Frederick Douglass, the Constitution, and Slavery: A Classroom Debate
Vanessa Rodriguez

Achievement and Innovation in the Middle Ages: Students Compare Civilizations
Aaron Kaio and Katie Gilbert

The Back Page
Now and Then: A Hierarchy of Needs
Within two generations, the compromises that were made in the Constitution on the issue of slavery were undermining the very republic that the founding fathers had struggled so hard to launch. We can study the problematic passages of the Constitution through the words of the great orator and African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Studying quotes from his antebellum speeches is intriguing for students because Douglass argued that the Constitution was a pro-slavery document until 1851, when he very publicly changed his opinion, announcing that the Constitution could serve very well as an anti-slavery document in a nation of free men and women. Which opinion was correct? Was the Constitution a pro-slavery or an anti-slavery document? This is the question that students grapple with in the activities below.

A Lesson Plan
I teach this lesson after students have argued over whether the Articles of Confederation (adopted in 1781), and the Constitutional Convention (held in 1787), solved, ignored, or made worse the problems facing the new nation. I use two 90-minute periods for this lesson, but it is described below as an activity using four 45-minute periods. The lesson involves reading, class discussion, small group discussion and planning, a debate, and a writing assignment. These are key points of information that I expect students will learn during this activity:

1. Slavery affected the young nation in many ways. Citizens and politicians debated issues related to slavery, and conflicts grew until the Civil War began in 1861.

2. Supporters of slavery used four passages in the Constitution to uphold their political power and sustain the institution of slavery.

3. The meaning of these passages was, however, open to debate. The words “slave” and “slavery” do not appear in the Constitution, so the meaning of the passages was ambiguous.

4. Frederick Douglass, a leading abolitionist, at first decried the U.S. Constitution as a pro-slavery document, but beginning in 1851, he argued that it was an anti-slavery document.

Day One: Introduction and Reading
Introduce a great American, Frederick Douglass, to your class by summarizing his biography. As a young man, Douglass escaped from slavery in Maryland and became a leading orator (speaker), author, and newspaper editor in the abolitionist movement during the antebellum period. Douglass began his abolitionist career with the support of William Lloyd Garrison, a white man and a radical fighter for the abolitionist cause. Garrison shocked the nation by burning a copy of the Constitution because it was a document that supported slavery, he said. He also published writings by Frederick Douglass in his newspaper *The Liberator.*

Having escaped from slavery, Douglass was, of course, always fiercely opposed to slavery. But in 1851, he began to distance himself from Garrison by declaring that he (Douglass) now thought that the Constitution was an anti-slavery document.

Distribute Frederick Douglass’s statements about specific passages in the Constitution to the students, one page
per student. [HANDOUTS 1-5] There are five different pages, each with five statements by Douglass concerning a specific passage in the Constitution. I tell students that tonight each of them will be reading only one passage from the Constitution, but that all five passages will be part of classroom discussion the following days.

Consider each student’s ability when assigning these readings. Handouts 2-4 are easier to read (Suppressing Insurrection, Returning Fugitive Slaves, and Ending the Slave Trade). Handout 1 (the Pre-amble) is moderately difficult. Handout 5 (The Three-Fifths Clause) is harder to read and comprehend.

Distribute handouts evenly so that there is a balance of students receiving each item within the Constitution. Ask students to read their handouts. Their homework assignment is to begin preparing for the debate by using the information in their handouts to answer the question: “Is the Constitution a Pro- or Anti-Slavery Document?” They must find evidence within the handout to support their opinion, and be prepared to discuss and defend their opinion.

Day Two: Preparing for Debate

Briefly recap earlier lessons. (5 minutes) Some problems with the Articles of Confederation were solved by the Constitution, but other problems were not. Problems associated with slavery grew worse in the decades that followed 1787, especially the conflicts over whether slavery would be allowed in new territories (and new states) in the West and whether enslaved men, women, and children who had escaped to free states should be forcibly returned to slavery.

