

## **Our Future is Now**

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### **Introduction**

“You cannot hope to build a better world without improving the individuals. To that end, each of us must work for our own improvement and, at the same time, share a general responsibility for all humanity, our particular duty being to aid those to whom we think we can be most useful.”<sup>1</sup>

I think I must be getting older (all right, more experienced) because I have noticed that I have been looking at the content we need to teach from a much broader angle and the outcome through very different lenses. When I started my career as an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher, my main focus was to teach the students the language itself: words, grammar rules, pronunciation and sentence structure. The instruction was driven by the set state curriculum with some deviance on my part to address the needs of my particular students. Today I am still following the state standards, but I am trying not to make those the driving forces of my units. I believe that students can learn making inferences, drawing conclusions, comparing and contrasting or making predictions without us putting these terms on the board as the objective of our lessons. I find that when there are meaningful (meaning that students can personally relate to them) questions to be answered or tasks to be performed, students are more engaged and acquire the above-mentioned skills more easily. I tend to base my curriculum on overarching themes which address different areas of life from multiple viewpoints so that students can take away a message that can shape their lives.

We need to bring content objectives and personal experiences closer. In a study Karen A. Franck expresses her concern about the distance between the actions taken and one's experiences: “The objectification of knowledge includes an objectification of the world: it is divided into separate classes of objects, with their connections, and their rich range of possible meanings reduced.”<sup>2</sup> This, unfortunately, is true of our education system as well. We teach math, social studies, science, language arts, philosophy, arts, music (if a child is lucky to be offered to take such classes) separately which makes it even harder for students to realize how interconnected everything in our life is. I am a firm believer of integrated studies and feel fortunate that as an English Language Arts teacher I actually have a way of making it happen by incorporating history, geography, arts and music when teaching literature.

### **Background**

I would like to tell you about the students I had in mind when planning this curriculum unit. The school I am teaching at is a Title 1 school in the Charlotte Mecklenburg School System and is located in a socio-economically challenged area of Charlotte. I am going to include some data, which I do believe have to be interpreted carefully. At the same time, I do know they might be indicative of certain tendencies and definitely help you get an idea of some aspects of this institution. 93% of the students get free or reduced lunch. 11.8% of the students have some kind of learning disability and 21.5% have Limited English Proficiency Status. This last number is partly explained by the diversity of the student population: 58.1% African-American, 3.1% white, 2.4% Asian, 34% Hispanic, 0.3% American Indian and 2.1% multiracial.

Until this year our school was a middle school, but this year we added the first 9<sup>th</sup> grade class by keeping last year's 8<sup>th</sup> graders at the school. I was very excited about the news, because this way I have a chance to teach 9<sup>th</sup> grade English to my ESL students. Yes, I teach ESL to some fabulous kids from different parts of the world. I feel very fortunate to be able to work with such a diverse group. To be more precise, I have an 8<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts class with 17 Hispanic and African students and a 9<sup>th</sup> grade English class with 10 Hispanic and Asian students. Just to make our group more interesting, I am from Budapest, Hungary, and as thus someone who speaks English as a second language. I believe that my background helps me better understand their daily conflicts, the challenges they face adjusting to their new lifestyle, new expectations, adapting to an unknown culture and learning a new language. I can sympathize with them when they miss their family and their familiar routines and I'm trying to help them through the harder days. I also aim at making them realize that sometimes their perceived disadvantages actually work as advantages over their native peers. They have a different appreciation of the world around them and even though they often feel like outsiders, they have to be aware of the values of their heritage.

## **Objective**

Nowadays, whenever we are asked to define our objectives we are supposed to include the core standards and some 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. It seems like we always have some kind of magic notion to follow. Don't get me wrong: I do believe that it is important to know why we are teaching certain concepts and how the students will be able to make use of them. However, these are technicalities. I teach English language and literature and when I set my goals, I take a more traditional approach. For me literature is a never-ending expedition, with all its beauties and sufferings, during which we learn, think, fall in love, get furious, stop and ponder, daydream, laugh or sob, get immersed in a different world and become a different person. I would like to set these as an objective. My ultimate goal is to get my students addicted to reading so that their lives can be enriched by all the different worlds that open up for them.

