

Scaffolding International Turtle Day through Poetry and Philosophy (Secondary)



theory behind scaffold...

May 23 - International Turtle Day. Go ahead, get it over with....have a good laugh....then keep reading! The more we know about these amazing creatures and the literary connections they inspire, the more we realise that this day gives us the opportunity to highlight a much larger issue:

how we treat all living beings on the planet.

Let's approach this really interesting choice of an international day through poetry and let's go a little further – let's throw in philosophy to boot.

Where to begin?...well, with the obvious.

TURTLES

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DR. SEUSS

([YERTLE THE TURTLE](#))

Seriously? A children's book about turtles? Oh yes! Theodor Seuss Geisel (Dr. Seuss), was not just a writer of children's books, but a profound philosopher, a poet, a political advocate (sometimes controversial), and a promoter of critical thinking on all levels. Not bad, eh?!

Outlining his many talents, we will also understand how many opportunities this day gives us to augment our lessons and target skills that will serve them well for their whole personal and professional lives. So...

Theodor Seuss Geisel as...

- ❖ a children's book writer...he was an American children's author, political cartoonist, illustrator, poet, animator, and filmmaker. He is best known for more than 60 children's books that he wrote and illustrated under the pseudonym 'Dr. Seuss'.
- ❖ a poet...he wrote most of his books in *anapestic tetrameter*, a poetic meter that consists of four rhythmic units called *anapests*. Anapests encourage musical rhythm as the lines are composed with two weak syllables followed by one strong syllable.

An example from [Yertle the Turtle](#):

And **today** the Great **Yertle**, that **Marvelous he**
Is **King** of the **Mud**. That is **all** he can **see**

Geisel's books are ideal for teaching children other poetic meters such as trochaic ([One Fish Two Fish](#)), amphibrachic ([If I Ran the Circus](#)), and iambic ([Bartholomew and the Oobleck](#).) Your students will have visual, linguistic, rhythmic and creative stimulation all at once. (You can find a specific poetic analysis for *Yertle the Turtle* at [this site](#).)

- ❖ a philosopher...he had a moral message in all of his stories, but intentionally did not highlight them. He said, 'Children see a moral coming a mile off' and knew that they would assimilate the underlying messages subconsciously. (You can find out more about the importance of philosophic development at young ages at [this site](#).)
- ❖ a political activist...not all of his books were written with a political message, but many were. *Yertle the Turtle*, for instance, was a statement about overreaching and poking fun at despots. In fact, it is little known that the original drawing of Yertle included a Hitler-like mustache that he eliminated later on. It's final line '...and the turtles of course, all the turtles are free, as turtles and maybe all creatures should be', can be applied to sentiments largely felt toward historic as well as current dictators and their like vying for subservience from others.

This scaffold uses Dr. Seuss' classic book and a form of the game 'Telephone' as an introduction to the reading of the book and then extended into the basis for any project-based lesson you're about to begin, including lessons on natural sciences.

Step by step:

1. Copy and paste several lines of [Yertle the Turtle](#), in a document or in a PPT.
2. Print the sentences out, make a set of them for each group of students, cut them up, crumple them up and put them in different bags. Hand them out to the students.
3. The activity proceeds in the following manner:
 - a) One student in the group chooses a sentence from the bag and reads it silently
 - b) That student then whispers the sentence to second student in the group.
 - c) The second student is *not* allowed to ask for repetition or to read the sentence on the paper but has only to remember what was heard and then whisper it to the next group member.
 - d) This continues until the last group member has heard the sentence and then says it aloud to the group.
 - e) The student who initially read the sentence reads it aloud and everyone sees how closely the last student was able to reproduce the original.

- f) Another student chooses a sentence from the bag, reads it silently, and begins the same dynamic as before.
 - g) When all groups have finished reading and repeating all of the sentences, project them on the board and everyone repeats them aloud. Clarify any questions about concept or linguistics.
4. *Formative Assessment:* Write the funniest mistakes your group has made with the telephone game.
 5. *Reflection:* After reading the story, students write 75-100 words from the point of view of the turtles at the bottom of the stack.