Review the passages from the Constitution that were involved in the issue of slavery. (5 minutes)

Ask students to vote, by a show of hands, on whether each passage of the Constitution was pro- or anti-slavery, and record their votes on a chart that lists the five passages under discussion. Take time to read each passage (they appear on Handouts 1-5) and discuss its meaning before taking a vote. (5 minutes)

Day Three: Debating the Issue

Clear away the desks and set up chairs so that the pro and anti groups will face each other (for example, in concentric half-circles or opposing rows). The teacher, serving as moderator (and time keeper) of the debate, gives an introduction. (3 minutes) Administer the debate as described on HANDOUT 6. (38 minutes) Afterwards, encourage students to share their reactions to the debate and any final thoughts on the topic: the Constitution as a pro- or anti-slavery document. (5 minutes)

Just before the end of class, explain tonight’s new homework task (or it could be tomorrow’s classroom writing assignment), “Arguing with Frederick Douglass.” [HANDOUT 7]. Students should use their Debate Organizer Handout 6 to complete this writing assignment. [HANDOUTS 1-4] (2 minutes)

Day Four: Debriefing and Reflecting

Invite a few volunteers to read aloud the dialog they wrote for the homework assignment, and allow other students to comment politely. This is a tough assignment that involves blending historical information and creative writing. (10 minutes)

Today, the teacher gives the students a page with excerpts from a speech that Frederick Douglass gave in 1860. [HANDOUT 8] In this speech,
Douglass explained why he changed his view of the Constitution. These passages are powerful when read aloud. The teacher should read the text, as the meaning is clearest if the reader has rehearsed and uses careful phrasing, taking time to pause between the paragraphs. Students can follow along by reading the handout. (5 minutes)

Can students decipher Douglass’s metaphor about pirates? Read that paragraph again for the class after reading the whole text. Douglass is saying that Northerners who would split up the nation by leaving the slave-holding South are like a healthy young man who would escape from pirates by leaving them—and his fellow passengers—behind. The young man ought to help his fellow passengers resist the pirates! In a similar way, Douglass argues that the abolitionists in the North should use the Constitution and all the powers of the federal government to bring an end to the institution of slavery.

The teacher can foreshadow upcoming lessons about Reconstruction by asking students how the four passages from the Constitution might be improved. How could the Constitution be amended so that American society of that era would better reflect one of the ideals asserted in the Constitution’s Preamble—that we should strive to “secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity”? (30 minutes)

Notes
1. Biographies are available at different levels of reading difficulty. Easiest: Elisabeth P. Myers, Frederick Douglass: Young Defender of Human Rights (Young Patriot Series) (Carmel, IN: Patria Press, 2002), 114 pages. This book tells the life of young Douglass up through 1841, includes a brief timeline and glossary for the basic reader. More advanced: Peter Burchard, Frederick Douglass: For the Great Family of Man (New York: Atheneum, 2003), 226 pages with notes on sources, bibliography, and index. Some students may be ready to read Frederick Douglass’s autobiography, The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (Kindle Edition) (indypublish.com, 2006), 96 pages. This edition, with notes, reading pointers, and vocabulary, will help students get the most out of this classic. Douglass’s Narrative can be downloaded free at sunsite.berkeley.edu/Literature/ Douglass/Autobiography/.
2. This might be a good moment in these lessons to explain that the period before the Civil War is known as the “antebellum period.” The Latin word “ante” means “before” and “bellum” means war, as in the words “belligerent” and “bellicose.”

The author thanks Professor Robert Cohen, chair of the Department of Teaching and Learning at New York University, for contributions and encouragement.

Vanessa Rodriguez wrote this article while teaching seventh grade social studies at the Salk School of Science in New York, NY.
Is the Constitution a Pro- or Anti-Slavery Document?

The Preamble

The Preamble to the Constitution reads:

We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common Defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Below are arguments that abolitionist Frederick Douglass made at different times before the Civil War. He was always against slavery. At first, Douglass argued that the Constitution supported slavery. But then, between 1851 and 1861, he argued that the Constitution was an anti-slavery document.

What do you think? Be prepared to defend your opinion using arguments from this handout.