To be more concrete, the ideas I want my students to explore will include a variety of notions ranging from ones that they are familiar with in certain areas to others that they probably haven't had to think about until now. One concept that we will look at is responsibility: responsibility for ourselves, our family, strangers and the environment. I would like them to think of themselves as important agents of our present and future society. We are going to look at the aspects of individual vs. community or society by exploring the society we live in and the tendencies that can lead to a certain path toward the future. We are going to read about past societies and utopias. I find it very important to take an interdisciplinary approach whenever we can, so I am going to incorporate the study of different ideologies as well as discussions of different art forms as they relate to our subject. This aspect makes this unit appropriate for Social Studies, History or Philosophy classes and certain parts of it can also be incorporated into Arts classes.

The concepts that we have our main focus on lend themselves to developing the students' critical thinking, problem solving and communication skills. The activities that I planned also require the students to analyze, evaluate and apply their knowledge in a creative way, while we are covering the objectives of the core standards.

## **Rationale**

Why do I want my student to do this unit? Since it was my choice it clearly has something to do with me. It is rooted partly in my avid interest in sociology and my fear of the downward spiral of humanity. No, I am not a pessimist. I do believe that humanity has a chance; we just need to keep learning and caring. Heart and intelligence rule! I notice the good examples around me, but I also see some alarming signs that we have to be aware of. Life should not be only about competition and individual success, which are often promoted in the easily consumable TV shows. Shows with valuable messages seem to be harder to grasp, require deeper understanding and time to digest. Most kids in our school choose to watch programs that don't inspire thinking about "big" questions and when it comes to picking up a book, again they elect to read "fun" novels. There is nothing wrong with that as long as there is a balance and they do get exposed to ideas that require some in-depth exploration. This is where our responsibility lies. Also we shouldn't forget that kids are intrinsically curious: we just have to make sure that this curiosity stays with them for the rest of their lives. They also have an opinion about the world around them, which needs to be heard and at times altered by giving the students opportunities to dig into those matters.

Apart from my anecdotal data for the need of raising social consciousness, there are various studies that point in the same direction. In his article, "Teaching Utopia," Arthur B. Shostak is quoting the 1999 UCLA Annual Survey of incoming students to point out that young adults avoid "any commitment to social activism" and that "the percent who thought it important to 'influence social values' reached the lowest level since 1986." They also showed a lack of interest in becoming a leader in the community. In his 2010

survey, he found that only 10% of his students thought “the world would be a better place with another two-thirds uncertain.”<sup>3</sup>

Edward W. Gondolf (Professor of Sociology) addresses the same problem in his article, “Teaching About Utopian Societies” stating some aspects of a “loss of community.” He says: “Increased mobility, the mass media, national political movements, and a corporate economy have, to varying degrees, subsumed much of our local self-determination, group interaction, and sense of identity. Consequently, much of the population has been set adrift fending for themselves in what Philip Slater (1976) termed famously ‘the pursuit of loneliness’.”<sup>4</sup> Another valuable book, *The Real American Dream*, points out that the absence of utopianism is “the root of our modern melancholy” since we are surrounded by “unprecedented wealth” but lack meaning.<sup>5</sup>

Exploring different societies, ideologies, goals and ideals of various communities can present our students with new kind of meaning and understanding that also inspires them to use their imagination to create. “Fantasy is not merely an interior process [...]. It is a way of being in the world and giving back to the soul of the world.”<sup>6</sup>

I think my students will learn a lot by comparing and contrasting different ideologies that they encounter in the books and movies we are going to work with. I want them to become independent thinkers and see what is really important in life by showing them different alternatives of our present society. Given that all my students came from different countries and have memories of a somewhat (or very much) different cultural, political and socio-economic environment, they will be able to relate to some of the notions that might be strange to a student who never lived in another country. This will give them a chance to relate to our readings on a more personal level and hopefully make them get involved and interested in the activities.

## **Strategies**

I have planned this unit for high school students; however, I believe that 8<sup>th</sup> grade students can benefit from it as well. Since the books we are going to read cover serious issues, a certain level of maturity and background knowledge is necessary for the unit to be successful. Of course with appropriate modifications parts of the unit can be used with younger students as well.

