



Overview

Henry Thoreau spent hours of every day walking the woods of Walden and the shore of Walden Pond – taking in its beauties, reflecting on life and the importance of maintaining a connection to nature. In this game-based learning experience, students are asked to take a mindful walk around the in-game Walden Pond, stopping to appreciate the virtual environment around them. As they explore, they will cultivate skills for being “awake” in the present moment, as Thoreau described. A set of modular social and emotional learning lessons support the 15-30 minute gameplay experience, prompting students to transfer these skills into their own lives through embodied practices.

Essential Question

- How can we practice being fully present to our inner and outer worlds -- “precisely the present moment,” as Thoreau writes?

ALIGNS WITH THESE STANDARDS

CASEL

Self-Awareness, the abilities to understand one’s own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.

From CASEL’s [District Resource Center](#)

“Mindfulness means maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment, through a gentle, nurturing lens” (Greater Good Science Center).

“By helping students become aware of and then embody the connection between their emotions, thoughts, and bodily sensations, students are better able to regulate their emotions, which then impacts things such as their behavior, stress levels, relationships, and ability to focus.”

(Lantieri & Zakrzewski, 2015).

Subjects

Social and Emotional Learning

Gameplay Time

15-30 minutes with six options for related activities

Activity Time

Six activities ranging from 20-60 minutes each

Cost: Free

Age Range: 14-18

Languages

English. The game is also available with Spanish and French subtitles.

Materials

- Web-based game module <https://www.waldengame.com/play-what-i-lived-for>
- Curriculum materials included in this PDF
- Related materials mentioned **in bold** are in the appendix at the end of this document

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Practice breathing and walking/movement meditation exercises.
- Identify their sensations, thoughts, and emotions.
- Identify and appreciate why Thoreau spent time outdoors.
- Identify and analyze connections between bodily motion and mindfulness in literature, including Thoreau’s writings.
- Create a trail map that engenders a sense of place and appreciation of the natural world.
- Compare and contrast their own mindfulness practices with Thoreau’s.



Warm-Up Activity (REMOTE-FRIENDLY)

How can noticing our breathing help us become more aware of how we feel?

Objectives

Students will practice guided breathing meditation exercises.

Students will identify their sensations and emotions.

Activity Time

20 minutes

Main Activity

Lesson Hook

The teacher will ask students to reflect (privately, at first) on their experiences with talking about emotions. In this lesson, students will be talking about their feelings, meditating, and mindfulness. The class will discuss their experience with those topics. Questions to ask: Do you talk about your feelings with family, friends, other trusted people? Do you write in a journal? Why or why not?

Lesson Prompts

The teacher will invite students to take part in a guided meditation. For example: “begin by taking three slow and deep breaths, without forcing them. Then return to whatever breathing pattern feels comfortable. Notice the in-breath and the out-breath. Notice any physical sensations that arise. Notice any emotions that arise. Notice any thoughts that arise. We don’t need to judge or try to change any of these, this is just about noticing them.”

Exit Ticket

The teacher will ask students to write down one word that describes how they’re feeling in that moment. This will not be shared with the class!

Assessments

The activity itself is a self-assessment, giving students information about how they are feeling and preparing them to become more aware of this as they play *Walden*. The teacher can do their own self-assessment as well, modeling this for the students by sharing how they are feeling.

Some follow up options for this activity include:

Focus on the air you are breathing. What is in it? How is it changing? How is it part of the climate, the atmosphere that is changing?

Think about the place where you are, about the people around you. Notice them breathing.

Notice any other sounds you hear. Notice what you see. Notice what you feel.



Pre-Game Discussion (REMOTE-FRIENDLY)

How can we become more aware of the worlds within and around us? How did Thoreau become more aware of the worlds within and around him?

Objectives

Students will be able to analyze their own assumptions about video games.

Students will be able to identify and appreciate why Thoreau spent time outdoors.

Activity Time

20 minutes

Materials

- *Walden, a game* website
<https://www.waldengame.com/>

Main Activity

Lesson Hook

The teacher will show the screenshot (https://waldengame.squarespace.com/s/WhatILivedFor_screenshot.png) from the *Walden, a game* mindfulness module and will say “we are about to go on a virtual walk through the woods, using the *Walden* video game. What do you think we will find there?”

Class Discussion

- The teacher will invite students to share what they expect, which might include their assumptions about video games. The teacher will validate these, but will also let students know when the game differs from their expectations. For example, if someone says “we’re gonna need to hunt bears to survive” the teacher could say “that’s what some games ask you to do, but today that’s not our goal. In this game, the animals can’t hurt you and you can’t hurt them. See if you can get close enough to them to have a meaningful moment with them - so you see them, and they see you. Go slow - if you get too close too fast, they might run away from you. Look for animals that are very small, that might live in the water.”
- The teacher will wrap up the discussion with short direct instruction about why Thoreau went to the woods. They will project the academic vocabulary below onto a whiteboard and will describe how Thoreau went to Walden to seek the **sublime**. He could get up early in the morning and have a moment without other humans around where he could commune with non-human beings like plants, animals, and the pond itself. He could contemplate every nook and cranny of the shore of the pond, knowing it intimately, knowing its beauties, breathing its air, seeing how its color changes day to day and season to season. This is the core of **Transcendentalism**.



