

A Fuzzy Companion in the Void: Finding Meaning in Meaninglessness

Nihilism

Margaret Salesky, Lindsey Link
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Grade Level	11th – Undergraduate Grade	**Duration**	2-3 class periods
Subject	Social Studies		
Course	AP Philosophy, Psychology		

Essential Question

What does nihilism teach us about the search for meaning and purpose in our lives. How can we reconcile existential questions with our own values and beliefs? How does one find meaning, purpose, or value in a world seemingly devoid of inherent significance or objective truths?

Summary

This companion lesson to "Screaming into the Void" explores the idea of nihilism and what it can teach us about the search for meaning and purpose in our lives, how we can reconcile existential questions with our own values and beliefs, and how one finds meaning, purpose, and value in a world seemingly devoid of inherent significance. Your students will grapple with the continuum of quotations taken from various pieces of literature, the Bible, and philosophers. After collaborating to read the quotes and sorting them, the whole class will discuss the meaning and implications of the quotes. Next, they will get an opportunity to explore Elmo's viral tweet, which sparked an existential crisis among his many followers. After spending some time learning about optimistic nihilism, your students will dissect song lyrics for examples of nihilism. The songs your students can choose from include: "Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For," by U2, "Smells Like Teen Spirit," by Nirvana, "Losing my Religion," by R.E.M., "Bullet with Butterfly Wings," by The Smashing Pumpkins, "Undone (Sweater Song)" by Weezer, "In the End," by Linkin Park, and "Leave Me Alone," by NF. The next day your students will flip the script, learn about resilience, and turn the nihilistic song lyrics into positive poetry using the instructional strategy Blackout Poetry.

Snapshot

Engage

Students will receive quotes and determine where they would follow on a continuum that includes optimism and nihilism.

Explore

Students will read about Elmo's viral tweet that sparked an existential crisis among his followers.

Explain

Students will watch a video to learn about optimistic nihilism.

Extend

Students will analyze song lyrics for examples of nihilism.

Evaluate

Students will turn nihilistic song lyrics into positive poetry using the instructional strategy, Blackout Poetry.

Standards

Oklahoma Academic Standards (Social Studies: Psychology (9th through 12th grade))

PS.9.2: Describe the characteristics of and factors that promote resilience and optimism.

Attachments

- Compilation of Song Lyrics—A Fuzzy Companion in the Void - Spanish.docx
- Compilation of Song Lyrics—A Fuzzy Companion in the Void - Spanish.pdf
- Compilation of Song Lyrics—A Fuzzy Companion in the Void.docx
- Compilation of Song Lyrics—A Fuzzy Companion in the Void.pdf
- Elmo's Viral Tweet Sparks An Existential Crisis—A Fuzzy Companion in the Void.pdf
- Fishbone—A Fuzzy Companion in the Void - Spanish.docx
- Fishbone—A Fuzzy Companion in the Void - Spanish.pdf
- Fishbone—A Fuzzy Companion in the Void.docx
- Fishbone—A Fuzzy Companion in the Void.pdf
- Lesson Slides—A Fuzzy Companion in the Void.pptx
- Tug of War Quotes—A Fuzzy Companion in the Void - Spanish.docx
- Tug of War Quotes—A Fuzzy Companion in the Void - Spanish.pdf
- Tug of War Quotes—A Fuzzy Companion in the Void.docx
- Tug of War Quotes—A Fuzzy Companion in the Void.pdf

Materials

- Lesson Slides - A Fuzzy Companion in the Void: Finding Meaning in the Meaninglessness (attached)
- Tug-of-War Quotes - A Fuzzy Companion in the Void: Finding Meaning in the Meaninglessness (attached; one quote per student or pair of students)
- Fishbone - A Fuzzy Companion in the Void: Finding Meaning in the Meaninglessness (attached; one per student)
- Blackout Poetry - A Fuzzy Companion in the Void: Finding Meaning in the Meaninglessness (attached; one per student)
- Wakelet - A Fuzzy Companion in the Void: Finding Meaning in the Meaninglessness (linked)
- Elmo’s Viral Tweet Sparks an Existential Crisis Among His Followers (linked; one copy per student)
- WiFi
- Student devices
- Pens or pencils
- Yellow and Pink highlighters
- Tape

30 minutes

Engage

Teacher's Note: Setting Up

While not essential, this lesson is meant to be a companion lesson to the lesson titled Screaming into the Void and should be taught after that lesson.

Prior to your students arriving to class, you will want to set up the board for the Tug-of-War strategy. On the right side of the board write “Nihilism” and on the left side write “Optimism.” Draw a continuing arrow from one to the other.

Introduce the lesson using the attached **Lesson Slides**. Display **slide 3** to share the essential questions and **slide 4** to go over the lesson's learning objectives to the extent you feel necessary.

