

## Authentic Learning in a Health and Wellness Class through the Writings of Thoreau

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*Thoreau's ideas expressed in Walden and an essay, Walking, are applied to a health promotion and wellness course to create an authentic learning experience. This qualitative study involved nineteen students from three classes. The students read one of Henry David Thoreau's written works, identified a personally meaningful passage from the work, and wrote a short paper related to the connections between the writing and health promotion and wellness. These were analyzed and organized according to themes and sub-themes identified for each of the readings. The students' reactions to Thoreau's writing illustrate how such work can be used to promote authentic learning in a health education classroom by helping students reflect on: the connections between the environment and their health, connections between physical health and mental and spiritual well-being, and some of the ways in which modern society may undermine our quality of life.*

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To have an authentic learning experience with a work of art, it is important that learners construct meaning in their own way (Dewey, 1916; Greene, 1995; Piaget, 1954, 1957). This way of learning is often thwarted by educators who impose their own views on learners, or learners who rely too heavily on the opinions of critics. The authentic learning experience described in this manuscript involves the reactions of my students to selected chapters of *Walden* (a classic personal narrative of Henry David Thoreau who lived in the woods of Concord, Massachusetts to remove himself from society and connect with nature) and an essay entitled *Walking*, also by Thoreau. My own exploration of this work helped me reflect on feelings as a native New Englander, a faculty member in health education, and a nature lover. This is a reflection of art in the best sense, one that I shared with my students.

### *What is Art?*

Kristellar (1990) discusses the eighteenth-century definition of Fine Arts (Beaux Arts) and its close relationship with the term *Art*, with a capital "A." He points

out that both these terms typically refer to visual arts, but are "also quite commonly understood in a broader sense" (Kristellar, 1990, p. 164). This broader sense, he suggests, encompasses the five major arts of painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry; suggesting that all other forms of art have a lowercase "a," and are not assigned the same value. I believe it's fallacious to categorize art in this sense, as art is subjective. I judge art in relation to the emotional response that it evokes in me. Greene (2001) agrees that instead of creating a definition of art, we need "a recognition of the ways in which encounters with paintings, dance performances, musical works, plays, and the rest open up new experiential possibilities-or might open them up if we become informed and aware enough to notice what there is to be noticed, to attend in such a fashion that art forms actually come alive" (2001, p. 49).

Further, Wollheim (1980) suggests that criticism of art means reconstructing the creative process, an impossible task. The creative process depends upon many things, which include one's culture (Baxandall, 1985), inherent views on aesthetics (Ziff,

1984), experience (Elliott, 1966), and emotional connection (Dewey, 1934).

Place plays an important role in the aesthetic experience. Dewey (1934), reasons, “life goes on in an environment; not merely in it, but because of it, through interaction with it” (p. 13). As a New Englander who has ‘experienced’ *Walden*, I feel this personal narrative exemplifies interaction, respect, and appreciation for the environment. Berger (1977) states seeing “...establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain the world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it” (p. 7). Thoreau certainly ‘saw’ what there was to see, but he expressed his visions and experiences with the splendor and grandeur that Walden Pond deserves throughout each season.

Thoreau’s *Walden* helped me to see New England in a different light and make more of an attempt to shake the winter doldrums long after the majestic leaves of autumn are gone. *Walden* influenced me in the way I believe art should, enriching my life. Therefore, the study described below was conducted to determine whether or not incorporating writings by Thoreau would lead students in a health promotion and wellness program to reflect on different aspects of health, thereby enriching their lives.

#### *Health and Wellness Program*

The Health and Wellness Program at the State University of New York - Oswego is intended to prepare health education specialists to work in community settings related to a wide range of health promotion and disease prevention topics. Helping students acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for planning and implementing health education programs is emphasized. While students are not expected to be evaluation specialists, they are expected to critically evaluate published

literature in order to identify credible best practices. Finally, students are expected to engage in reflection about their practice, and the philosophical and ethical principles upon which it is based. Unfortunately, coursework does not always allow the students the formal opportunity to reflect on their own health. Hence, by encouraging the students to reflect on the writings of Henry David Thoreau and their own health beliefs and practices, this opportunity was provided.

The reactions of my students to selected chapters of *Walden* and *Walking* (Thoreau’s essay) show how Thoreau’s writings can be used to promote authentic learning in the health education classroom. This perspective can help incorporate art (through literature and possibly even other media) and imagination in different subject areas.

