Lesson Plan: Montgomery Bus Boycott

In 1956, New York artist Harvey Dinnerstein traveled to Alabama to sketch his impressions of the Montgomery bus boycott and trial of the boycott leaders.

courtesy of Harvey Dinnerstein

Introduction
The Montgomery bus boycott serves as an ideal historical model for teaching social movements, not only because the boycott achieved an end to segregated seating on city bus lines, but it also illustrates some of the key elements of achieving social transformation: sustained commitment, intense strategizing, and intricate cooperation. Typically, educators focus on Rosa Parks' arrest and the speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr. While Parks and King certainly played an integral role in the boycott, there are many more stories to tell and lessons to learn through the experiences of Montgomery's citizens in 1955 and 1956. As Martin Luther King, Jr., stated during the first few days of the boycott, by standing up for their rights, the people of Montgomery "injected a new meaning into the veins of history and civilization."

Just as the bus boycott relied on the participation of many individuals, so does this unit. Each lesson is constructed to engage students as active participants. The teacher plays the role of a facilitator, not as a lecturer, and in turn the students construct their own understanding of the past. To complete the entire unit of five lessons and four culminating assignments would take approximately three weeks. Therefore, we recommend that you adjust each lesson to fit the needs of your students and your curriculum framework. Each lesson can stand alone or can be taught in combination with others.

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Subject: English Language, U.S. History
Grades: 6-8, 9-12
Teaching Standard: 11.1

Essential Question
How can everyday people organize to transform a community?

Sub Questions
• Does the general public regard Rosa Parks as a historical figure or more of a legend?
• Who is Claudette Colvin and why is she left out of the mainstream historical narrative?
• Did the citizens of Montgomery achieve justice, social transformation, and/or reconciliation as a result of their nonviolent direct action?
• Some have described the Montgomery bus boycott as the beginning of the civil rights movement. Is that an accurate description? How should the boycott be situated in the broader African American freedom struggle? How should it be told?

Lesson Activities
Part One: Rosa Parks
Part Two: Claudette Colvin
Part Three: Goals of the Boycott
Part Four: Redefining Leadership
Part Five: Social Transformation
Culminating Project: Montgomery Bus Boycott

Part One: Rosa Parks
Instructions
1. Opening Activity: Elicit students’ prior knowledge by asking, what do you know about Rosa Parks? Have the class brainstorm as a whole on the board for about 5 minutes.

2. Classroom Activity: Using the Document Analysis Worksheet have students examine Jo Ann Robinson’s letter to Mayor Gayle, Rosa Parks’ arrest report, and
the boycott handbill. Students can work individually or in small groups.

3. **Discussion/Reflection Questions:** What new information about Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott did you gain from the documents? What was most interesting to you? What questions do you still have? How does the information in these documents differ from the generally accepted story of Rosa Parks? Is the public's understanding of Parks based more on legend or reality? Who or what contributes to the public's understanding of historical events and figures? What are the consequences of hero making in history? Support your answer with examples.

**Assignment Option:**

- Ask students to read about **Rosa Parks** and **Jo Ann Robinson** from the online **King Encyclopedia**. Next, ask students to critique their textbook's description of Rosa Parks by comparing the information in the textbook to the primary source documents and the encyclopedia entries. Ask students to make a list of the inaccuracies and omissions by their textbook.

- Challenge students to interview teachers, parents, community members or other students about Rosa Parks. Ask them to report their findings to the class. Students may lead a follow-up discussion. What does the general public "know" about Rosa Parks? How and why does misinformation become generally accepted as fact?

**Materials**

**Documents:**

- [JoAnn Robinson’s letter to Mayor Gayle](#)
- [Rosa Parks’ arrest report](#)
- [Boycott handbill](#)

**Resources:**

- [Document Analysis Worksheet](#)
- [Rosa Parks and Jo Ann Robinson, King Encyclopedia](#)
- [*Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Chapter 7: Montgomery Bus Boycott Begins; PDF: Chapter 7](#)

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Part Two: Claudette Colvin

Instructions

1. **Opening Activity:** Review the boycott handbill. Ask students to create a list of questions about Claudette Colvin, incorrectly referred to as "Claudette Colbert" in the handbill.