The strategies I am going to use are partly defined by the learning model that is being utilized at our school. All the teachers are required to plan and deliver their lessons according to the best practices of an interactive teaching model called Learning-Focused. “The Learning-Focused model is a framework for planning and delivering instruction using exemplary practices with a focus on learning.” (The Learning-Focused Notebook, 2005) Just to provide you some insight on how it works, I am going to summarize it in a nutshell. Teachers utilize data-driven instruction that requires students to use their higher

order thinking skills and is aimed at 100% student involvement. Teachers develop so-called “Acquisition Lesson Plans,” which might cover multiple days, depending on how much time is needed to cover the given content. The teacher’s role is more similar to that of a facilitator, who works as a catalyst, significantly reducing lecture time. The units/lessons are planned around an Essential Question, which represents an objective in the prioritized curriculum. There are separate Essential Questions for the unit and for the lessons and the students are expected to be able to answer them by the end of the lesson or unit. As a must-have, each lesson has to contain at least three Higher Order Thinking (HOT) Questions. Since student involvement is key, every lesson starts with an Activating Strategy that links the content to be taught to the students’ prior knowledge and also motivates the learner.

Other strategies that have to be present are Graphic Organizers, Structured Note Taking, Guided Reading and Writing, Study and Summarizing Tools and Visual Models. Using these strategies is non-negotiable. It really makes sense and I believe that every good teacher uses all these without following or even knowing about this model. What makes it stand out is that all the teachers at the school utilize the Learning-Focused model which gives the students a sense of uniformity, making it easier for them to meet the expectations.

My philosophy is that everybody can excel in something. Unfortunately, the present education system does not make it easy for non-traditional students to shine. In my view too much emphasis is placed on academic excellence, meaning that a student is considered successful only if he or she can do math, read or write at the expected level. Do not get me wrong: I do believe that these are very important skills; however, being able to create and having skills at different crafts or being able to perform is equally important. It really saddens me when I hear about elective classes that are being cut just to add some more math or literacy classes. Since students (children and adults) have a better chance to excel when we are addressing different learning styles, I find it imperative to engage all the multiple intelligences that students possess. I like to provide instruction that is easily accessible by students with a stronger auditory, visual, kinesthetic, tactile or social-interpersonal learning style. Apart from this approach being very effective, it also makes the lesson more fun for both the students and the teacher.

You will also see that there are strategies incorporated in my unit that address the needs of English Language Learners. For different reasons, most of my students are on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading level. Of course when you have a conversation with them they almost sound as if they were native speakers of English. Their listening and speaking skills are far more advanced than their literacy skills. Naturally we don’t want that to completely stop them from learning about more advanced topics, so I use a lot of audio-visual support and scaffolding pre-activities. Understandably their vocabulary is more limited than what their native speaker peers possess so they have to work hard to bridge that gap. For this end I have planned a lot of vocabulary building activities.

In spite of my preference of real books to e-books and face-face workshops to webinars, I do appreciate technology. I understand my students' addiction to the internet, Facebook, and other social networking sites, since I'm no exception either. You just cannot say no to getting information, and for now this is the quickest and most convenient way to get it. In this unit we are going to use laptops to search for and share information and also to create electronic products. We are using Edmodo as our networking site and students are going to create posters, cartoons and presentations using different websites and programs.

## **The Unit**

As I have mentioned before, one of the main concepts that is in the center of this unit is responsibility: knowing the weight and importance of our decisions and actions and how they affect our closer and wider community. We are going to dissect, analyze and interpret this concept through a range of stories, which involve different genres: short stories, novels, movies, paintings, even music. Throughout our journey we are going to travel in the past, just to see how writers of different eras envisioned the future creating engaging stories of utopia and dystopia. Students will be required to open their minds to incredible ideas and also to examine them through critical lenses. To achieve my objective I decided to use utopian and dystopian literature as the basis of our discussions. Students are going to learn how to react to new and often alien concepts by understanding them so that they can make a decision whether to accept or dismiss them based on educated evaluation.

Unit introduction: getting to know our present day society

Sort of as a prolonged Activating Strategy, I am going to ask my students to watch the news, browse the internet or read newspapers to follow current events. When they find something interesting, exciting, disturbing, puzzling or for any reason worthwhile to share, they are encouraged to bring it to class. (This "collecting" stage will last at least three weeks, because as of now my students haven't been interested in current news, so I have to make sure that they have ample information and a higher interest level by the time we start the unit.) We are going to create a bulletin board to display the articles, pictures and ads they provide. I am going to participate as well, making sure that we have lots of different issues worth discussion that would lead up to our unit. These discussions will hopefully touch upon topics like natural disasters, population issues, urbanization, economic inequality, racism, sexism, war and peace, crime, issues in the family unit, education and politics. I will make sure that there is a healthy balance between stories that depict our society in a positive and a negative way. Sad news items tend to comprise the majority of news programs or newspapers.