Display **slide 5**. Share the instructional strategy Tug-of-War and distribute the nihilistic **Tug-of-War Quotes** handout to your students.

Have students line up according to which quotes are most nihilistic to most optimistic. Students should read their quotes and work together to figure out where they should stand with their quote along the continuum. Once they are sure about where their quote should be, have them tape it on the board. Allow students to share out about the quotes with the whole class. Ask students why they chose to place their quote along the continuum as they did. Encourage the whole class to discuss the quotes together.

30 minutes

Explore

Display **slide 6** and share the tweet from Elmo on January 29, 2024.

Move to **slide 7**. Share the instructional strategy Categorical Highlighting with your students and distribute to students the Today article, "Elmo's Viral Tweet Sparks an Existential Crisis Among His Followers." Instruct them to highlight examples of feelings in pink and key information in yellow. Once your students have finished, ask a few to share with the class.

Display **slide 8** and play the video, "Elmo Opens Up to Today about Tweet that Sparked Intense Reaction."

Embedded video
https://youtube.com/watch?v=xBidHiE2bzQ

After showing the video, use **slide 9** to open up to a whole class discussion. "What reaction did the world have?" "What was Elmo's response?" "Does Elmo exhibit nihilism or optimism?" "What advice to the Sesame Street characters give about facing life?"

40 minutes

Explain

Display **slide 10** and share the video titled "Optimistic Nihilism."

As students watch the video, have them keep in mind the Elmo story.

Embedded video
https://youtube.com/watch?v=MBRqu0YOH14

After viewing the video, get the students' reactions. Display **slide 11**, using the question to guide your discussion. "What connections can you make between this video and Elmo's tweet story?"

30 minutes

Extend

Display **slide 12**. Share the instructional strategy Fishbone and pass out the attached **Fishbone** handout. Point out that the "fish head" or the effect the students are analyzing is *"nihilism."* As they read the lyrics and find examples of nihilism, they will add them to the six "fishbones."

Move to **slide 13** and share the linked Wakelet, "Lyrical Stylings of Nihilism," which includes videos and lyrics. Instruct them to choose only one song to work on for the time being. The song choices include:

- Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For by U2
- Smells Like Teen Spirit by Nirvana
- Losing my Religion by R.E.M.
- Bullet with Butterfly Wings by Smashing Pumpkins
- Undone (Sweater Song) by Weezer
- In the End by Linkin Park
- Leave Me Alone by NF

Once your students have accessed the Wakelet, project **slide 14** which has the instructions for them again. This is a good place to pause for the day.

30 minutes

Evaluate

This should be the start of a new day.

Display **slide 15** and share the video "Famous Failures" with your students.

Embedded video
https://youtube.com/watch?v=zLYECljmnQs

When the video ends, have a guided discussion with your students using the questions on **slide 16.**

Teacher's Note: Possible Student Responses

1. What did they have that pushed them? *(Students should mention resilience in some way.)*
2. What does it mean to be resilient? *(Answers will vary, but you are looking for students to provide some characteristics here such as: when they got rejected or knocked down, when they got back up, problem solving, emotional awareness and emotional intelligence, strong social connections, commitment, perspective, humor, commitment to values, flexibility.)*
3. What do you want to do in life?

Display **slide 17** and share the instructional strategy Blackout Poetry with your students. The goal of the activity is for your students to "flip the script" on the song lyrics from the previous activity and create a positive poem!

Move to **slide 18** and play the following video for your students that explains how to create Blackout Poetry with Google Slides. Once the video is over, use **slides 19-21** to share a couple of completed examples with your students. Move to **slide 22** and pass out the **Compilation of Song Lyrics** attachment.

Teacher's Note: Handout Printing Options

The lyrics for the song, "Leave Me Along," by NF take up two pages, the remaining songs are approximately half a page in length each. We suggest having those students who want an extra challenge to use the longer song.

Resources

- K20 Center. (n.d.). Blackout poetry. Strategies. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/84
- K20 Center. (2021). Blackout Poetry - Google Slides [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ADnAmvqXMRU
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Fishbone. Strategies. https://learn.k20ceer.ou.edu/strategy/1664
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Tug-of-War. Strategies. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/98
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Wakelet. Tech tools. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/tech-tool/2180
- Kurzgesagt -- In a Nutshell. (2017, July 26). *Optimistic nihilism*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MBRqu0YOH14
- MotivatingSuccess. (2012). *Famous Failures* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLYECljmnQs&list=PL6P49nXsj_RyRa8udbr2ac_Xb9Sw4Pu5R&index=6
- Today. (2024, February 1). *Elmo opens up to Today about tweet that sparked intense reaction*. YouTube. https://youtu.be/xBidHiE2bzQ