



Teaching LGBTQ History

a project of Our Family Coalition

The AIDS Epidemic (1 of 4): The Government's Response

An Apathetic Government

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Subject: History

Topic: Integrated; US Domestic Policy and Social Problems/Policies, Government Response to Social Changes

Grade Level: High School: 11th Grade

Overview

This lesson plan seeks to examine the ways in which the United States government ignored a disease that took thousands of American lives. It will debunk fallacies about HIV/AIDS and use the history of AIDS in the US to analyze how powerful activism can be.

Time: 50 minutes

Lesson Objectives:

Students will:

- Analyze the ways that our government has a history of ignoring people on the margins of society, including gay people and people of color who were disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS.
- Learn how ACT UP/NY borrowed activism tactics from movements of people of color by way of sit-ins, peaceful protests and violent protests.
- Examine sensationalism and how U.S. media uses this as a distraction from actual lives lost.

Essential Questions:

1. Who is the US government supposed to serve and protect? Who does the US government actually serve and protect?
2. How do the opinions of AIDS differ from gay people and their allies, and straight people?
3. How does the lack of government response leave people of color out of the conversation?

Standards:

HSS 11.11: Students analyze the major social problems and domestic policy issues in contemporary American society.

HISTORY FRAMEWORK: CH 16 P 427: [Reagan] supported a stronger government that would outlaw abortion and appealed to social conservatives seeking to promote heterosexual marriage, to oppose ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, to support faith-based cultural advocacy, to champion individual accomplishment, and to oppose many safety-net programs. He also vowed to expand the military and the Cold War. These three areas led to the resurgence of the Republican Party under Reagan as he restructured the scope of the federal government.

HISTORY FRAMEWORK: CH 16 P 431: In what ways have issues such as education; civil rights for people of color, immigrants, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Americans, and disabled Americans; economic policy; recognition of economic, social and cultural rights; the environment; and the status of women remained unchanged over time? In what ways have they changed?

The growth of the LGBT rights movement, for example, led to the pioneering role of gay politicians such as Elaine Noble, who was elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1974, and Harvey Milk, elected in 1977 to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.

Vocabulary:

- **Civic Engagement:** any individual or group activity addressing issues of public concern (i.e. protesting, boycotting, information campaigns, etc...).
- **Marginalize:** to treat a person, group of people or concept as insignificant.
- **Sensationalism:** the use of exciting or shocking stories or language at the expense of accuracy, in order to provoke public interest or excitement.

Teacher Background:

The teacher is encouraged to watch AIDS crisis documentaries such as *United in Anger: The History of ACT UP* in order to fully understand the intensity of the topic. The teacher should have experience with facilitating a Socratic Seminar and their class should be given experience with the method before this lesson plan.

Materials:

- Copies of [“Why We Fight”](#) by Vito Russo
- Video scavenger hunt [worksheet](#) (for pre-learning extension activity)

Recommended Pre-learning Extension:

- Video Scavenger Hunt: This homework assignment can be given to students to help them gain background knowledge on what HIV/AIDS is before beginning this lesson. Students will need a copy of the video scavenger hunt worksheet (see Materials), and will need to watch the [video](#), “How a Sick Chimp Led to a Global Pandemic: The Rise of HIV” on YouTube. Students will fill out the questions on the worksheet while they watch.

- “Why We Fight” by Vito Russo: Additionally, the teacher might consider assigning Russo’s speech as homework. Ask students to read and annotate the speech before class, and to come prepared to discuss.

Instructions:

- Introduction (15 minutes)
 - If the teacher chose to assign the optional video scavenger hunt homework assignment, spend about five minutes discussing the questions from the worksheet. Ask student volunteers to read their answers out loud to each question on the worksheet.
 - Watch “[Reagan Administration’s Chilling Response to the AIDS Crisis](#)” on YouTube by Vanity Fair Magazine (7:49).
 - Have students discuss in pairs or as a class questions about the video:
 - Why did the Reagan Administration appear so apathetic about the AIDS crisis? If the federal government had responded differently, how might that have changed the outcome of the AIDS crisis?
 - What kinds of stories/language did the media use as an opportunity to sensationalize the AIDS crisis? What impact did sensationalism have on the crisis?
 - When are other times in history that we have seen the federal government actively harm and contribute to the further marginalization of vulnerable communities and people?
- Socratic Seminar (25 minutes)
 - If the Russo speech was not assigned as a homework assignment to complete before class, pass out copies of Vito Russo’s “Why We Fight” speech for each student. Give them 10 minutes to read, annotate and prepare ideas about the article to share with the socratic seminar.
 - Split the class up into small groups of no more than seven students each, so that every student has a chance to speak and discuss their ideas. Before beginning, remind students of the importance of practicing active listening during a socratic seminar, and to create space for new ideas to be shared in respectful ways.
 - Encourage students to take the lead on the discussions themselves by discussing any questions that arose while they read or any connections or observations they made.
- Conclusion (10 minutes)
 - Each group will pick two representatives to tell the rest of the class what their group discussed. The other groups can ask questions or add on to what the representatives say.

Relevant Resources:

Russo, Vito. “Why We Fight.” 9 May 1988, Albany.
<http://www.actupny.org/documents/whfight.html>

SciShow. *How a Sick Chimpanzee Led to a Global Pandemic: The Rise of HIV*. YouTube, 29 Nov. 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izwomieBwG0>.

“Socratic Seminar.” *Facing History and Ourselves*,
www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/socratic-seminar.

“The Memorial.” *National AIDS Memorial Grove in San Francisco RSS*,
www.aidsmemorial.org/about/

“President Reagan Delivers First Major Speech on AIDS Epidemic in 1987.” *ABC News*, ABC News Network,
abcnews.go.com/Health/video/president-reagan-delivers-major-speech-aids-epidemic-1987-46492956.

VanityFairMagazine. *Reagan Administration's Chilling Response to the AIDS Crisis*. YouTube, YouTube, 1 Dec. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=yAzDn7tE1IU.

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