The objective of these discussions is to raise awareness of the positive and negative features of our present lives. We are going to put the articles into different categories to

find out the main factors that determine social well-being. The students are going to evaluate today's society regarding the factors they established. The anticipated categories will be: economy, education, freedom, political structure, family life, transportation, entertainment, jobs, nature, living conditions, safety and technology. Students will be working in groups to evaluate their assigned categories. They will be given an evaluation guide with questions to help them think about each factor, but they are also welcome to add their own comments from their point of view.

To follow up, we are going to have a panel meeting where each team will present their factor and the results of their evaluation, on which the other teams will reflect. After the discussion my students will create a chart in which they enumerate the positive and negative features of each category and they have to predict the course of the future regarding that category based on the present state. Honestly, I can't wait to see the results of this activity. I am almost tempted to try this out with the staff at the school just to be able to compare the outcome.

### Idiocracy

The activity described above was the intro to the movie titled "Idiocracy". As an Activating Strategy I am going to show the students the poster of the movie, which depicts Leonardo da Vinci's famous drawing, The Vitruvian Man. I am going to show them the original picture too, so that they can make better predictions as to what the movie might be about. At this point I am not revealing the title of the movie so that they feel more challenged. They will be able to further elaborate on their expectations after I showed them the title of the movie. In case you haven't seen the movie, it is set in the future about 500 years from now. We get to explore the society and the problems they are facing through the adventures of an "average American" who woke up in that future society after a botched hibernation experiment. The movie is mostly funny on the surface and the students will enjoy it. It will be interesting to see if they are able to connect its main idea to our previous discussion.

To accompany the movie I will have three sets of questions. The first set will be an anticipation survey, which I will hand out right after the scene where Joe Bauers, the main character, wakes up. I am interested in what the students think Joe will find in the future. The second set of questions will be the "while you watch" type of questions. I will stop the movie at certain times where students will have to make an inference, a prediction or analyze conflict. The third set of questions come after the movie and will require students to evaluate what they saw. They will also be asked to reflect on the answers they gave to the first set of question and evaluate the accuracy of their predictions. We are going to have a group discussion about how they felt about the society and the problems depicted in the movie.

The final activity of this section is to use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast our society and the one shown in the movie. As homework they are asked to write an essay that answers the question: Are there any signs in our present society that might indicate that we are headed towards Idiocracy?

## Utopia

In this section of the unit we are going back to the past and first look at the origins of utopia. We are going to talk about the first utopias (these were not called utopias at the time, since the genre was officially invented by Thomas More), like Ovid's Golden Age and Greek myths. Students will think about possible reasons that led to the birth of utopias. To deepen their understanding students are going to read about specific utopian stories in teams and then summarize them for the rest of the class. They will sometimes encounter astonishing ideas, like the lack of the institution of marriage in a utopia by Aristophanes.

After having defined utopia ("a nonexistent society described in detail and normally placed in time and place"<sup>7</sup>) we are going to make a distinction between *eutopias* and *dystopias*. Eutopia is considered an obsolete word, and nowadays the expression 'positive utopia' is used to refer to the type of utopia that depicts a society that is better than the society the reader/writer lives in. A dystopia or a negative utopia is what it suggests: a society that is not preferable to the one the reader/writer lives in. I find this topic fascinating because of all the possibilities and creativity involved. I would like to present my students with multiple examples, but since our time for this unit is limited, I have to resort to some modifications. Instead of reading the stories in whole, the students are going to be given summaries and excerpts of some of the most famous utopias and utopian societies from the past. (I am not giving a complete list of these here, because every one of us has his or her favorite ones to choose from; however, if I may recommend one, the society of classical Sparta is a gem.)

## Fahrenheit 451

To continue our voyage in the land of utopias we are going to visit the realm of science fiction since some of the books and short stories we are reading in this unit have science fiction elements. It is also an introduction to our novel study.

First I am showing a trailer from one of the most well-known science fiction movies, Star Wars (keeping in mind that my students might not be familiar with some lesser known ones) and ask them to identify some features that help them determine the genre of the movie. During the discussion we are going to come up with a definition for science fiction and compare it to Asimov's definition. In the next activity students will have to find evidence for the excerpts shown from science fiction movies and stories.



After this the students will learn about the history of science fiction to familiarize themselves with some of the most significant writers and types of science fiction literature. At this point I make sure to point out that contrary to what my students always tell me: science fiction is not “fake”. I will draw their attention to the original ideas of Jules Verne that are reality today and encourage them to find other examples for visionary ideas in the stories we are going to read.