Pre-Game Discussion *continued* (REMOTE-FRIENDLY)

Academic Vocab

- **Thoreau’s definition of the sublime:** a spiritual experience of the world. A beautiful, wild, vibrant, mysterious, and infinite otherness he was trying to encounter. Something that can be found only in the present moment. Something that supports personal transformation and growth in the ability to do the right thing.
- **Definition of Transcendentalism:** a movement of people who tried to find the divine in nature. It developed in New England around 1836. It draws from philosophies around the world that emphasize direct encounter with the sublime rather than finding truth through rational logic. Transcendentalists had progressive views on feminism and communal living. Thoreau was a Transcendentalist.

But is this really a game?

Students and teachers may assume that all video games require achievement (finding resources, gaining points, completing quests) or competition (fighting, racing, etc.). That’s true of many great games, but this module of *Walden*, a game does not include either. That’s because the designers found that some people want games where they can just wander around and be in the present moment, like they would be when they go for a walk, without having to worry about meeting particular goals like preparing for a boss fight. This kind of game is called a **walking simulator**, a genre of games that emphasizes narrative, exploration, and discovery rather than direct conflict. Players can explore the game world mindfully and playfully, at their own pace, deciding for themselves what they want to focus on. The world itself is not just a backdrop for more important action; interacting with it is the main action itself. Plants, animals, waters, and skies are active participants, almost like they are characters in the game rather than just scenery. This is similar to many kinds of contemporary ecological writing, where authors try to describe non-human beings as equal and active partners rather than as simply a passive backdrop to human concerns.



Playing the Game (REMOTE-FRIENDLY)

Can we become more mindful through exploring a game world?

Objectives

Students will be able to take a mindful (virtual) walk at Walden Pond.

Activity Time

30 minutes

Materials

- *Walden, a game* What I lived For module
<https://www.waldengame.com/play-what-i-lived-for>

Main Activity

Lesson Hook

As students begin to play the game, it will invite them to take a virtual walk along the shore of Walden Pond.

Lesson Prompt

- Students will play the What I Lived For module (30 minutes).
- In the game, they can:
 - ▷ Notice plants, animals, and the pond itself, and how they interact with them.
 - ▷ Stop at piles of stones called cairns (see picture below) to practice breathing meditation. The player character (Thoreau) will model this by breathing in and out, and the students will be invited to breathe with him. This is optional.

- At the end of the module, the game will give students feedback on how long they meditated with Thoreau at the cairns, and how many cairns they encountered.

Exit Ticket

Students will write down what sensations they feel, what emotions they are feeling, and what thoughts they are thinking after playing the game (this can be a few words or sentences).

Assessments

While the game assesses how long the students let Thoreau breathe, and where they walked, it is important that this be used for formative student self-reflection and not for summative assessment by the teacher. Students should not be graded for completing specific tasks in the game because the purpose of the game is to simply be in the present moment, not to try to achieve an objective. The exit ticket and the following lessons can extend students' reflective self-assessment.





Reading and Responding to Texts from Walden (REMOTE-FRIENDLY)

How does our consciousness change when we move our bodies through the world?

Objectives

Students will be able to identify and analyze connections between bodily motion and mindfulness in literature.

Activity Time

45-60 minutes

Materials

- A downloadable / printable packet that includes excerpts from *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* by Rebecca Solnit and *Notes on Blindness* by John Hull. (<https://waldengame.squarespace.com/s/Walden-Edu-WhatILivedFor-Excerpts.pdf>)

Main Activity

Lesson Hook

The teacher will write this prompt on a whiteboard or will project it on a digital slide: “make a list of songs, poems, or scenes from movies or books that describe someone experiencing joy from moving their body. Please note any descriptions you can relate to from your own experience moving your body.”

Lesson Prompt

Students will read the passages from Thoreau and contemporary authors. Using highlighters or digital highlighting (e.g. in Google Docs), they will highlight in yellow any passage that reminds them of an experience they have had walking/ moving their body. They will underline any passages that describe a mindset they would like to try out the next time they go for a walk or move their body intentionally. They will write down any notes or reflections they have as they read in the box provided on the handout.

Exit Ticket

In their own words, students will write down one thing they learned from the readings that they want to think about and practice as they move their bodies mindfully.

Assessments

Student annotations and exit tickets assess the objectives for this lesson, and the following lesson assesses whether what they learn can be transferred to their own walking meditation practice.

Challenging Ableism

The teacher should be mindful about being inclusive of students with disabilities who cannot walk with their legs in some or all settings (e.g. some wheelchair users). They should emphasize that using a chair is also a valid and insightful way to move mindfully through the world, and that some of the walking practices described in the texts could be adapted to go on a mindful journey in a wheelchair.

