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The Mark Twain Project at The Principia School: Lesson Plan Checklist:

Subject: Knowing the Works of Mark Twain as a Precious Missouri Legacy

Goal: Choosing and appreciating a Mark Twain book, and getting to know his entire literary canon through the work of the class.

Specific and measurable content objectives: Students read and write analyses of *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn*, and they also produce an 8-10 page chapter on the Twain work of their choice.

Key vocabulary: (introduced and used in this project) vernacular, narrative point of view, satire, epiphany.

Materials: A class set of quality paperbacks of 20+ individual volumes of Mark Twain's works from *The Innocents Abroad* through *Letters from the Earth*, from which students will choose a target volume; small portions of Ken Burns' Mark Twain DVD.

Directions: See attached Course Description, though key dates are as follows:

- By September 30: Individual Target Twain work chosen
- December 3-January 11, In-class reading, discussion, and writing about *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
- By March 25: Individual Target Twain work finished—and/or reread
- By March 31: 2-Page synopsis of Individual Target Twain work submitted for evaluation and editing.
- May 12: Florida/Hannibal Field Trip Day
- May 19: Remaining 6-8 page chapters due for evaluation, editing, and revision for inclusion in annual Mark Twain Project volume.
- May 20-23: Editing, revising, copying Individual Target Twain work chapters for delivery to Kinkos by 6:00 pm 5/23.
- May 26: Last day of classes: bound volumes distributed to students.

Evaluation/Assessment: All submitted materials are both peer edited and graded by instructor.

Examples of student work: The Mark Twain Boyhood Home Museum has copies of each of the first three years of this project: *Mark Twain: as We Know Him* (vol 1.), *Down by the River: Essays on Mark Twain* (vol. 2), and *No Twain No Gain* (vol. 3).

The Mark Twain Project at The Principia School, St. Louis Missouri

The Mark Twain Project at The Principia School was the product of two key factors: first, a genuine desire to encourage in my students a **love of reading**; second, the chance to encourage students to get to **know Mark Twain in depth, an author associated with the region in which they are going to school**. Add to these two goals the odd phenomenon that AP tests are administered nearly a full month prior to the end of the school year and, the ground was particularly ripe for an innovative piece of additional curriculum that would culminate in the month of May for these highly motivated Juniors..

The Mark Twain Project at The Principia School has been the result, and, in its first four years, it has served as a wonderful capstone experience for our AP Literature and Composition course..

PHASE ONE: Choosing the book.

First, nothing promotes **the love of reading** in students more than the activity of being allowed to choose for themselves books they would like to read. Our AP students are all earnest and industrious, but far too often they merely respond to assignments planned by their teachers. The Mark Twain Project begins at the start of the year in a very different way. I have a full set of the works of Mark Twain in my classroom, and, at the outset of the year, I walk my students through the essential characteristics of each work. As curriculum differentiation is a key goal here at Principia, I encourage students to choose as their target volume works that correspond to their other interests (e.g. a student who had spent time in an exchange program in Germany was particularly interested in *A Tramp Abroad* which recounts Twain's adventures traversing Germany; a highly artistic student was fascinated by the prospect of assessing Twain's response to European art in *The Innocents Abroad*; a student interested in politics and effective verbal communication chose the volume of Twain's *Speeches*, etc.) Each student selects a separate volume as his or her target work, about which he or she will produce between eight and ten pages for our capstone project: a student written volume of responses to the works of Mark Twain. Once every member of the class has picked his or her book, the project moves into its second phase.

PHASE TWO: Reading, researching, appreciating.

Most high school students, even the highly talented and motivated ones, have seldom stopped to think about **the impact of a region on an author** living and working in that place. Although Mark Twain, quite literally, can be seen as a citizen of the world, there is no question that Missouri was a key and formative influence in his life. As students begin to read—and research—the volumes that they have chosen, days are set aside to appreciate the various elements of distinctly Missourian attitudes (that well honed, honest skepticism which identifies our state—"Show me"—and pervades Twain's writings), language (his introduction of the vernacular as legitimate prose), and social assumptions which, for better or worse, are clearly on display throughout Twain's

writings. (Discussions are occasionally augmented by short sections of Ken Burns' video presentation of the life of Mark Twain, detailing various aspects of Mark Twain's biography.)

As a class, in addition to our other AP level texts, we read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (all our students have also read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as freshmen) and engage in lively discussions of the novel's controversial use of language, its presentation of racism, and the implications of Huck's moral growth throughout his journey down river.