Before actually starting to read *Fahrenheit 451*, I have a lesson about the 1950s, in which I show clips about life in that decade (commercials, videos of rock performances, recordings of then current events) so that they can have an idea in what environment Ray Bradbury wrote the book. After the discussion and viewing the students will make a Venn diagram to show the similarities and differences between the 50s and today.

This will be followed by actually reading the novel. Since this is going to be the first book with challenging language and ideas for my ESL students, we are going to read it together, frequently stopping to check understanding and to discuss new or confusing ideas. They will be required to take notes in a three column graphic organizer of the similarities and differences between our present world and the world depicted in the novel throughout their reading experience. Keeping in mind that my students will have to take the dreaded end of course exam, we are going to address content objectives too: we are going to examine plot structure, character development and motivation, the creation of suspense, irony, tone and mood. Ray Bradbury’s rich narrative lends itself to extensive discussions of the use of imagery and sensory language too.

As sort of a culminating project my students will have to write an essay about how they think the movie *Idiocracy* and the book *Fahrenheit 451* can be compared.

#### Utopia outside literature

This section of the unit will be an “out-of-curriculum” experience. Students will be introduced to utopia in different fields of art: visual arts, music, dancing, acting and (yes!) culinary arts. Art is a fascinating area to explore utopia in. We can easily get lost in its infinite means of expressions and the countless interpretations. Talking about art is very liberating for our students because they cannot really be wrong in their reactions to a piece of art or music. Who is it to say that they relate to it the wrong way? My students love talking about abstract paintings, guessing what the painting can depict or what the title is. Deciding whether a picture is utopian or not depends greatly on our inner expectations and schema of the world. To decide whether a piece of art is utopian or not, we can go back to our definition of utopia: if it depicts a detail of a nonexistent society, it is utopian. Again, nonexistent to our knowledge, so if a student has no knowledge of that particular aspect, he or she might decide on something being utopian even if it isn’t. I would say we should not worry about it too much, rather let them enjoy the experience of free thinking without the stress of having to give the right answer.

So what my students will do here is a gallery walk where they have a chance to react to different pieces of art: paintings, sculptures, buildings, pictures of meals, music clips, short clips of theatrical performances and performance artists. These “artifacts” will be exhibited around the classroom on laptops. Students can take their time enjoying the experience and take notes of their thoughts and feelings about the items. They will be asked to try to decide whether these pieces show elements of utopia, and then explain why they think so. When they are done walking around they will sit around a table and we will have our feedback session while having some cookies and tea, since that’s how a discussion should happen in my utopian school.

After this class I do not feel it right to give a real homework, so I will just ask my students to keep their eyes and minds open and whenever they come across something they consider utopian, bring it to class and let the others know about it.(All right, I might offer some extra credit as an incentive.)

#### Utopia and dystopia in short stories

In this section of the unit students will take instruction in their own hands. I will present a number of short stories from which they will have to pick the one they are going to present to the class. They can work individually or in pairs. Since my class is not big, I would not prefer groups so that we can have more stories to hear and discuss. Some of the short stories my students may choose from are: “Harrison Bergeron” by Kurt Vonnegut, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” by Ursula Le Guin, “The Machine Stops” by E. M. Forster, “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson, “The Punishment of Luxury” by Michael Carson, “The Pedestrian” by Ray Bradbury and “We Ate the Children Last” by Yann Martel.

The students will have to read their stories and get ready to present them. They have to do some research about the writer and the time the short story was written in. It is important that the students know the circumstances in which the story was born so that they can fully grasp its significance. Then the students will summarize the story, identify its theme and analyze what characteristics make it a utopian or dystopian short story. They also have to come up with some questions for the audience to inspire a conversation about the message of the story. They can choose the form of the presentation, but since using technology for creating a product is an expectation, they need to utilize one of the following methods: Power Point presentation, Prezi, or Toondoo.

After the presentations we are going to evaluate the short stories in terms of relevance to our society and to our lives. Students will have to decide on their favorite story and explain why their choice fell on that specific one. In my experience my students find it challenging to give reasons for their likes and dislikes, so I encourage them to explore what triggers their preferences.