2. **Classroom Activity:** Using the Document Analysis Worksheet ask students to analyze: Colvin's Arrest Report and Virginia Durr's letter about Colvin's arrest. As an additional assignment you may ask students to analyze the Montgomery Improvement Association meeting minutes.

3. **Discuss/Reflection Questions:** Who is Claudette Colvin and why do traditional historical narratives ignore her actions? What was the role of young people in the civil rights movement? What role do young people play in social justice movements today? Who constructs history? Who chooses the nation’s story?

4. **Classroom Activity:** Read an account by Colvin in Freedom's Children by Ellen Levine. Have students write their own entry about Colvin for their US History textbook.

Assignment Options:

- Research young activists during the African American Freedom Struggle in the past and present. Some ideas for research include the following; Barbara Johns, John Lewis, Freedom Summer, Birmingham Children's Crusade, the Little Rock Nine, Diane Nash, Mary Louise Smith.

Materials

Documents:

- Boycott handbill
- Colvin's Arrest Report
- Virginia Durr's letter about Colvin's arrest
- Montgomery Improvement Association meeting minutes

Resources:

- Document Analysis Worksheet
Part Three: Goals of the Boycott

Instructions

1. **Opening Activity:** Examining perspectives. Who supported the boycott? What was the reaction of the Montgomery citizens? In this activity students will participate in a speakers’ panel. The panel includes eight historically accurate citizens from Montgomery. You will also need a student to play the role of facilitator. Students will read interviews or letters authored by their citizen during 1955 and 1956. The questions asked by the facilitator will be drawn from the content of the document. Since some of the interviews and letters are longer than others, be sure to read over the documents before assigning roles to students. For example the letter from Mrs. I.B. Rutledge is fairly short but the interview with Attorney Jack Crenshaw is long and contains legal vocabulary. This role is perfect for your student interested in law. Within the documents students will find the word "negro," "nigra" and "colored." You may want to talk with students about the historical background of these terms and decide on a language policy for the speakers' panel activity. Encourage them to make a nametag and to dress in character. The rest of the class will take notes during the speakers' panel and prepare questions for the members of the panel.

2. **Discussion/Reflection Questions after the Speakers’ Panel:** Recall Questions: What were the goals of the boycott? Why did some citizens choose to support the boycott, while others did not? How long were they willing to boycott? Did the citizens of Montgomery see the issue as simply seating arrangements on a bus or something larger? Why were citizens of Montgomery willing to walk for miles each day, risk their jobs and personal safety to support the boycott?

Analysis Questions: Why is a boycott an effective strategy? What obstacles stood in their way? What are some of the strategies for transforming institutional racism? How can everyday people organize to transform a community?

3. **Classroom Activity:** Allow students to read the Alabama Movement for Human Relations (AMHR) newsletter from December of 1955. The AMHR newsletter describes the situation in Montgomery and the boycott goals. Ask students to identify the goals and the obstacles of the boycott using the T-Chart Handout.

4. **Classroom Activity:** Ask students to read the letter to editors of *TIME*. Discuss with students the role the media plays in influencing public opinion. You may also
want to discuss how newspaper accounts contribute to the historical narrative. As an extended activity, ask students to choose a local or national event and follow the coverage from multiple news sources. Ask students to compare and critique the sources. Based on their research, students will write a letter to the editor using the letter to *TIME* as an example.

5. **Classroom Activity:** Discuss with students the definition of institutional racism. You may want to use Jenice L. View’s definition from her article in "Putting the Movement Back in Civil Rights Teaching." As View states, institutional racism is the concept of white superiority that is "reinforced in schools, banks, churches, the workplace, real estate agencies, law enforcement, the judicial system, and other institutions that govern daily life, with the purpose of exploiting other "races" and preserving privilege for "whites." Have students read Anna Holden’s interview with the Police Commissioner Sellers and identify examples of institutional racism. Encourage them to think beyond the bus company.

