The Great Gatsby Curve Lesson Plan

Subjects
Economics, Government, Social Issues

Estimated time
One hour and 30 minutes

Grade level
7-12

Pre-Lesson Homework
If students have not read or seen “The Great Gatsby” have them find an online plot overview of the novel so they will have context for the lesson. For example Spark Notes has a good plot overview available in both written and video form:

Gatsby Written Summary

Gatsby Video Summary

Warm up activity
In this activity students will authentically experience how having (or not having) resources contributes to their ability to produce materials that are in demand and as well as sustain themselves as a society through a resource simulation.

Materials needed for warm up activity

- 3 pens (or pencils)
- 3 pairs of scissors
- 1 glue stick or bottle of glue
- 20 paper clips
- paper ruler (provided)
- paper (on pdf) - 2 stripe sheets, 2 wood sheets, 2 wave sheets, 2 white sheets, 1 polka-dot sheet
- 4 large manila envelopes

Directions
1. Print off the envelope pages, fill the envelopes with the following items (see instruction for each group on envelope pages), and staple a copy of items list onto a manila envelope. (Example here)

2. Divide the students into four groups (of four or five). *Note, if you have enough students to fill 8 groups simply divide the class in half and create two separate simulation groups (you will need to double the number of envelopes and materials as well.)

3. Explain to the class that each group will be getting a different set of resources but to win you will have to complete the tasks of creating “food”, “minerals”, “education” and “shelter” in the shortest amount of time. Each item they must make with their materials is an important part of basic human needs as well as some items that contribute to a successful economy. See image 1 for an example of finished items and image 2 for envelope setup.

Rules

- Students will have 25 minutes to complete their items
- Students may trade with each other to get the materials they don’t have but need to complete the task.
- Students may only use the materials from their envelope and will be disqualified for using other materials not directly from the envelope.
- Students caught stealing will be sent to “jail” and their team will have to work without their help for five minutes.
- Items will be measured by the teacher with a ruler and they must be exactly the size required in the directions.

After the students have accomplished the task and a winner is declared, debrief them by asking them the questions below

1. Discuss what happened in their groups, and in the class as a whole.
2. How did the amount of your resources affect your ability to complete your task?
3. How does a person’s financial resource situation affect their ability to lead their lives?
4. What did you learn from the simulation?

Main activity

In this part of the lesson student will gain an understanding economic inequality in the United States and other countries. They will be given a glossary to scaffold their understanding of economic terms, view a short video on economic inequality, and read an article about the new economic concept “The Great Gatsby Curve”. Questions for each section can be found on the questions and responses sheet.
Materials needed for main activity

- Computer, internet access, and a projector or SmartBoard
- “The Great Gatsby Curve: Inequality and the End of Upward Mobility” glossary
- “The Great Gatsby Curve: Inequality and the End of Upward Mobility” questions and responses sheet
- Washington Post article
- “The Great Gatsby Curve: Inequality and the End of Upward Mobility” repurposed article
- Infograph from the White House

Directions:

1. Pass out “The Great Gatsby Curve” glossary for students to use throughout the lesson.

2. On the “The Great Gatsby Curve” questions and responses sheet have students respond individually to the following questions:

   1. Do you believe that there is financial inequality in the United States? Why or why not?

   2. Why do you think that there are certain people who have not been able to become rich? How can someone become wealthy?

   3. Play the first 1:40 from the “The Great Gatsby” trailer and have students watch to re-familiarize themselves with the story

4. Explain to the students that they are now going to see one perspective on “Wealth Inequality in America”. Let them know to expect that this film supports the belief that things are not equal between the poor, the middle class, and the wealthy, and that this is not the only perspective. However, the facts in the video have been checked and are supported by research done at the Washington Post. Pass the Washington Post article out to students so they can use it later to assess and support the validity of the video.

   Play the animated short film “Wealth Inequality in America”, stopping when appropriate to answer questions. Ask students to write down anything that surprised them while they are watching the video.

5. First have them write down their own answer on the questions and responses sheet, then discuss with the class what they thought about the video- Did it seem true? What surprised you? Did your answers from the questions before change after watching the video?
6. Now pass out the repurposed article, “The Great Gatsby Curve” and read together using the glossary to promote understanding of the economic vocabulary. An infographic that may be helpful for understanding is from the White House’s website.

7. Discuss the article with students and then have them answer the following questions about the article on their questions and response sheet:

- Is having an economic system with inequality a good thing that reflects the hard work, skills and ambition of some, and the laziness, and lack of desire to be successful in others?
- Does inequality limit opportunities for the poor to create a better future for their children, and place unfair barriers to success on them regardless of their talent?

8. For homework as the students to write an essay answering the following question found on their questions and response sheet:

- In your own words explain the “Great Gatsby Curve” and why it may play a key role in our understanding of how the American economic system works? Make sure to include an explanation of the graph, use terminology from the Glossary, and provide specific examples from the article. Please write or type on a separate sheet of paper.