## Anthem

I have chosen Ayn Rand's book as our second novel in this unit because it paints a peculiar picture of the future that would hopefully spark some lively discussions. The story is set in the far-away future, after the "Great Rebirth" when people "saw the Great Truth which is that all men are one and that there is no will save the will of all men together"; in a time when "I" is a punishable word and instead of names, people are called by numbers. The juxtaposition of two ideologies, individualism and communism creates interesting dynamics throughout the novel.

The introduction to this novel will be a lesson in ideology so that the students can understand why Rand's novel is so controversial. Having been brought up in Russia, Rand was a witness to some of the harsh actions taken as the first stage of communism was about to come to life. Her family lost the business that previously provided for them. That most certainly influenced her view of communism, which she summarizes in the following quote: "The Communists' chief purpose is to destroy every form of independence—independent work, independent action, independent property, independent thought, an independent mind, or an independent man. Conformity, alikeness, servility, submission and obedience are necessary to establish a Communist slave-state."<sup>8</sup>

In order to clarify the true nature of communism (the ideology and not the misrepresentations of it that we have seen in Russia, Cuba, North Korea, China or Vietnam), the students will be given a chance to learn not only about the Marxist theory but its early predecessors as well. My students will set on yet another journey to trace back the appearance of communistic ideas in works like Plato's *The Republic* and Thomas Moore's *Utopia*. We are going to explore the pros and cons of a classless society before turning to objectivism, the philosophy that Rand created based on her strong belief in the importance of the freedom and independence of the individual.

While reading the novel the students will have ongoing tasks. In a graphic organizer they are going to keep track of the different institutions this future society has. They will have to record what function each one serves and evaluate if we have something similar to it, or whether we could use one if we do not. Students will also keep a pro and con diary in which they will take notes about the features they like or dislike in this fictional world.

To make the novel study a bit more realistic and to bring Rand's imaginary society closer to the students, they are going to be involved in some experimental activities. One activity will address the lack of career choice. I will come up with a list of jobs in and around the classroom, like cleaners, messengers, announcers and scribes, just to mention a few. The students will write down their preferences. The next day I am going to act as

the Council of Vocations and assign jobs to the students, but of course not everybody will be happy with my choice. I want them to discuss their experience during and after the process and think about the implications of not being able to choose a career. I am going to take this activity a step further and get them think about their future: they will have to make a plan that would ensure them to be able to choose the profession they want when the time comes.

In another class, to experience the monotony of the life depicted in the novel, students will be asked to wear the same color T-shirt for a few days and the lessons will follow the same pattern too. This will be an introduction to a discussion about identity and individualism.

In another experiment we are going to eliminate the word “I” and all the other first person pronouns. We are going to play this game for one class period and give out “penalties” for the “transgressors”. The person with the fewest “transgressions” will get a prize. The next day we are going to do the same activity but the prohibited words will be all the first person plural pronouns. I would like this activity to generate a conversation about which task was easier and what they think the reason is.

After having read the novel the students will have to evaluate Rand’s society by making a SWOT analysis of it.

### Utopian communities

As we are approaching the end of this unit, I wanted to bring my students’ attention to some alternative mini-societies that exist today. I included the topic of intentional communities, partly to fight their reaction “It’s fake”, whenever unknown and hard-to-imagine ideas are presented to them, and partly to show them that choosing another path *is* possible. We are going to explore the many reasons for which these communities can come about and find the causes of the growing number of these communities. Next the students are going to get a closer look at two historically rooted but still functioning utopian communities, the Amish and the Hutterites. I have chosen these particular ones because they have long lasting traditions, they are well-established and have certain common features with the society that was depicted in *Anthem*.

The students will work in two groups and will be given a set of criteria for their research. They will need to collect information on different aspects of life in those communities. The groups will be responsible to divide the task among themselves, but in the end each group member needs to have all the information. When they compiled all the necessary information, the members of the two groups need to pair up and share the information they gathered so that they can compare and contrast the two utopian communities. Their product will be a Glogster poster, which is a very creative, interactive way for posting information.

As a closing activity we are going to have a discussion about the similarities between these communities and Rand's society in the *Anthem*, touching upon the question of the distance between fiction and reality.

### Final project

Here we are at the most unpredictable, and for this reason, probably the most exciting part of the unit. This is also the part where students can shine their strength that they otherwise wouldn't in a class that mostly focuses on verbal activities. Students will be able to improve their organizational, leadership and problem-solving skills. They will practice how to manage their own project, delegate tasks, negotiate, come to consensus, make group decisions and all the other skills that are necessary in a project-based activity.