6. **Reflection Questions:** What are the difficulties faced in transforming institutional racism? Discuss Police Commissioner’s explanation for the resistance to change. How did individuals use institutions to maintain segregation? Besides a boycott, what are strategies for transforming institutional racism? How can everyday people organize to transform a community? How can they create systematic change? Discuss King’s quote, "We are not wrong it what we are doing. If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong." Martin Luther King, Jr., 5 December 1955.

**Materials**

**Documents:**

- Juliette Morgan: Montgomery Citizen
- Mrs. I.B. Rutledge: Montgomery Citizen
- J.H. Bagley: Manager Montgomery City Lines
- Beatrice Charles: Citizen of Montgomery
- Mary Kinney: Business Owner
- Edna King: Music Instructor
- Alabama Council on Human Relations
- letter to editors of *TIME*
Part Four: Redefining Leadership

Instructions

1. **Opening Activity:** Play the audio (ca. 15min) of King's first speech as President of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) at Holt Street Baptist Church on 5 December 1955. Students can also follow the text of the speech and see a photo of the meeting in the Holt Street Baptist Church. Explain to students that the boycott had begun that morning after Jo Ann Robinson circulated handbills asking for citizens to stay off the buses. Thousands of people came to the meeting that night to support a call for continuing the boycott. While they listen to the speech, have students choose their favorite quote and explain the reason for their choice. After listening ask students to explain how King's position as a minister contributed to his role as a leader within the boycott.

2. **Classroom Activity:** Choose 7 students to perform a dramatic reading of the Montgomery Improvement Association minutes from 30 January 1956. The roles should include a narrator, Rev. Alford, Rev. Binion, Mr. E.D. Nixon, Mr. White, Rev. King, and Mr. Saye. You will need to show your students the parts for the narrator. The narrator should read the passages without quotation marks. You may want to highlight the narrator parts for easier identification.

3. **Discussion/Reflection Questions:** Who led the boycott? Many argue that King led the boycott. Is this an accurate characterization? In the MIA meeting King states, "From my limited contact, if we went tonight and asked the people to get back on the bus, we would be ostracized." Did the people create and sustain the boycott or did Martin Luther King, Jr., inspire them to sustain the boycott? What was the legal strategy of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)? What was the relationship between the MIA and the
4. **Classroom Activity:** Using the King Encyclopedia ask students to examine the role of the MIA, the Women's Political Council (WPC) and the NAACP. As the students read the entries from the King Encyclopedia, have them record their findings on the Redefining Leadership Handout. You may want to split students into groups of three and assign one organization to each of the three students. The students will report to their partners or to the class their findings.

**Assignment Options:**

- Ask students to prepare for a debate. Start by giving the students Ella Baker's statement, "The movement made Martin rather than Martin making the movement," (Baker, 19 June 1968). Ask students to support or criticize the statement using concrete details about the bus boycott.

**Materials**

**Documents:**

- Text and audio of King's speech
- Meeting minutes, Montgomery Improvement Association, 30 January 1956

**Handouts:**

- Redefining Leadership Handout

**Resources:**

- King Encyclopedia
- Montgomery Improvement Association
- Women's Political Council
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

**Part Five: Social Transformation**

**Instructions**

1. **Opening Activity:** Ask students to watch Kazu Haga's discussion of the philosophy of nonviolence from Freedom's Ring. Ask students to put the philosophy in their own words and apply it to an event in their own lives.
2. **Classroom Activity:** Ask student to read and discuss the *Six Principles of Nonviolence* and *Six Steps to Nonviolent Direct Action*. Using the Document Analysis Worksheet read and analyze the *Statement on the End of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and Integrated Bus Suggestions*. Ask students to identify examples of the philosophy of nonviolence within the *Integrated Bus Suggestions*.

