

Assignment Discovery Online Curriculum 8th Amendment: The Death Penalty

Curriculum Focus

U.S. Government

Grade level

9-12

Duration

One or two class periods

Objectives

Students will

- define capital punishment;
- discuss the positions for and against the death penalty discussed in the video; and
- write a mock editorial for a Huntsville, Texas, paper to defend or denounce the death penalty.

Materials

- Computer with Internet access
- Paper, pencils, pens

Procedures:

1. Ask students to use what they learned in the video to define capital punishment. (*A punishment in which a convicted criminal faces execution, such as by lethal injection. A criminal must be convicted, the jury must recommend the death penalty in the punishment phase of the trial, and the judge must agree with the recommendation.*) Do all states allow capital punishment? (*No*) Do any other Western countries have a death penalty? (*No*)
2. Next, discuss some of the positions cited in the video. What are the arguments that support the death penalty? (*Example: The death penalty is appropriate retribution for taking someone's life; the death penalty is a deterrent to future murders.*) What are arguments against the death penalty? (*Example: The death penalty is cruel and inhumane, regardless of the crime; the death penalty does not deter or prevent future murders; the possibility of executing someone who is innocent is too great.*)
3. Explain to students that they will be writing a mock editorial for the local paper in Huntsville, Texas. Featured in the video, Huntsville is known for its high number of executions. Students can choose which side to defend. They may also wish to assume a persona directly related to a scheduled execution, such as a victim's brother, defense attorney, an inmate's mother, or an anti-death penalty demonstrator.
4. Allow enough class time or assign the editorials as homework. Provide the following sites for students to use in their research:

Neutral Sites

The Death Penalty Information Center: Arguments For and Against
<http://deathpenaltyinfo.msu.edu/c/about/arguments/contents.htm>

Issues and Controversies: Death Penalty
<http://www.facts.com/cd/i00015.htm>

Bureau of Justice Statistics Capital Punishment Statistics
<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/cp.htm>

Capital Punishment (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy)
<http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/c/capitalp.htm>

Capital Punishment: Life or Death
<http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~tonya/spring/cap/group1.htm>

Pro-Death Penalty

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<http://www.prodeathpenalty.com/>

The New American: Capital Punishment
http://www.thenewamerican.com/focus/cap_punishment/index.htm

Anti-Death Penalty

ACLU: Death Penalty
<http://aclu.org/death-penalty/>

The National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty
<http://www.ncadp.org/>

5. Make enough copies of the students' editorials for everyone in the class. As a homework assignment, have students read their classmates' essays. The next day, have students try to summarize the arguments for and against the death penalty. Why is this such a difficult issue to resolve? Ask students if they envision the death penalty gaining or losing support in different states in the coming years.

Evaluation

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' work during this lesson.

3 points: Students were highly engaged in class discussions, and they wrote comprehensive and thoughtful editorials that include several relevant facts and quotes.

2 points: Students participated in class discussions, and they wrote somewhat comprehensive editorials that include some facts and at least one quote.

1 point: Students participated minimally in class discussions, and they wrote simplistic editorials that include few or no facts or quotes.

Vocabulary

capital punishment (death penalty)

Definition: A punishment in which a convicted criminal faces some form of execution, such as lethal injection.

Context: In order for capital punishment to be considered, a criminal must be convicted, and both the jury and the judge must agree on this type of sentence.

The Eighth Amendment

Definition: The Eighth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution states that "Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted."

Context: From 1972 to 1976, capital punishment was ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, citing that the death penalty was cruel and unusual punishment under the Eighth Amendment.

Academic Standards

This lesson plan addresses the following thematic standards:

- VI. Power, Authority, and Governance