The Constitution is Pro-Slavery

- The 1859 Supreme Court verdict in the case of Dred Scott stated that the founders could not possibly have meant for “We the People” to include blacks.
- All of the Founding Fathers in 1789 were white, so “we” meant “whites.”
- The political community that chose the Founders was also white.
- Few blacks could vote at this time, even in the North.
- Slavery existed in 8 of the 13 original states in 1789

The Constitution is Anti-Slavery

- Look at the six goals that the Constitution framed and adopted and see if slavery is one of them.
- The six goals outlined in the peamble included “union, defense, welfare, tranquility, justice, and liberty” all of which are “good”. Having slavery is the opposite of these goals of the country.
- Its language is all inclusive: “we the people;” not we the white people, not even we the citizens, not we the privileged class, not we the high, not we the low, but we the people; and if Negroes are people, they are included in the benefits for which the Constitution of the United States of America was ordained and established.
- I refuse to allow white Americans to wash out African Americans from the Constitution. I insist that blacks are covered by the rights and liberties it lays down. We are “people,” and therefore we are included.
- There are no words in that preamble that can be found that contradict my reading of it

Simon Walker was interviewed as part of the Ex-Slaves Narratives project in 1937, sponsored by the federal government’s Works Progress Administration (WPA). Walker’s generation saw the end of slavery. (See Paul Horton, “The WPA Slave Narratives: Teaching with Oral Histories”, Middle Level Learning 13 (January/February 2002): 3-8.)
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Suppressing Insurrection

Article I, Section 8 (paraphrased): Congress has the power to call forth the militia to execute the laws of the Union, suppress insurrections, and repel invasions.

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• This clause gave Congress the power to use the military to put down slave revolts. It gave the federal government power to crush rebellions.</td>
<td>• Let us imagine that an anti-slavery man is President of the United States and he has the power of holding back slave rebellions. This clause would put an end to slavery because he could decide how to end the slave rebellion. He could decide that slavery should end so that there wouldn't be any more slave rebellions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Every man who pledges himself to raise his hand in support of the ... constitution ... swears the slaves shall either remain slaves or die.</td>
<td>• If there is no safety from the rebellions of slaves, then it would be best to obey the Constitution by putting an end to slavery so you could keep the people safe from slave rebellions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• This clause of the Constitution “changes every white man into an enemy of the black man in this land that preaches of liberty. Every bayonet, sword, musket, and cannon is aimed at the chest of the Negro: 3,000,000 of the colored race are lying there under the heels of 17,000,000 of their white fellow creatures.”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Joseph Cinquez, leader of a revolt among African slaves aboard the Spanish ship Amistad en route to Cuba in June 1839. This portrait was commissioned by the New York Sun newspaper in 1839. (Library of Congress)
Is the Constitution a Pro- or Anti-Slavery Document?

Returning Fugitive Slaves

Article IV, Section 2 (paraphrased): If a person held in service (or labor) escapes to another state, the escaped person will not be freed from service, but will be given back to the person who held him in service.

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<tr>
<td>• The fugitive slave clause is morally embarrassing in every way; it forces the whole country to return slaves to their owners.</td>
<td>• This passage is not a fugitive slave clause because it never mentions slavery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• This clause of the American Constitution makes this whole land one huge hunting ground for men.</td>
<td>• This clause states that a person held in service or labor in one state who flees to another must be returned to his owners. This applies to a very large group of people, including escaped prisoners and indentured servants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It gives the slaveholder the right at any moment to set his bloodhounds on the track of the poor fugitive; hunt him down like a wild beast and hurl him back into the jaws of slavery from which he had briefly escaped.</td>
<td>• After the Constitutional Convention in 1789, southern delegates originally introduced an article to recapture fugitive slaves. It included specific language about the returning of persons being held to “servitude.” But these slave-owning delegates quickly learned that the language of their Fugitive Slave clause was too pro-slavery. Other delegates quickly rejected such wording.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The fugitive slave clause secures slave owners their property in slaves because it forces people to deliver fugitive slaves and servants like criminals.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Sheet music cover from 1845 illustrated with a portrait of Frederick Douglass as a runaway slave. (Library of Congress)
Is the Constitution a Pro- or Anti-Slavery Document?

Ending the Slave Trade

Article I, Section 9 (written in 1789, paraphrased): Congress may not stop the migration or importation of people before the year 1808. A tax can be charged on the importation, but it cannot exceed ten dollars per person.