The students will form small groups of three or four to create a project that presents their perfect society. During the unit our main focus was on dystopian societies, so I want to direct their attention towards a positive vision. I will encourage them to go wild with their ideas and use their imagination without limitations. Since creating all aspects of a society in details would need much more time than what we can actually afford to spend on this section on the unit, the expectations will be the following. The groups have to determine when and where their society exists, identify what the ideology is behind their society and describe it in general terms, emphasizing its differences from our present society. They should include descriptions of different aspects of life, like recreation, environment, education, work, technological advancement, health, financial issues, family life and relationships. After the general overview they need to pick one aspect and give a very detailed presentation of that. I want to encourage my students to go deep into the topic and be circumspect about it by examining the matter from multiple angles.

The delivery of the presentation will be their choice. They can present it in a traditional way using poster boards, or write a story, draw or paint pictures or perform it in a play. They are also welcome to choose from more contemporary delivery methods using computer technology. There are numerous websites that offer creative forms of presentation. One of them is Animoto, with which students can create a slide show of photos. Another website is Toondoo where students can create comic strips. Voicethread promotes a cooperative approach and uses different delivery methods: video, audio, doodling or attachments. The above-mentioned methods would probably be more time-consuming and require a lot of thinking as to how to convey all the information the students need to share about their society, so I will remind them of the good old Power Point presentation and its more mobile version Prezi, as well as (at least for me) the most interesting presentation tool: Glogster. This is a very colorful and versatile tool for compiling information in all formats: music, pictures and documents can be embedded and posted in an innovative way.

Another option for them to present their utopia is to make a boardgame. Honestly, I do hope that at least one group will decide on this method. This would be the most interactive way to get to know their society since the other students can be the characters who get to live by the new rules (or “unrules,” who knows?).

It will be very interesting to see what aspects of our present lives will appear similar or would completely disappear in the utopian societies the groups create. I am also curious to find out how much they will be influenced by the stories we read and the different societies we read about.

## Conclusion

I hope that my students will enjoy this unit as much I will enjoy teaching it and also that they will take away some ideas that can help them shape their lives. Bradbury will teach them that sometimes rules can be bad and need to be broken. Ayn Rand will make them realize that if we take ideologies to the extreme that can lead to a miserable world. The movie *Idiocracy* might warn them about the dangers of an ignorant society and make them think about initiating change. The short stories and art pieces can make them realize that being creative and using their imagination can open up new horizons. They can actually try out their potentials by creating something new.

The cross-curricular nature of this unit gives each student a chance to find what he or she is most interested in and to discover new fields of study that a student might want to focus on. The students get an introduction to philosophy, sociology, psychology and will achieve a deeper understanding of different eras of history. By looking into the past they obtain the necessary knowledge to reevaluate the present and get prepared for the future they actively create. Now.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Marie Curie quotes." Find the famous quotes you need, ThinkExist.com Quotations. [http://en.thinkexist.com/quotes/Marie\\_Curie/](http://en.thinkexist.com/quotes/Marie_Curie/) (accessed November 25, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Franck, Karen A.. "Imagining as a way of knowing: some reasons for teaching "Architecture of Utopia." " Utopian Studies, January 1, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Shostak, Arthur B.. "Teaching Utopia." *The Futurist* September-October (2000): 68.

<sup>4</sup> Gondolf, Edward W. "Teaching About Utopian Societies." *Teaching Sociology* 1 No.2, no. January (1985): 229-241.

<sup>5</sup> Delbanco, Andrew. *The Real American Dream*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Gondolf, Edward W. "Teaching About Utopian Societies." *Teaching Sociology* 1 No.2, no. January (1985): 229-241.

<sup>7</sup> Claeys, Gregory, and Lyman Tower Sargent. *The Utopia Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> "Communism — Ayn Rand Lexicon." The Ayn Rand Lexicon: Objectivism from A to Z — Ayn Rand Lexicon. <http://aynrandlexicon.com/lexicon/communism.html> (accessed November 25, 2011).

## Resources

### Bibliography for teachers

1. Alvares, Jean. "The Utopian Ideal and Critical Methods for the Humanities." *International Journal of the Humanities* 3:2 (2005): 9-15.

This scholarly work outlines a critical approach to interpret works via explaining their motifs, images and historical relevance.

2. "Art's Utopian Function | nomadic utopianism." nomadic utopianism | fail again. fail better.. <http://nomadicutopianism.wordpress.com/2011/04/22/art-and-utopia/> (accessed November 26, 2011).