#### **Method**

The purpose of this study was to determine how Thoreau’s ideas expressed in *Walden* and *Walking* could be applied to a course in health promotion and wellness to create an authentic learning experience. This qualitative study involved a convenience sample of 19 students from the author’s following three classes: (1) Evaluation and Research, (2) Health Promotion Program Planning and (3) Wellness Skills.

The students were given the opportunity to receive a small percentage of their grade in extra credit for completing the following task. First, they were asked to read one of the following chapters from *Walden: Where I Lived and What I Lived For*, *The Bean Field*, *Solitude*, or the essay, *Walking*.

*Where I Lived and What I Lived For* highlights the reasons Thoreau chose to spend his time at Walden Pond, focusing on the beauty that abounds. There are also apparent philosophical and spiritual

elements in this chapter in which he urges the readers to think about their values and define their own reality.

In *The Bean Field*, Thoreau describes growing his own food and being self-sufficient. He clearly has a heightened appreciation for nature and the results of his physical labor.

*Solitude*, which posits Thoreau's opinion that one is not really alone in nature (Is the pond alone? No, it is shared with loons and fish). In this chapter, he was only lonely once for an hour, which was really a momentary lapse of reason.

In the essay *Walking*, Thoreau calls for a "wildness whose glance no civilization can endure" (p.192). He believes "all good things are wild and free" (p 197). In other words, we, like the animals we have enslaved, are dull and tame, but there is something in our spirits which, when connected to nature, can break the mundane and confining rules of society. Europe is to the east of Walden, and is ultra-civilized. Thoreau says we should head west to the wild and untamed parts of the country. He makes a pun of Sainte-Terrer (Holy Lander) and says they were walkers, or saunterers. When you are ready to leave everything, you are ready for a walk.

The students who volunteered for this assignment were asked to identify a specific passage or quote from within the reading they selected. This passage should have raised an issue regarding their own health in which they could improve in some way. Each student was required to write a two to three page reflective paper to include: (1) A statement of a personal health area (physical, mental, exercise plan, stress-reduction, spirituality) that the student would like to improve; (2) A paragraph detailing exactly what needs to be improved and how the student had become aware of the problem; (3) A two to ten sentence quote from Thoreau's work that could be applied

to this area; (4) A paragraph analyzing what Thoreau meant by this quote; (5) A couple of paragraphs that tell how Thoreau's ideas could be applied to remedy or improve the problem; and (6) A reflection on how changing lifestyle by applying these ideas from *Walden* will affect one's life with specific examples from the student's life.

The opportunity to complete the assignment was given to all forty-nine students enrolled for the spring semester. Nineteen students agreed to participate.

Permission was obtained from the Human Subjects Committee of SUNY-Oswego to involve students in this qualitative study. Participating students gave written permission for their work to be included in this study.

The reflective papers were analyzed qualitatively by grouping them according to the writings on which the student focused. I read each paper and wrote some notes in the margins to identify the emerging themes apparent for the specific focus. Of the nineteen respondents, one chose to read *Where I Lived and What I Lived For*, another one chose to read *The Bean Field*, five chose to read *Solitude*, and twelve chose to read *Walking*.

## Results

The results are organized according to the participants' selected reading. For each reading, the identified themes and sub-themes are presented and sections of the reflective papers, which provided examples of these themes, are extracted and explained in greater detail under their respective focus.

### *Where I Lived and What I Lived For*

The primary theme in this section was improving mental health via social acceptance. The sub-themes which the participant made reference to were role of

the media, stereotype/stigma, importance of being alone, and appreciation of small things.

There are many different aspects of mental health on which the participant focused. The participant who read this chapter recognized the ill effects of striving to fit into a desired social group. The participant discussed how Thoreau discovered what to appreciate on his own, rather than being influenced by the media or other people surrounding him. In addition, he appreciated small things, which the participant admired. The following quote from the student's paper illustrates these points:

Thoreau's ideas could be applied if I tried to do what he did, appreciate everything around, not just what I have been told to appreciate on TV. Thoreau was able to take joy in everything that happened to him. He was happy when it was nice out and he could work his fields, and he was happy when it rained because it would water his plants. If I, and other people, (because I'm sure the problem is not exclusive to me) could be more comfortable with myself, I would not need to seek the approval of others.

This quote shows that this student reflected on the adverse effect of social pressures from television and peers, realizing that by applying Thoreau's approach she could be more comfortable with herself. Attaining such self-comfort can be an important contributor to one's mental health.