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<td>• This clause allowed the inhumane traffic of enslaved Africans to continue through 1807, supporting massive enslavement and a booming slave trade that strengthened the institution of slavery in the United States.</td>
<td>• At the time that the Constitution was written it was obvious that ending the slave trade would bring “the certain death of slavery.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The Constitutional Convention of 1789 chose not to pass the strongest anti-slavery act, which would be immediately abolishing the slave trade. It didn’t even order the abolishment of slavery twenty years later in 1807; it just said that Congress could decide in 20 years if it wanted to abolish it. It empowered the Congress, but did not require it, to abolish the slave trade after two decades.</td>
<td>• If you “cut off the stream, the pond would dry up.” This part of the Constitution “makes the Constitution anti-slavery... because it said to the slave-states that the price they would have to pay for coming into the American Union was that the slave trade would be put to an end in twenty years.” The slave trade could have carried on indefinitely if they stayed out of the Union.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Southern delegates like Charles C. Pinckney of South Carolina went home and promoted ratification of the Constitution by telling his pro-slavery supporters that “we have secured an unlimited importation of negroes for twenty years and nowhere in that document is it declared that the importation shall be then stopped.”</td>
<td>• This clause in the Constitution gave the federal government a power that it didn’t have with the Articles of Confederation—the power to abolish the slave trade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• This clause in the Constitution gave the federal government a power that it didn’t have with the Articles of Confederation—the power to abolish the slave trade.</td>
<td>• The fact that it agreed to wait 20 years was not as important as the fact that the slave trade would end.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This detailed drawing of the slave ship Brookes, showing how 482 people were to be packed onto the decks, was distributed by the Abolitionist Society in England in 1789 in its campaign against the slave trade.

The year 2008 marks the 200th anniversary of the end of the U.S. slave trade, the importation of enslaved persons to the United States. Learn more at the PBS website “Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North,” at www.pbs.org/preview/pov-tracesofthetrade/.
Is the Constitution a Pro- or Anti-Slavery Document?

The Three-Fifths Clause

Article I, Section 2 (paraphrased): The number of representatives and taxes that each state gets will be calculated according to its population. The population will be determined by adding the number of free persons, including those bound to service for a set number of years, and three fifths (\( \frac{3}{5} \)) of all other persons. (Indians are excluded because they are not taxed).

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<td>• The majority of slavers were in the South, and since slaves could not vote but were still being counted as if they represented ( \frac{1}{2} ) of a vote, this meant that slave-owners were politically rewarded for owning their slaves.</td>
<td>• By counting each slave only ( \frac{1}{5} ) of a vote for representation in federal elections, the Constitution gave the slaveholding States a disability; it took away their power to have a whole vote for each of their slaves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Adding ( \frac{1}{5} ) of a vote per slave (for millions of slaves) for representational purposes gave slave-owners and the white South huge political power. At the same time, enslaved African American men could not vote.</td>
<td>• A black man in a free state is worth two-fifths more than a black man in a slave state. Thus, more power is given to the non-slaveholding states.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Five of the first seven presidents were slaveholders.</td>
<td>• Instead of encouraging slavery, the Constitution encourages ending slavery by giving an increase of “two-fifths” political power to free states.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The powerful office of the speaker of the House was held by a slaveholder for 28 of the nation’s first 30 years.</td>
<td>• Slaves are referred to in the ( \frac{3}{5} ) clause as “other persons,” which at least does recognize their humanity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The leader of the Senate had always been a slaveholder.</td>
<td>• Southern states ought to realize that freeing their slaves would give them more power. Each freed slave would be worth one whole vote, rather than ( \frac{3}{5} ) of a vote.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The majority of cabinet members and justices on the Supreme Court were slaveholders.</td>
<td>• Nowhere does the Constitution forbid a black man to vote.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• If Georgians and South Carolinians were to go to the Coast of Africa, and tear away their fellow human beings from their loved ones only to damn them to the cruelest slavery, should they be allowed to have more votes in government? Should we reward them for this behavior?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**A Classroom Debate**

**Debate Steps:** This is how we will conduct the debate in the classroom. There are five passages from the Constitution that will be discussed during the debate.

