



Teacher material

Weimar Classicism

Introduction

Students are entitled to engage with cultural history. For example, the history of great thinkers and great ideas has shaped their lives. Also, there are important lessons to be learned about how progress in science and technology has required open and enquiring minds, tolerance of free-thinkers and communication beyond borders. However, exactly because this history is about big ideas beyond borders, it can be quite hard for young minds to engage with it. How can we make this history accessible?

This is a three hour enquiry entitled: 'How did one small town in Germany shape your life?' The focus is the 4 Weimar 'giants': Herder, Schiller, Goethe and Wieland. It is possible to use parts of this activity if you do not have time to do it all.

Activity Plan

The powerpoint includes some images that may be useful.

Who were the Weimar 'giants'?

STEP 1: Introduction

Start with a short passage from Peter Watson's book, 'The German Genius' to set the scene of Weimar in the 18th century. He describes Weimar in the late 18th century; a small place - more of a large schloss than a town.

"As one approached [Weimar] in the 18th century, one saw – standing out above the town's 600 or 700 houses – the towers of a couple of churches and the ducal Schloss. There were two inns, the Erbprinz and the Elefant, three shops worth the name, and the streets were lit by 500 lanterns, though they were so expensive to maintain that the order to light them was seldom given. In 1786, the population was 6200, or which 2000 were courtiers, bureaucrats, soldiers, or pensioners supported by taxation. There was no trade, no tourism, and of course no factories. ...

Though it was small and unprepossessing physically (drainage was still very primitive), Weimar was a capital and had a court. The original star ... was Princess Anna Amalia of Brunswick, who had been married in 1756, while still a girl, to Ernst August Konstantin of Weimar, himself no more than eighteen. ...

When Anna Amalia was married, she was not yet seventeen and her husband under nineteen. Before he died, two years later, she had borne him one son, Karl August, with another on the way. She became Weimar's regent during her son's minority, and it was in the nineteen years before his accession that she changed the court and made later developments possible."

P11-112 'The German Genius', Peter Watson



STEP 2: Introduction continued

Next give students the tourist map of central Weimar today (easily downloadable online) and ask them to spot which four names come up more than once. They will arrive at Herder, Schiller, Goethe, Wieland. But who were they?

STEP 3: Activity

Divide students into groups of 5 – 1 person for each character and an eavesdropper. Give 4 of the 5 a short role play card which they use to have a 'conversation in a café'. The more students are dramatic about this up the better. Wieland might say: 'Well did you know, I'm a poet!' To which Schiller replies: 'Oh so am I, but I write plays too!' The eavesdropper's role is to butt in and reflect on the connections between people. After this have a short plenary discussion to draw out what was important to these men. Essentially they are fascinated with what it means to be human.

STEP 3: Write up findings

Give students an A3 version of the tree diagram. By the trunk of the tree are four ovals. Into these they summarise the ideas of each of the four giants. Model selecting the ideas from one of the character information sheets, and thus help them practise note-taking. You might even explain how these men saw themselves as part of classicism, and link the terms 'classical music' and the name of Mozart to them.

STEP 4: Exploring for themselves

How about asking them to find and comment on a short Goethe or Schiller poem in order to broaden your students cultural horizons.

What made the Weimar 'giants' possible?

Our second hour focuses on the roots of our tree diagram. It aims to show students simply that the 4 Weimar giants were themselves standing on the shoulders of giants. That they took the ideas of great thinkers from across Europe and beyond and developed their ideas further. This is an important thing to understand if students are to understand how we make progress.

STEP 1: Introduction

Hear some of the poems and recap on who the four 'giants' were.

STEP 2: Activity

Students work in small groups with a factor card each. They have to prepare a short speech to explain why without their factor the four giants could not have done what they did. Run this as a balloon debate. That is, students vote on the merit of each factor. The factors with the least votes get thrown out of a fictional hot air balloon. In plenary make clear that some causes are what we call underlying causes, while others seem to make change happen at a specific time. Lots of discussion about links between causal factors is possible too. Some students may argue that the role of the individuals, such as Anna Amalia and the four men themselves is crucial. Others may argue that without the connections of an open and educated society there would have been no Weimar 'giants'.

STEP 3: Write up findings

Students write the factors around the roots of their tree diagram. They make the most important causes larger and draw arrows to show links.

To prepare for the next lesson ask students to research about another historical or contemporary thinker that interests them.



How did the Weimar giants shape my life?

Having explored the idea that our Weimar giants did not arrive from nowhere, now turn to the branches of the tree. Students have a range of things that exist today and they have to explain how their thing relates back to the ideas and actions of our giants. The aim is, of course, not to say that these 4 men created the modern world, but to try to get across the idea that ideas that become universal often start with some leading thinkers who are extraordinary in their time. Students can then write the things in branches and the summary activity is a student reflection on what they have learnt and thought about doing the enquiry.

Some final thoughts

Finding a place and some people to start our story makes this enquiry accessible; as does the simple tree metaphor. The idea that every child is entitled to learn about such subject matter is really important, and feedback from students suggests this approach has been successful. It works at different levels. All students grasp the idea of the Weimar giants having big ideas, learning from others and inspiring others. Some students start to connect this enquiry to their science lessons, to literature and who knows to what else.

Sources:

Factor Card Images:

1. Sir Isaac Newton's *Philosophiae Naturalis Principa Mathematica*, CC-BY-SA / Andrew Dunn
2. Duchess Anna Amalia, Public Domain in Germany
3. Napoleon at the Battle of Jena-Auerstedt, Public Domain in France
4. Title page of the First Folio by William Shakespeare, Public Domain in the USA
5. *Vitruvian Man* by Leonardo Da Vinci, Public Domain in Italy
6. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Public Domain in Austria

Images that link Weimar to today:

1. Eleanor Roosevelt and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Public Domain in the USA
2. Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Public Domain in the USA
3. Goethe's symmetric colour wheel, Public Domain in the EU
4. Hadassah School of Nursing in Jerusalem, Public Domain in Israel
5. Rhode Island School of Design Art Class, CC-BY-SA / PPhillip Capper
6. Ode to Joy Sheet Music, www.abcnotation.com
7. WSPU founders Annie Kenney and Christabel Pankhurst, Public Domain in the EU
8. Entrance to Faculty of History, University of Oxford, CC-BY-SA / Maxime Gtn
9. Matter Distribution, Public Domain in the USA