#### *The Bean Field*

The major theme from this chapter was spirituality. The following three sub-themes were identified by the participant: (1) nature is a higher power; (2) life is a delicate existence; and (3) political action is needed to protect nature.

Spirituality is a broad topic that the participant analyzed from different perspectives, focusing on the role of nature in spirituality. Thoreau, who recognized the

splendor in growing beans in the summer, inspired the respondent to search for deeper meaning. After defining spirituality based on personal perspective, the participant suggested that people could benefit from seeking deeper meaning of life through nature, which is why we need to protect our environment.

It may be too late to live like Thoreau intended, but these principles can be applied to modern life. I can be thankful for what I have been provided; I can respect other cultures and beliefs; I can find peace in myself knowing that nature provides for her creatures. To me this is spirituality, not in the sense of religion, but in the sense of a higher power than within human control. At some point in my life I would like to live in conditions similar to Walden. It seems peaceful, simple, and honest ... three characteristics that in today's society are widely overlooked.

This student's reflections on spiritual dimensions of health indicate how she believed Thoreau's ways could be applied to modern life. Reflecting on one's values seems truly important for leading a healthful life since health may be conceptualized at least in part as defining how one wants to live one's life and then pursuing life in those ways.

#### *Solitude*

The primary themes in the reactions to this chapter were (1) improving mental health; (2) spirituality; and (3) applicability to today's world.

*Improving Mental Health through Solitude.* The sub-theme for improving mental health pertaining to this chapter was spending ample time with one's thoughts. Several participants commented on the benefits of spending time alone. These benefits ranged from increasing confidence to coping with loss. Some of these points are illustrated below with quotations from different students' papers.

People who are comfortable with their own thoughts regarding their whole existence must be content with every aspect of their overall well-being. This would include being comfortable with their physical appearance, spirituality and psychological well-being. People at ease with their thoughts are perhaps the healthiest people, as it affects so many aspects of their daily lives.

Thoreau's ability to be happy alone is evident in every phrase that he writes. I believe that Thoreau's ideas can be implemented to solve the problem of loneliness. To tell you the truth, I believe that this ability comes from being confident with yourself.

Thoreau's ideas can be used to improve spirituality in a person through his experiences and thoughts he talks about in the chapter titled Solitude. Just by reading this chapter, I have come to realize how precious alone time is.

In the past, I found it hard to be alone and happy, yet in the past few years, happiness in solitude has come with maturity and experience. My experiences in life have been dramatic from losing my brother to cancer at 29, to losing the love of my life, but I have found that if you make yourself happy and are comfortable living your life within your own mind, then the people that come and go in and out of your life will just add to the happiness that you accomplish alone. Happiness does truly come from within!

Thoreau also highlights the advantages of possessing the ability to be alone. It is this factor that so many people struggle with today. In this society many are constantly surrounded by family, friends, coworkers, and people in general. There are few places we can immediately escape to and be alone and find true sanctuary in quietness and solitude. As we become more and more accustomed to being surrounded by others, some develop a reliance and level of comfort with having people around. If one cannot be

happy in his/her own company, this can present serious mental health problems.

It seems clear that these students' reflections about solitude are related to the importance of self-reflection, not only in establishing one's identity, but also in finding peace within.

*Spirituality.* Students identified the importance of possessing joy from within. Many respondents discussed how being stronger spiritually could increase overall inner joy and happiness. Thoreau's writings prompted a few students to reflect on their own connection with nature and their room for personal growth.

Joy should come from within, and if a person can accomplish this they may be forever happy. (student's reaction)

Living out the true meaning of life means to not rely on money, friends, or even family to find happiness. It means to find complete happiness in one's self spiritually...

Throughout my short life I have come to the realization that no one else is going to bring me complete happiness, part of that must come from within.

These students' reflections relate to the importance of searching within rather than in the material world for finding satisfaction and fulfillment in life. Such outcomes are surely intimately related to health.

*Applicability to today's world.* Students addressed loss of respect, listening to others, and stress-reduction in applying this reading selection to their lives. They remarked on today's fast-paced lifestyle and the lack of attention for human emotion.

We go through day to day trying not to bring an up rise of emotion from those who we see on a daily basis; consequently, we really do not care what those people have to say, but what responses we can give to keep them content.

Thoreau calls society “cheap,” by this I think he means that society is superficial in that we generally interact with the same people at the same time everyday. Being cheap means that we have accepted this as a lifestyle, and do not look to interact by any other means. Therefore, the way I can apply Thoreau’s ideas to help reduce my social stress is to take individuals in my social group, and really listen to what they are saying. Don’t cheapen conversation with a generic response or synthetic attitude.