1. Opening Statements: One member of each team provides an overview of the group’s position in this matter. Use passion to convince everyone that your group’s opinion is correct, but don’t give specific evidence, at least not yet!
   - Team One (2 minutes)
   - Team Two (2 minutes)

2. Best Argument: Members of Team 1 start with their strongest arguments, based on the passage from the Constitution that best supports their position. Both teams limit their examples to this one passage of the Constitution during this round of the debate. Both teams give evidence throughout, drawing from Douglass’s words spoken at different times in his life.
   - Team One (argument, 3 minutes)
   - Team Two (rebuttal, 2 minutes)
   - Team One (final word, 1 minute)

3. Best Counter-Argument: In this round, members of Team 2 respond with their strongest arguments, based on the passage from the Constitution that best supports their position. Both teams limit their examples to this one passage of the Constitution during this round. Both teams give evidence throughout, drawing from Douglass’s words.
   - Team Two (argument, 3 minutes)
   - Team One (rebuttal, 2 minutes)
   - Team Two (final word, 1 minute)

4. Continuing Arguments: Repeat steps 2 and 3 for each of the remaining three passages from the Constitution, alternating which team gives the opening argument. (6 minutes X 3 remaining rounds = 18 minutes)

5. Closing Statements: One member from each team gives a brief, but moving final appeal. (2 minutes for each closing. Total time for the whole debate is 38 minutes)

**Debate Organizer:** Copy the following chart onto a sheet of paper, and use it to take down notes about your team’s debate strategy. You will use these notes again later for a written homework assignment: “Arguing with Frederick Douglass.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constitution Passage</th>
<th>My Team’s Argument</th>
<th>Opponent’s Likely Argument</th>
<th>My Team’s Rebuttals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preamble</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suppressing Insurrection</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Three-fifths Clause</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Opening Statement:</td>
<td></td>
<td>Our Closing Statement:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Student Writing Assignment

Arguing with Frederick Douglass

Create a short dialogue in which you pretend to argue with Frederick Douglass about this question: “Is the U.S. Constitution a pro- or anti-slavery document?”

You may choose to argue against Douglass as he stood in 1850, when he was arguing that the Constitution was a pro-slavery document and ought to be discarded…

Or you may choose to argue against Douglass as he stood in 1860, when he argued that the Constitution was an instrument of freedom for all.

You do not have to hold to the position that you were assigned in today’s debate.

Use material from the homework sheets and, if you wish, the arguments from the classroom debate.

Mention at least two passages from the Constitution to support your argument.

Remember that you are writing at a time in American life when the institution of slavery was hotly debated. In some states, the danger of arguments breaking out into violent conflicts was very real. It is okay, in this moot debate, to argue against Mr. Douglass with passion!
Samples of Student Writing: “Arguing with Frederick Douglass”

In these excerpts, four different seventh grade students argue with Frederick Douglass about the meaning of the U.S. Constitution. Douglass was always against slavery. At first, he argued that the Constitution supported slavery. But then, between 1851 and 1861, he argued that the Constitution was an anti-slavery document.

In this writing exercise, students chose “which Douglass” they would debate with, and then they argued with passion! These excerpts are examples of what seventh grade students are capable of. This page is not a handout for students. [Editor’s additions are in brackets.]

Arguing with Frederick Douglass before 1851

Me: I have heard that you, as brilliant as you are, feel as if the Constitution is pro-slavery. Is it rumor or truth?

Douglass: The Constitution is a pro-slavery document.

Me: I dare say you are wrong, Mr. Douglass, and for one can prove it. Let’s start from the first line, “We the People” of the USA. We is he and I, you and I, they and I, us. It’s not we the whites. Or we the privileged, wealthy, fortunate, beautiful. It is “We the People” … Don’t you agree that if they wanted to promote slavery, they would say “except for the colored” or “besides the slaves, the negroes”?

Douglass, I disagree with you!!!” I nearly yelled.

“And why is that, I ask?” He inquired.

“Because you say that the United States Constitution is a Pro-Slavery document!” I retorted.

“And is it not true?” He asked calmly.

“Of course not!” I answered, flabbergasted.

“Really? Care to explain why it is not true?” He said.

“Well for starters the Three Fifths Compromise, it stated that slaves were only amounted as \( \frac{3}{5} \) of a person, yes?” I said.

“Right.” He replied.

