



CLASSROOM VIDEO • VIEWING GUIDE

INTRODUCING UNIVERSE OF OBLIGATION IN AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM

Overview

In this classroom video, English language arts teacher Jackie Rubino introduces the idea of a *universe of obligation*, the term sociologist Helen Fein coined to describe the circle of individuals and groups within a society “toward whom obligations are owed, to whom rules apply, and whose injuries call for amends.”¹ Although Fein conceived of the term to describe the way nations determine who belongs, we might also refer to an individual’s universe of obligation to describe the circle of other people that the person feels a responsibility to care for and protect. This concept allows us to

recognize the internalized hierarchies that influence how we think about and respond to the needs of others. While it is neither practical nor possible for one’s universe of obligation to include everyone in its center, acknowledging the way we think about and prioritize our obligations toward others can help us act in a more thoughtful, compassionate manner.

In this lesson, students consider their own universes of obligation, preparing them to apply this key concept to works of literature and to reflect on the way they view others and make sense of the society in which they live.

Questions to Consider

1. At **0:59**, Ms. Rubino shares her goals for what her students will glean from the lesson, noting that “I also want them to think about whom they feel responsible for—not thinking that they are just responsible for people immediately around them, but that we can have a greater impact on the world around us.” Why do you think Ms. Rubino makes this distinction?
2. At **1:15**, Ms. Rubino breaks down the definition of *universe of obligation* with her students. How might you do this in your own classroom?
3. At **2:35**, Ms. Rubino has her students consider three guiding questions about their own universes of obligation. Later in the video, she reflects on how students will apply the universe of obligation concept to works of literature. How might the guiding questions included in Ms. Rubino’s lesson be applied when studying characters in a novel or a play? How might you modify these questions?
4. How might the universe of obligation concept be useful in other disciplines, such as social studies?

Featured

Jackie Rubino

Teacher
12th Grade
Methuen High School
Methuen, MA

Video Goals

- **Consider** how you might use the universe of obligation concept in your own classroom.
- **Observe** how the universe of obligation concept can be used to help students in their study of literature.
- **See** the universe of obligation concept in action in an English language arts classroom.

Lesson Resources

- **Lesson Plan: Understanding Universe of Obligation**
- **Reading: Universe of Obligation** from Holocaust and Human Behavior
- **Handout: Universe of Obligation** from Holocaust and Human Behavior

¹ Helen Fein, *Accounting for Genocide* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 4.