A year and a half ago I found myself in a new apartment, living by myself in a town where I knew no one for three weeks. I had no television or radio to break the silence of my quiet neighborhood. When I wasn’t walking the streets looking for a job, as was my afternoon routine, I was at the park or by the water or alone in my apartment. It was the first time I fell in love with nature and simultaneously was forced to be alone and face all the things that I was able to ignore when friends and family and work and school were there to distract me. Those three weeks felt like three months, but were more beneficial to my mental health than any other therapy or discussion I’ve ever experienced. It was a turning point and to this day I possess a greater appreciation for solitude and a need for time outdoors and its benefits.

These quotes reflect students’ recognition of the way in which modern life may detract from interpersonal interactions, and, in turn, quality of life. The students seem to yearn for meaningful rather than superficial interpersonal relationships. In addition, the third quotation reflects the student’s appreciation for personal time and a greater appreciation of nature.

### *Walking*

Most participants in this study read Thoreau’s essay, *Walking*, and provided a well-rounded, holistic perspective related to health. The three major themes pertaining to

the essay were: (1) physical well-being; (2) spiritual well-being; and (3) appreciation of nature.

*Physical well-being* Participants discussed the relationship of physical well being to overall well being, discipline, and routines. There was a wide range of variation in the responses. The following quotes illustrate that the respondents felt there is a link between physicality and overall well-being.

Walking is an adventure, a journey that you must go on. Thoreau thinks of exercise when he thinks of a man swinging dumbbells for his health. As I read on, I seemed to think that when he takes his “walks” he does it spiritually, in his mind as well as physically with his body.

Walking allows him to see new and great things. It also allows him to experience things beyond his dreams and to embrace and enjoy each moment of the walk. It seems like his walks give him a way to escape and to see only what he wants.

In conclusion, I feel that I would be happier and more physically healthy if I emulate what Thoreau did in his essay. This would only change my lifestyle for the better. I also believe that I would be more positive about my physical appearance.

Without being healthy physically, many other aspects of health can be affected. I know that becoming obese can affect a person’s mental well-being. Also, it helps relieve stress. The biggest goal I wish to accomplish is just to be more physically active, whether it be going for a jog, or beginning a workout program that I can stick with.

Being physically healthy is one of the easiest ways for a person to improve their overall well-being. By beginning a workout program to help me to become more active, or maybe if I could walk or jog more would be a big step.

Thoreau's ideas are based on improving overall wellness in society. They generally stem from improvements in mental and spiritual wellness rather than physical. However, he does make note of extensive walks, which cleanse the body. In terms of physical output, walking is a great way to improve overall physical health from the young to the elderly.

These students' reflections indicate an appreciation for the importance of physical activity and for the connection between physical health and emotional/spiritual health.

Some respondents thought making exercise a routine was essential, whereas others argued that sameness was a bad idea. A big contrast concerning discipline and routines in physical health was noted in the following responses.

Not everyone has what it takes to become physically fit. I think many people lack not only the physical aspects, but the drive and mental strength to succeed in a constant exercise routine.

People will not be able to experience the gratification of physical activity until they learn to be free from their dull daily routines. The effects of being physically active will not only affect their body, but also their mind and soul.

Walking is a good source of exercise. If I walked everyday for some hours, I would probably loose enough weight. He says that he walks everyday and for two or three hours. If I did that on a constant basis and ate right, I would not have my problem anymore. Another way this paragraph can help my problem is by walking not only on a treadmill but outdoors. If I walk outdoors, I won't be bored. I would have nature to see and a variety of other things. By being outdoors, it would inspire me to keep walking instead of just pushing stop on a treadmill. If I walked enough, it would be

a routine to me and would not be so strenuous to do.

While the students acknowledged that regular physical activity may have physical and emotional benefits, they also recognize that some people may find it difficult to be physically active on a regular basis because of personal limitations.

*Spiritual well-being.* Some participants focused solely on how the essay, *Walking*, may help enhance spiritual well-being. The sub-theme identified in this category was freedom. The following quotes were selected to represent how Thoreau provoked the respondents to think about spiritual well being.

I think that being outdoors and absorbing nature can make me happy and free. For example, if I'm upset about something, I go for a walk and walk away my troubles.

When Thoreau physically takes a walk, he finds himself heading towards a wood, meadow or a deserted pasture or hill. This seems to be his escape from the real world.