“Okay then, \( \frac{1}{5} \) is still better than nothing and defiantly [sic] more that nothing. And if you read it carefully and analyze it more thoroughly, you’ll come to realize that the Constitution is actually encouraging Anti-Slavery. You know that the more people a state has, then the more power they get? Well, the Constitution is suggesting that if they release all their slaves, then that \( \frac{1}{5} \) of a person would become \( \frac{5}{5} \) of a whole person or rather a whole.” I said.

Arguing with Frederick Douglass after 1851

Douglass: So you believe the Constitution was a pro-slavery document? Are you serious?

Me: Yes. You said so yourself.

Douglass: That was before. Besides, how can you look at the Preamble and read “We the People” and not think that includes slaves?

Me: That is your strongest argument. However, look at the Three Fifths Compromise! They are saying that slaves are not a whole person. They aren’t equal to everyone else!

Douglass: But when you look at it, it’s really an incentive to end slavery. When you free the slaves then [you] get \( \frac{5}{5} \) political power and the state over all gets more power. Besides, 60% is a lot.

Me: But the slaveholders might not free the slaves because if they do then they don’t have the power to tell the slaves who to vote for!

Me: The Constitution states that the slave trade can be abolished 20 years later. This only means that it can [— not that it necessarily will be abolished].

Douglass: If you “cut off the stream, the pond would dry up.” It’s anti-slavery because in the American Union, people will end the slave trade in 20 years.

Me: If you cut off the stream, the pond [may] find a way not to dry up. When it rains, it refills. There are many other ways that [slavery] could continue.

Douglass: It’s still anti-slavery because the Constitution gave the federal government the power to abolish [the] slave trade.
Is the Constitution a Pro- or Anti-Slavery Document?

“My Position Now is One of Reform”

by Frederick Douglass

It was not just southern states that were threatening to break up the Union. Some abolitionists wanted the Northern states to secede—to break away from the slave-holding South. Frederick Douglass argued against these abolitionists who wanted secession in a speech he gave in Glasgow, Scotland, on March 26, 1860.*

My argument against the dissolution of the American Union is this: It would place the slave system more exclusively under the control of the slaveholding States, and withdraw it from the power in the Northern States which is opposed to slavery…

If a man were on board of a pirate ship, and in company with others had [been] robbed and plundered, his whole duty would not be preformed simply by taking the longboat and singing out, “No union with pirates.” His duty would be to restore the stolen property. The American people in the Northern States have helped to enslave the black people. Their duty will not have been done till they give them back their plundered rights…

My position now is one of reform, not of revolution. I would act for the abolition of slavery through the Government—not over its ruins. If slaveholders have ruled the American Government for the last fifty years, let the anti-slavery men rule the nation for the next fifty years.

If the South has made the Constitution bend to the purposes of slavery, let the North now make that instrument bend to the cause of freedom and justice. If 350,000 slaveholders have, by devoting their energies to that single end, been able to make slavery the vital and animating spirit of the American [nation] for the last 72 years, now let the freemen of the North, who have the power in their own hands, and who can make the American Government just what they think fit, resolve to blot out forever the foul and haggard crime, which is the blight and mildew, the curse and the disgrace of the whole United States…

Where would be the advantage of a written constitution, if, instead of seeking its meaning in its words, we had to seek them in the secret intentions of individuals who may have had something to do with writing the paper? What will the people of America a hundred years hence care about the intentions of the scriveners who wrote the Constitution? These men are already gone from us, and in the course of nature were expected to go from us. They were for a generation, but the Constitution is for ages.

Visit the Frederick Douglass webpages of the Teaching with Museum Collections, hosted by the U.S. National Park Service, at www.nps.gov/history/museum/exhibits/douglass/. American Memory at the Library of Congress has a collection of of documents about Frederick Douglass at memory.loc.gov/ammem/today/sep03.html.

* The complete text of this 1860 speech, as well as “Change of Opinion Announced” of 1851, is free online at the Ashbrook Center for Public Affairs at Ashland University in Ohio, www.teachingamericanhistory.org/library
**Achievement and Innovation in the Middle Ages:** Students Compare Civilizations

Aaron Kaio and Katie Gilbert

**The computer game Civilization III** allows the player to choose from among some of the great civilizations of the past, such as Roman, Aztec, or Babylonian. In a similar way, we divide seven medieval civilizations (Aztec, China, Europe, Inca, Islam/Arabian Peninsula, Japan and West Africa) between seven student teams. Each team studies one civilization’s social and technical accomplishments, gives a presentation to the rest of the class about what they have found, and then debates the question of which civilization gave rise to the most important achievements and innovations during the Middle Ages. Students seem to find this the most competitive and exciting unit of study in our seventh grade social studies curriculum.