A fascinating blog about the interaction between art and utopia.

3. Bickman, Martin. "Thinking Toward Utopia." *Phi Delta Kappan* 80:1 (1998): 75-78.

An eye-opening article about what education should be focusing on, expressed in the subtitle: "Reconstructing the Tradition of the Active Mind."

4. Bradbury, Ray. *The Pedestrian*. s.l.: Printed by R.A. Squires, 1951.

A short story Bradbury used as a basis for Fahrenheit 451.

5. Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*. [Book Club ed. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967.

It is a thought-provoking novel about a society that prefers ignorance and considers reading a crime.

6. Claeys, Gregory, and Lyman Tower Sargent. *The Utopia Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.

It is an anthology of utopian writings from the Old Testament to Orwell. Great resource and appetizer!

7. "The Ayn Rand Lexicon: Objectivism from A to Z — Ayn Rand Lexicon." *The Ayn Rand Lexicon: Objectivism from A to Z — Ayn Rand Lexicon*. N.p., 26 Nov. 2011. Web. 26 Nov. 2011. <<http://aynrandlexicon.com/>>.

This online mini-encyclopedia offers an insight to Rand's philosophy.

8. Delbanco, Andrew. *The Real American Dream*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

This work analyzes the American history from a different point of view and tries to find the answers to how keeping up hope makes realizing the "American dream" possible.

9. Forster, E. M.. *The Machine Stops*. London: Penguin, 2011.

This short story tells a fascinating and still relevant story about the role of technology in our lives.

10. Franck, Karen A.. "Imagining as a Way of Knowing: Some Reasons for Teaching Architecture of Utopia." *Utopian Studies*, January 1, 1998.

This article argues that learning should not be "a rational, detached and impersonal process."

11. Gondolf, Edward W.. "Teaching About Utopian Societies." *Teaching Sociology* 12

No.2, January (1985): 229-241.

This study describes a sociology course on utopian societies. It involves some interesting and unconventional projects.

12. Goodwin, Pearl. "Elements of Utopias in Young Adult Literature." *English Journal* 74:6 (1985): 66-69.

Goodwin describes how reading utopian literature can help personal growth.

13. Guin, Ursula K.. *The Ones Who Walk away from Omelas*. Mankato, Minn.: Creative Education, 1993.

This short story is an allegorical tale about how sacrifice can be a means to the happiness of a community.

14. Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. New York: Harper & Bros., 1946.

This engaging utopian/dystopian novel deals with contemporary issues set in the future.

15. Jackson, Shirley, and Reg Sandland. *The Lottery*. Mankato, Minn.: Creative Education, 1983.

It is a great short story to introduce the shocking nature of some traditions of different communities and to inspire a conversation about morality.

16. Jowett, Benjamin. *Plato: The Republic*. Collector's ed. Norwalk, Conn.: Easton Press, 1980.

This basic philosophical work is a Socratic discussion on moral questions such as societal, political and individual justice while describing an ideal society.

17. Martel, Yann. *We Ate the Children Last: stories*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2004.

A short story about the unexpected effects of an operation. It is great to generate conversation about morality and responsibility.

18. Marx, Karl, Friedrich Engels, and Ellen Meiksins Wood. *The Communist Manifesto*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998.

The political theory of a utopian society without classes and private property in which all individuals are equal.

19. Orwell, George, Michael Kort, Ariel Dorfman, Kurt Vonnegut, and Daphne Maurier. *Animal farm: and related readings*. Evanston, Ill.: McDougal Littell, 1997.

Among other stories, I recommend reading Vonnegut's *Harrison Bergeron*, which lends itself to great comparison with some ideas in Rand's *Anthem*.

20. Rand, Ayn. *Anthem*. Salt Lake City: Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, 1998.

This novel describes a society where the individual disappears and everything is done for and with the community.

21. Shostak, Arthur B.. "Teaching Utopia." *The Futurist* September-october (2000): 68.

This article argues for teaching utopia in the classroom and gives practical ideas on what to keep in mind when doing so.

22. Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. *Encyclopedia of Utopian Literature*. Santa Barbara: ABC CLIO, 1995.

A great reference book on everything that is connected to utopia, conveniently arranged in alphabetical order.



23. Westfahl, Gary. *Science Fiction Quotations*. New Haven and London: Yale University, 2005.

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Reading list for students

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15. Idiocracy (2006)

A movie I used to explore different aspects of our present day and any future society.