3. **Discussion/Reflection Questions:** What is the philosophy of nonviolence? In what ways does nonviolent direct action lead to social transformation? Who is transformed by nonviolent direct action? How does the following quote reflect King’s commitment to nonviolence?

   "This morning the long awaited mandate from the United States Supreme Court concerning bus segregation came to Montgomery. Our experience and growth during this past year of united nonviolent protest has been of such that we cannot be satisfied with a court ‘victory’ over our white brothers. We must respond to the decision with an understanding of those who have oppressed us and with an appreciation of the new adjustments that the court order poses for them. We must act in such a way as to make possible a coming together of white people and colored people on the basis of a real harmony of interests and understandings. We seek an integration based on mutual respect." Martin Luther King, Jr., 20 December, 1956

4. **Classroom Activity:** In *Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching*, Alana D. Murray (2004), describes the ingredients for social movements and strategy. She identifies the Montgomery bus boycott as an ideal model. Drawing on what they have learned over the last few days, ask students to choose specific examples to coincide with each of the key ingredients. Next, ask students to identify a current injustice and choose a strategy to address and change it.

5. **Debate Resolution:** *The philosophy of nonviolence, in the form of a bus boycott, was successful in transforming the institutional racism in Montgomery, Alabama*. The debate can be organized in a number of ways. You can split students into groups of 2–4 and ask them to prepare affirmative and negative arguments supported by examples. You may also split the class in half and ask students to participate in a discussion of the statement. Finally, you may ask students to write individual responses.

6. **Discussion Questions:** Did the citizens of Montgomery achieve justice, social transformation and/or reconciliation as a result of the nonviolent direct action? Some have described the Montgomery bus boycott as the beginning of
the civil rights movement. Is that an accurate description? How should the boycott be situated in the broader black freedom struggle? How should it be told?

Materials
Documents:
  • King, Statement on the end of the Montgomery bus boycott, 20 December 1956
  • Integrated Bus Suggestions

Resources:
  • Freedom's Ring
  • Kazu Haga's discussion of the philosophy of nonviolence
  • King Encyclopedia
  • Six Principles of the Philosophy of Nonviolence
  • Six Steps for Nonviolent Direct Action
  • Document Analysis Worksheet

Culminating Project: Montgomery Bus Boycott
Instructions
1. Strategizing for Justice:
   Identify an unjust law or policy in your school or community. Using the Montgomery bus boycott as a model, create a step-by-step plan to change the law or policy. Present the plan for causing systemic change to your class. You may want to use the Six Steps for Nonviolent Direct Action as a guide.

2. Constructing an Illustrated Narrative:
   Create an illustrated timeline, exhibit, documentary, website, or textbook chapter about the Montgomery bus boycott. Make use of the documents and articles from the unit to create your narrative. The Montgomery bus boycott encyclopedia entry will also be useful. Be sure to cite your sources.

3. Creating a Document Based Question:
   To create a sample Document Based Question you may use documents from this unit or find other documents from Featured Documents. Create an essay question which will assess students' knowledge of the period and will require
analysis of the documents. The essential question, sub-questions or discussion questions are a good place to start. Be sure that the documents you provide to the students include various viewpoints and historical background useful for answering the essay question. If you do not want to create your own question, you may want to use the following: "Although King played a crucial role in transforming a local boycott into a social justice movement of international significance, he was himself transformed by a movement he did not initiate." Do you agree or disagree with the statement by Clayborne Carson? Support with evidence.

4. **Writing a Film Critique:**
Watch the Eyes on the Prize segment on the Montgomery bus boycott (ca. 7 min). Does the documentary offer an accurate account of the Montgomery bus boycott? Answer this question in the form of a newspaper film review. Support your opinions with specific examples.

**Materials**
- Six Steps for Nonviolent Direct Action
- King Encyclopedia
- Featured Documents
- Eyes on the Prize segment on the Montgomery bus boycott (ca. 7 min)