Walking in serene places might have given him a sense of freedom, an implication of tranquility.

*Appreciating nature.* Nature was an apparent theme in the essay, *Walking*. Students recognized the need for finding beauty and inspiration through nature and addressing how technology has changed our lives.

Participants commented on how finding beauty and inspiration through nature can improve overall health in the following excerpts from papers.

I enjoy being outdoors so I know I can walk for at least two hours if I really wanted to like Thoreau. It's peaceful; I could breathe in fresh air, and enjoy nature.

Too many people think it may be difficult to get out of their homes to go for a walk to help improve their health. He is

fascinated by what nature has to offer, and he can't see why others find it so difficult to just get out of their homes to notice it as well. Simply by walking and observing what nature has to offer can be one of the easiest ways to start improving one's physical well-being. However, people neglect to notice this, and choose not to do anything about it because they are ignorant to what it takes to become healthier. People are unaware of how easy it is to change their lifestyle.

Thoreau talks about being in nature for the majority of his papers. He brings up some good points about what it has to offer, and how people may take it for granted. Nature can be the biggest tool we can use to help aid us in improving our health. Just by being outside can be much better than sitting inside being inactive. Also, the food that has been made naturally from earth is much better than food that has been altered by humans. It is much more nutritional to consume fruits and vegetables than any other foods.

These students' reflections not only show they appreciate that simply being outdoors can contribute to our health, but also that walking outside is a relatively simple yet very important way to improve physical well-being. Longitudinal studies have shown that the biggest effects of physical activity are achieved when people who are sedentary become moderately physically active (such as walking).

*Technology: One step forward, two steps back?* The quotes below are illustrative of respondents' feelings about how technological advances have detracted from nature and our health. Reflections include insight into the ways technology has influenced them personally and as a society as well.

There should be a return to simplicity. Simplicity is when the people were at their prime, they were healthy because they were participating in

activities that their bodies were built for. The early peoples were able to sustain life through their own means of building their own houses by the materials that were available. They had the nutrients needed to suit good nutrition because they grew most of their own food and prepared it themselves.

The changing lifestyle of today is a product of "progress" that man has made. The "progress" has created technology that minimizes the need for the human labor source, causing them to be less active than in previous history. The energy that people used before is being stored due to the change in physical activity. With more free time, people spend more time in front of the television. It has been observed that people who sit in front of the television are more apt to eat snack foods. Snack foods provide empty calories, and provide no nutritional value. Because there is no need to burn the calories consumed they become stored as fat because the caloric intake is greater than the caloric expenditure. The new technology created this scenario, by making life more complex in the long run (like cardiovascular disease) and simpler for now. If we returned to the simpler life, people would be forced to produce for themselves and would not have so many luxuries and easy access to foods that are not healthy. This would also imply that people would need to be more physically active to provide for themselves.

Physical health today is of great concern in our culture and society. There has been a new trend on dieting strategies; this is not enough to facilitate change. It may seem that people are more health conscious, but it is only a select group. Both adults and children are plagued with obesity. The cause is the movement from a mobile to a sedentary life. More and more time is spent in-front of the television screen watching movies, and playing video games, as well as hours in front of the computer surfing the internet.



Living with twentieth century technology has changed the traditional way of life. We no longer have to do anything ourselves. Everything is made to do things for us or to make it easier for us to do it ourselves. Henry David was trying to say that taking a walk instead of using industrial transportation is a journey in itself because it's the traditional source of transportation.

I do spend a lot of time outside, but because this world is so materialistic, many people don't realize that utilizing nature can be one of the best ways to become a healthier person.

These students' comments make the important point that while technological progress in our modern society may have conferred a variety of benefits, there are costs as well. These costs may be reflected in less physical activity and concomitant increases in population-wide levels of obesity, worse nutrition, an overemphasis on dieting, and an emphasis on material versus an appreciation for some of the simpler, wonderful things in life.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of student papers given above shows that students were able to successfully apply the ideas from Thoreau's writings to their own health and wellness. Students expressed a variety of connections between Thoreau's ideas and their own life experiences. The activity was valuable in assisting students in reflection on important ideas that they might not have otherwise considered. In short, introducing art has created an authentic experience for these students. The use of art (in this case the writings of Thoreau) may be useful in health education by helping students appreciate nature and interpersonal relationships. This exercise helped students perceive links between the environment and their health, connections between physical

health and mental and spiritual well-being, and some of the ways in which modern society may undermine our quality of life.

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