Philosophical questions they can answer:

1. How important is fairness in a society?
 2. Should every individual have equal rights? If so, what should they be?
 3. What are the responsibilities included in owning something?
 4. How can we resolve conflicts in which two people believe they own the same thing?
 5. What are characteristics of a leader that you would want to follow?
 6. Is disliking a leader sufficient to warrant disobeying that person?
(More philosophical questions included at the end.)
6. *Extension:* Watch the video of [Yertle the Turtle](#) and discuss the hierarchy highlighted in the story, and whether that dynamic is just or not. Where can students find a similar hierarchy in their own lives?

Example of sentences from the transcript you can use for the activity:

Sentence 1:

On the far-away Island of Sala-ma-Sond, Yertle the Turtle was king of the pond.

Sentence 2:

A nice little pond. It was clean. It was neat. The water was warm. There was plenty to eat.

Sentence 3:

The turtles had everything turtles might need. And they were all happy. Quite happy indeed.

Extension:

Video: [Yertle the Turtle](#)

Video: [The Real World of Turtles](#)

[Philosophical discussion](#)

[More Questions for Philosophical Discussion](#)

Justice and Rights

Mack protests that Yertle's treatment of the turtles is unfair.

1. Have you ever felt like someone with power was treating you or someone you knew unfairly?
2. Is Mack right that Yertle is treating the turtles unfairly? Why?
3. What does fairness mean?
4. Can you think of a time when the best thing to do isn't fair?
5. Is just being fair enough to make a society good? What if all the turtles were equally hungry and unhappy?
6. Do the turtles deserve to be free? Do they have other rights?
7. Is Yertle a bad king for making the turtles be his throne?
8. Is it ever okay for a leader to allow his subjects to be hurt or treated unfairly?
9. Do the turtles have a right to say no to Yertle, even though he is in charge?
10. What rights do you think all people should have? Are there times when people should not have these rights?

Property and Colonialism

Yertle thinks that if he sees something, he rules over it.

1. Do you own everything that you see?
2. What's a time you got to own something because you saw it?
3. Is Yertle really the ruler of all that he sees? Why or why not?
4. Who really owns the house that Yertle says he is the king of?
5. How do people get to own things? How do people get to own land in particular?
6. Have you ever disagreed with a friend about who was the owner of something? How did you resolve the conflict?
7. Is it ever okay for a person to take something that belongs to someone else?
8. Indigenous peoples were living here before Europeans came and took their land. Did the European settlers really own it?
9. Do we, their descendants, own that same land we live on now?

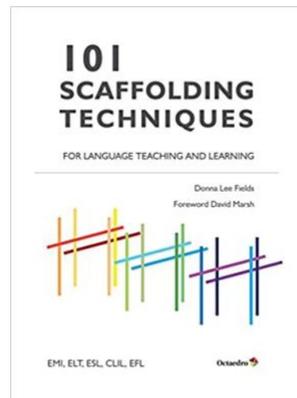
Power and Authority

The turtles obey Yertle's commands despite being afraid and uncomfortable.

1. Who are some people in charge of you?
2. Do you always listen to them?
3. Should you listen to people in charge? Why?
4. If you were a turtle, would you have obeyed Yertle's commands?
5. Can you think of times when you should not listen to people in charge?
6. Why do you think that the turtles listened to Yertle even though they didn't want to do what he told them?
7. Should people listen to a person in charge even if they don't like them?
8. If most people like a leader, should that leader's rule be obeyed?
9. Can you think of leaders that should be followed and leaders that should not be? Why do you think they should or should not be followed?

Original questions and guidelines for philosophical discussion by Teddy Willard and Soren Schlassa archived here. Edited June 2020 by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics.

Find tips for leading a philosophical discussion on our Resources page.



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