Walking Meditation Doesn't Need to be a Workout

Teachers should emphasize that the point of walking meditation is not necessarily to exercise or get in shape, though some people might do it for those reasons. It isn't necessarily about trying to change your body, it's about noticing how your body interacts with the world around you. This can be done through a short walk, or through climbing a mountain. There is no one standard body type. Every body experiences the world differently, and one of the points of this exercise is to be curious about your own body and how you move in the world.



Taking a Mindful Walk (REMOTE-FRIENDLY)

Walking has a utilitarian purpose of getting us from here to there. But walking has other benefits, too. How can walking help us to build awareness and a sense of presence? How do you think walking helped Thoreau process his thoughts?

Objectives

Students will build awareness and a sense of presence from taking a mindful walk.

Students will compare and contrast their mindful walk to Thoreau's experience.

Activity Time

15-45 minutes

Materials

- A notebook or journal.

Main Activity

Lesson Hook

Think about a walk that you have taken. Perhaps around your block or neighborhood, alone, with a friend, or on a dog walk. What did you notice? What did you see? Hear? Feel? Smell? What emotions did you feel? What thoughts did you have?

Lesson Prompt

- You will take a walk at a location of your choosing. You can walk alone or with a friend, parent, or caregiver. If you walk with someone, for this lesson, try to stay silent so that you can process each step that you take. You may also complete this lesson with a pet (e.g., a dog walk).
- Begin your walk. As you take each step, take in the sounds, scents, and sights in your environment. How do these make you feel? Consider your mood before your walk began.
- After your walk, write down a journal entry answering: How did you feel after your walk compared to before? Did your mood change? How would you label your mood? As you walked, did your thoughts wander? What did you think about? If you were to recommend the path that you took to a friend, where would your cairns be?

Exit Ticket

Thoreau's classroom was the woods. Often, he split his days walking, then writing. Just before his death, Thoreau wrote an essay titled, *Walking* (1862). In it, he wrote, "Two or three hours' walking will carry me to as strange a country as I expect ever to see" (1862, para. 15). What do you think he meant by that quote? Connect your answer to the walk that you took.

Assessments

The journal notes and the exit ticket responses.

Alternatives to Walking

If someone is unable to walk, they might be able to perform a modified version of this activity. If there are students in the class who cannot walk, the teacher should differentiate the activity to be inclusive and accessible. Students could think about it in terms of changing their point of view, or moving through space however their body can and wants to move. The teacher can emphasize that this motion could involve a wheelchair or other mobility aid. And if someone is unable to leave home, there might be ways to move their point of view within their home to prompt a mindful mindset.



Summative Final Project (REMOTE-FRIENDLY)

This can be an extension of Taking a Mindful Walk, above. Walking has a utilitarian purpose of getting us from here to there. But walking has other benefits, too. How can walking help us to build awareness and a sense of presence? How do you think walking helped Thoreau process his thoughts?

Objectives

Students will explore various practices of journaling for descriptive, informational, reflective writing.

Students will create a trail map that engenders a sense of place and appreciation of the natural world.

Students will compare and contrast their memo journal to Thoreau's writings.

Activity Time

2-3 Days Outside of Class

Materials

- Lined and blank paper, staples, colored pencils, ruler.
- Optional: computer printer, binoculars, compass.

Main Activity

Lesson Hook

Identify a place where you can feel safe enough to sit with your eyes closed and breathe. What is your Walden?

Lesson Prompt

- *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* and *Walden, a game* are shared self-expressions of personal walks for others to virtually or vicariously take. In this activity, students will also share their walks with others.
- Students will design a cover for their journal, a trail map with a trailhead (start and end point), and 5-7 spots that are in the trail loop. On each spot, students will write a sensory reflection prompt for their peer to respond to. Prompts should ask the peer to reflect on their breathing, thoughts, and the environmental setting, using descriptive vocabulary, sounds, and colors. It should be framed to students that the land, animals, plants, etc. encountered are more like active protagonists and not simply a backdrop to the human experience.

- Next, a peer will follow their journey, walking in their steps but bringing a different perspective, completing the prompts in their peer's journal. This activity embeds empathy (walking in someone else's path) with mindfulness. There should be a final prompt on why they think their peer shared this particular mindful walk.
- It is suggested that the peer's notes should be handwritten, not typed on a phone. The peer should also comment on what they may discover that is not in the prompts. This is not an ethnographic exercise of field notes so it does not require recording every detail, but it should involve students reflecting on nature, the walk itself, and their mindsets.
- Optional prompt: Build or identify your own cairns at the landmark spots on your trail. Of course, you need to stay safe and respectful of others, but you can identify landmarks to stand and breathe as part of your trail. Choose a cactus or succulent plants, a favorite tree, or a corner with a nice view.
- Example of a reflective journal: <https://fieldnotesbrand.com/products/national-parks>

Exit Ticket

Author Rebecca Solnit wrote, "The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking" (2001, p. 5). According to Solnit, the pace of walking, around three miles per hour, may equal the speed of human thought.

Answer this prompt: How did your experience completing a peer's journey generate a rhythm of thinking? How do you think Thoreau's daily walks affected his writing?

Fully digital alternate lesson version:

Create a "playlist" of websites or online communities for a peer to follow.