By the end of Spring Break in late March, our students have finished reading their target books—frequently more than once—and are preparing for their early May AP testing. After the tests are taken, the Mark Twain Project shifts into high gear and is their sole English activity for the remainder of the year. These weeks are packed with events that make the final phase of the project particularly rewarding.

PHASE THREE: Conceptualizing, writing, and editing the capstone project.

The final phase of The Mark Twain Project at The Principia School begins on the Monday following the AP test. Students are loaded onto a bus about at 7:00 am and are driven through Missouri farm country to the Mark Twain Shrine in Florida, Missouri. This is about an hour and a half drive for us in a bus, and we use the travel time to identify the goals of the day and to integrate these goals with various elements of their reading. Of course, for the students who have chosen any of Twain's autobiographical or Mississippi writings, the relevance is obvious, but even for others, the landscape and the remoteness of Twain's beginnings have substantial meaning.

We arrive at the Shrine before opening and, through the generosity of the staff there, have been permitted to have the run of this marvelous location, featuring as it does a very helpful orientation film, together with the gems of this small museum: the house where Twain was born in 1835 and a manuscript copy of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Later we visit the original site of the house, together with a stop at the Florida cemetery, where the gravestones of both Margaret Clemens and John and Mary Quarles can be seen. It is here that we frequently begin discussing Uncle Dan'el and the slave narrative roots of Twain's idiomatic style.

Our day continues in Hannibal, where we take full advantage of the Boyhood Home Museum, both in its beautifully curated buildings (the Boyhood Home, the Becky Thatcher Home, the John Marshall Clemens's law Office, and the Grant Drug Store) as well as the Museum itself. On some occasions Henry Sweets, curator, has been free to answer questions and fill in the students' understanding of various treasures in the Museum's holdings.

Next, it's down to the river for a riverboat ride—a first for many of our students and a special treat for the student whose target volume was *Life on the Mississippi* (though, since all our students know both *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the various elements of the riverboat voyage are particularly wonderful). Finally we continue our appreciation of the Twain sites in Hannibal by

visiting both the Baptist and the Mount Olivet cemeteries where the Clemens family, as well as Injun Joe, are buried. Then a dinner in Hannibal (last year in view of the river) before an evening return to our campus.

The next three weeks involve synthesizing these reading and travel experiences into chapters for our year's contributory volume to the Principia School's Mark Twain Project studies.

Each student is responsible for producing an 8-10 page chapter on his/her chosen target work, and this is the time when students can have a marvelously divergent response to each Twain book represented. As a perusal of our first three installments will attest, our students have responded creatively, artistically, and critically with a high degree of originality and verve. For some students, this opportunity to speak at length about a favorite Twain book has allowed them to share critical insights that constitute the high point of their year as analysts (Garner Andrews's thoughts on the correlation of the ending of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to post-Reconstruction America comes to mind—see the *No Twain No Gain* volume). For others, the project has unleashed artistic potential (see Caitlin Heimerl's amazing sketches inspired by *The Innocents Abroad* in the *Mark Twain as We Know Him* volume). One student even wrote a one-act play, based both on our class and Twain's satirical masterpiece, "Cannibalism in the Cars" that allowed her theatrical flair to come to the foreground in our English class (Caitlin Oates on the Short Stories in *No Twain, No Gain*).

Producing these chapters, helping each other edit their language, responding to the pressures of a publication deadline, and, finally, rejoicing in their own individual copies of their class-produced book of Twain responses is an experience that none of our students has forgotten. Years later, students have expressed to me the value of this experience. Just this past month, in planning her Senior project prior to leaving for college, Jennifer Kidson, a past graduate of this program, stated simply, "I want my Senior project to be substantial, to give me the same kind of feeling the Mark Twain Project left me experiencing."

For me, there is no higher praise.

Since the outset of this project, our School administration has become increasingly supportive. For the first year, all our expenses were met personally by me and by special pleading with my department chair. Kinkos gave us their best price for binding, and my academic dean came up with financial help to offset the price of the riverboat cruise. Of late, the CEO of the Principia School has established a separate fund to support this activity, attesting officially, I believe, to its value both to the students involved and to our community as a whole.

In my 35 years of teaching, I've never been happier developing any piece of curriculum than I have been with The Mark Twain Project at The Principia School. This activity has broadened and blessed my life and the lives of now four years of students who have participated in it. Mark Twain, and a love for and appreciation of ALL his writings, is alive and well at The Principia School in St. Louis, Missouri.