**Days 1-2: Problems and Solutions**

To begin the unit, we ask students to name some of the problems they have in their own lives. These difficulties usually involve friends or boredom, which is typical for twelve year olds. Then we present a version of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (See page 16). Students recognize that most of their basic physical and safety needs are taken care of pretty well. They are mostly aware of problems and struggles in the area of social needs as well as desires for the future, like getting good test scores and becoming better athletes.

Once we have a good sample of student problems, I ask students to think about possible solutions. Students come up with interesting ideas about studying harder, joining a school club, practicing basketball more often, and so forth. I then move students toward thinking about the Middle Ages by asking them what types of problems people in medieval civilizations might have had. At this point in the year, students have already learned a little about world geography and history, so they mention things like lack of drinking water in much of the Arabian Middle East, hurricanes crashing into the Japanese coast, and hostile militias threatening European villages after the fall of the Roman Empire.

I then ask them to open their books to search for some of the solutions and innovations created during medieval times to deal with various problems, both physical and social. Our school district uses the textbook History Alive! The Medieval World and Beyond, which describes seven major civilizations of the Middle Ages and provides details about each one’s technical and social innovations.

For example, students read about the West African griots (itinerant storytellers, who are often also musicians and oral historians), whose spoken proverbs taught history and morals to the younger generation. Students “backward think” to the original problem for which this social innovation was created. In this case, the stories told by the griot answered society’s need to pass on information. West Africa had no written language at the time.

**Days 3-4: Relevance Today**

For the next few days, I ask students to extend their thinking into the present, to inquiring about whether ideas and innovations born in the Middle Ages actually affect human life today. The History Alive! textbook provides some useful examples of this sort of connection: The idea of limiting a ruler’s power, as stated in the Magna Carta, is further developed in the U.S. Constitution. Students also make informed guesses based on various sources of information. They see similarities of form between an Incan suspension bridge made of vines and suspension bridges made of steel today in San Francisco and New York. The Incas cultivated 200 varieties of potatoes, and some of these are the progenitors of the variety used in a favorite side dish—what we call French fries.

**Days 5-8: Comparing Civilizations**

Up to this point, each group has studied only one civilization in detail. I now ask each group to present its civilization’s solutions and innovations to the whole class. I tell students to be alert for achievements—arising from any society—that have had the greatest impact on our modern civilization. Each group creates a paragraph and a picture for each solution that they present. I instruct the audience to take notes during these presentations, and I provide motivation for doing so—when they are done, students will debate which civilization has had the greatest impact on our modern society.

These debates became especially fiery when students began to compare accomplishments with one another. Some examples:

“West Africa’s call and response led to hip hop and we all listen to hip hop. None of us listen to Incan pan pipes or seashell horns.”

“Islam’s hospitals were the best because Islamic pharmacists would use drugs to dull patients’ pain, like when a doctor gave me aspirin after...
I crashed on my skateboard. If I had been in a European hospital [four centuries ago] they probably would have stuck a leech on me.”

“Europe's habeas corpus would have assured me of having a fair trial with evidence and witnesses. In West Africa I might have had a "trial by wood" where I would have to drink water poured over bitter tasting wood. If I vomited, I’m guilty.”

During the debates, the student groups refused to give an inch, each one claiming, “Our civilization was the greatest,” even after the debates ended. Students then asked who I thought was the greatest, hoping that they would hear a final word and decision. I refused to answer and instead asked them to activate their imaginations to sort it all out—and to be sure to show up for the next class.

Day 9: Bidding and Debating
On this day, I tell the teams that they are changing roles. They no longer represent an ancient civilization, but rather a new civilization that no one has ever heard of. This new civilization has to build its culture and technology up from the ground; that is, from a blank slate.

Each group gets a chance to bid on the achievements we have been learning about, and each will end up with three. Those will be the main “bricks” that the group can use (hypothetically) to build an imaginary civilization.

