?

3. How would you describe the questions that Horton posed to the students? Why do you think he challenged the students this way?

4. Looking at the last paragraph, how do you think the Highlander approach contributed to the civil rights movement?

Source 3:
1. Basic Analysis: What are some things that you see? What questions do you have about this source?

2. How do the workshop topics at Highlander align with the larger work of the civil rights movement? (red arrow)
Source 1: Excerpt from *Highlander Reports*, October 1, 1957—September 30, 1958, 26th Annual Report Highlander Folk School, Monteagle, Tennessee

Candie Carawan: Well, Highlander hosted the first gathering of people who had been involved in the sit-ins April first to third, 1960... And Guy was already working at Highlander as a volunteer, having come in 1959. And I came up with a delegation of students from Nashville, having been involved in the sit-ins there...

I could start with the part of Guy and I meeting each other. He was teaching songs. And we’d had some songs in Nashville. We’d been in jail and used some singing to sort of keep our spirits up. But we didn’t have what I would call freedom songs. And he taught us, “I’m Going To Sit at the Welcome Table,” “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,” and “We Shall Overcome.” And I know for the people from Nashville that was just so incredible to have those songs, because they were so perfect. And I think for the students from around the South that was true.

But it was an incredible weekend in other ways. Myles Horton, the director of Highlander, and two or three other people used the Highlander process, which is asking a lot of questions that really got you thinking and got you thinking beyond what you’d done so far to think about next steps. And we had breakout sessions on what the meaning of nonviolence is, whether it was a tactic or a philosophy for us. What was our relationship with the adult communities that had already been working to try to dismantle segregation? What about the notion of, if you, were arrested, rather than coming out and taking all that bail money, staying in jail to put more pressure on the system. So, there were just a range of questions that, we struggled with that weekend. And it was a very heady time just to meet the other people who had been involved in similar situations...

CC: ...I know other people that we’ve talked to remember it that whenever the meeting got too heavy or the questions were too hard or whatever, Guy would go off in the room with his guitar. And, James Bevel and Bernard Lafayette and others would go in there with him and, they would just keep the singing going.

I mean, that’s actually been true of Highlander historically. It’s always dealt with really hard problems and pressed people to really make good decisions, but they’ve always used the uplift of culture to enable people to take on some of those hard things and to keep their spirits up. We’ve always used a lot of music and dance and good food and humor, and so, it’s part of the Highlander process, actually.
Source 3: Excerpt from Highlander Reports, October 1, 1957—September 30, 1958, 26th Annual Report Highlander Folk School, Monteagle, Tennessee

Mrs. Nixon's father died and she took it awfully hard. They took a trip and are just back. Both look well and Mr. Nixon comes by every day to ask about Mr. Williams. I think he is some better in his spirits than he was although he is still right bitter about the treatment he received, and I can't say I blame him too much, although getting mad does not do much good. At least the MIA did come out in defense of Highlander and old man Solomon Saay was there when it was raided and he got awfully mad and spoke right out and publicly in defense of it, which I was glad to see. Myles called up the other day to ask about Aubrey Williams and he said the hearing on the 2nd of November was going to be awfully rough, as they are going to try and close the school down entirely.
Dorothy Cotton: … Highlander was in the throes of being closed down because they had all sorts of phony charges leveled at them. This communist school and there was a billboard on the side of the road with Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt and Dr. King, on the same roadside sign, and somewhere in the caption was, “These have been to that communist school.” Interestingly one woman at Myles’ memorial service told this story. And she said, “We owe a big laugh at Myles’ funeral. They wouldn’t have known communism from rheumatism.” And because they’re calling the school a communist school and then because Myles Horton had black folk and white folk meeting together when that was just not the thing to do in those days.

But I was asked to go over to Highlander and because Dr. King and company must’ve seen the handwriting on the wall. … They [Highlander] were just taunted all the time and charged, just had many charges leveled against them, … but when Dr. King asked me if I would go over there to just meet the people and check out the school to get to know something of the school, I did just that…

I went to Highlander and I met this woman Septima Clark, and Septima was working there at the Highlander Folk School…

Septima had been fired from the Charleston school system. She had been a teacher, but she was fired because she would not say whether or not she was a member of the NAACP or not. And Esau Jenkins and Septima met actually at a conference at the Highlander Folk School.

… fast forward a little bit here to a time when the Citizenship Education Program, that is helping functionally illiterate black folk, African American people understand their political power. It just grew when Septima and Esau met each other there at the Highlander Folk School. Esau was wanting people to discover their political power and literacy training was a major part of that… So my being there meeting Septima who’d now moved, came over from Charleston to work there at the Highlander Folk School and Esau and her working together now. I just want to tell you that Highlander was fighting for its very life in the courts at this time. And they lost that battle. In other words the state confiscated their property, beautiful property, there in the Cumberland Mountains. And because they lost that property, so Highlander in terms of location was kind of in limbo for a while… ultimately they got a new property… between the time from actually losing the Highlander Folk School, the people who were funding these workshops … so Septima could help them learn to read and write and Esau was talking the political aspect of it. Everybody wanted to make sure this training continued. SCLC, now my organization, Dr. King’s organization inherited the organization.