I give each team one million “civilization dollars” to bid on items in a mock auction. Student artwork and paragraphs created for the presentations now represent the items up for bid. The bidding is loud and raucous, as fellow team members squabble over whether to bid more money on, say, China's gunpowder or Islam's public hospitals. This year saw $900,000.00 as the winning bid for the latter. The most successful “new civilization” managed to bag hospitals, habeas corpus, and trephination (Incan brain surgery).

At the end, we display the winning amounts of all bids to indicate which civilization's medieval achievements are most highly prized (Table 1) by this class. This year, while Europe's innovations fared well in the bidding, it's Islam's accomplishments that receive the most money.

Day 10: Assessment
For the final assessment of this unit of study, each student writes a five-paragraph essay about the innovations that his or her team won in the auction. Rather than being an onerous task, explaining their reasoning for what their group won in the auction is something students seem eager to do.

“So, without Islam's invention of book making we wouldn't be able to sit down and enjoy a fantastic book.”

“Muslims adapted and improved the game [of chess, which] spread all over [the Middle East] and [was] introduced to Europe. Now these days chess is enjoyed all over the world.”

“Martial arts was one of the important solutions Japan had. During bat-
tle, when a samurai gets his sword broken and has nothing else to use, he would do martial arts. Martial arts are important for Samurai's because it was their backup plan ... “

Conclusion
We really enjoy teaching our students thematically, rather than one civilization at a time. Thematic teaching allows students to get a broader picture of what was happening all over the world during a given period. Later in the year, when we study the concept of social hierarchy, students can see similarities between civilizations in terms of who held power, how rulers wielded power, and how they justified their actions and status in society. When innovations of governance like the Magna Carta, parliamentary representation, and trial by jury come onto the scene, students can see why they were revolutionary ideas “in the course of human events.”

Students are always impressed with the advancements first seen in the Arabian Peninsula and China, and are usually appalled by European ideas of healthcare and sanitation during medieval times. Later in the course, we see Europe becoming a center of social innovation and scientific advancement during the Enlightenment. This observation leads to interesting questions for discussion, such as “What is it that allows a civilization to become a source of creativity and innovation?”

Table 1. Students’ Ranking of Achievements and Innovations

| 1. Public Hospitals (Islam/Arab)          | 6. Martial Arts (Japan)       |
| 2. Gunpowder (China)                     | 7. Algebra (Islam/Arab)       |
| 3. Pharmacies (Islam/Arab)               | 8. Book Making (Islam/Arab)   |
| 4. Habeas Corpus (Europe)                | 9. Calendar (Aztec)          |
| 5. Magna Carta (Europe)                  | 10. Bronze Sculpture (West Africa) |

Notes
1. Psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) developed a theory of personality that has influenced a number of different fields, including education. In the levels of the five basic needs, a person does not feel the second need until the demands of the first have been satisfied, nor the third until the second has been satisfied, and so on. Social institutions (family, business, government) help to answer these needs of the individual, which are summarized in on page 16. See “Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs,” honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtips/maslows.htm.

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Now and Then: A Hierarchy of Human Needs

Society helps each of us stay alive and be healthy, to meet our needs. The first column in this chart shows a hierarchy of human needs. A “hierarchy” is a list that has, at the top, the most important item—or the first step in a series of steps.

What inventions, innovations, or institutions does modern society provide to help people meet their needs? List some of these in the second column. Use examples from your own experience.

What inventions, innovations, or institutions did an ancient society provide to help people meet their needs? List some of these in the third column. Use examples from an ancient civilization that you are studying.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hierarchy of Needs*</th>
<th>Modern Society</th>
<th>Ancient Society</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Basic Physical Needs | a. Air, food, and water  
b. Shelter and clothing | |
| 2. Safety Needs | a. Health care  
b. Law and order  
c. Employment | |
b. Recreation | |
| 4. Needs for Esteem | a. Self-respect and respect from others  
b. Hope for the future, a sense of advancement | |
b. Spirituality and gratitude | |

*This list is based on Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. See the article on pages 14 and 15 of this issue of MLL.

Humans need approval from their peers in order to thrive. These boys are celebrating a goal during a 2004 school football tournament in Chiatura, one of the poorest regions of the nation Georgia.