

Interview with Heather Coffey
Fourth Grade Teacher
John Brown Song

1. Meet the Song (1:49)

John Brown's Body was played in the North as a popular marching song for the Union army and it was played during rallies and in cities in the North.

It actually fits in with Standard VS.7a, that says that students will demonstrate knowledge of the issues that divided our nation and led to the Civil War by identifying the events and differences between northern and southern states that divided Virginians and led to secession, war, and the creation of West Virginia. So, John Brown's raid falls in that standard and John Brown's Body expresses that opinion of the northerners and how his raid led to the division of the country.

John Brown, in our textbook, is about a paragraph, if that. It just says that he's an abolitionist who led slaves in this rebellion. But our kids don't really understand who he was and why it was so important. So, in this lesson I wanted to give them an in-depth view of John Brown and what he did. So, I thought about the best way for fourth graders to look at him and his story, and the best way to do it is through a song.

They all know Harriet Tubman from second grade. Nat Turner, they get about a paragraph on him too. The one thing with our textbook is they only present one side to the kids. You know, these are all the good things people did. So all the kids know is there are three people in Virginia history who fought to end slavery. And that's as far as fourth graders are expected to go with it. So, when you give it to them in this format it makes a lot more sense. Why would he put his life at risk? What could have possibly possessed him to do something that tragic, that severe?

And we had a big weeklong unit on what makes a hero. What if they did something bad? What if they did something that hurt somebody else? How could that person be considered a hero? So they had that concept in their mind when they approached John Brown.

2. Lesson Set-up (2:09)

Rather than just spending an hour, just a class period on just the song, we spent three days. We did a day of what was going on in the country. We did a day of who was John Brown, looking at his life, looking at his pictures, looking at some of the letters that were written to him or by him. And then our third day was an intense look at this song.

The day before we talked specifically about John Brown and his history. We spent a lot of time looking at his photographs and paintings of him, and getting an idea of who he was, and how different people saw him at different times in history.

When we talked about John Brown to start with, and the things that he did in Kansas, and we looked at some of the paintings and photographs, he looks like a frightening man. So, students initially will tell you, no, he wasn't a good person at all. And then when you start looking at, well, who would say that? Would a northerner say that? Would a southerner say that? They start

talking about, well, what does good mean? Is what he did good? Could he have done it better? So it leads them into a debate over what is good, what is bad.

My class of fourth graders this year, there are 25 of them. Our kids do a lot of creating and they do a lot of research. So, an activity like this fits in well with our class because they have to take something new and figure out what is it, using everything that we've taught them, with a little bit of guidance. They are very familiar with primary sources this year.

In the class I teach we have a lot of children who are very low readers, and for them this is a hard reading assignment. So they were partnered up with somebody who was a better reader, and that helped them out. Here's what we call it, their "two highlighter strategy," where they're given two highlighters. One color for anything that sticks out in their mind as, "Wow, this is really neat, I want to remember this." And the other color for, "I don't understand what this is." And they're told to highlight their song. And they can take what they know, and then take what they don't know, and try and put them together.

3. Lesson: Introduction (0:44)

So, after we read our short little paragraph in the textbook, we passed out the lyrics to them and just let them read them. And explore and figure out, you know, what do you think this is saying in here? The first time that they looked at the words, they looked at it by themselves—just so that they could familiarize themselves with it. I didn't give them any kind of information other than, "Look at this. And what do you think this is?" So they had to look through it and figure out, well, what is this trying to say. I like to give my kids the opportunity to do some free exploration without me influencing their thought process at first. They were allowed to work with a partner. They were allowed to ask questions of teachers, of each other, and to sort of get an idea of what was going on.

4. Lesson: Music (2:34)

After that we played the music for them, and let them listen to it, and most kids sing along because they knew the chorus part. We listened to it twice. Their First, they just listened. The second time they got to draw their pictures. If they were going to listen to the song about John Brown and make sense of it, they needed to be doing some kind of art project. And it helps them to focus their listening, not just on the words but let's set the words aside for now and listen to what's going on behind them.

They're given a piece of white construction paper. And for this particular song, they just put it flat in front of them and they had a box of crayons. And you tell them, "I don't care what you draw. You can draw symbols, you can draw colors, you can draw pictures. Whatever you hear, whatever you see and whatever you feel, put in on your paper." So you'll get kids trying to draw the words. They try and draw action scenes. Some kids will sit there and they'll just draw slashes of green or slashes of red, or you know, big fireworks, or they'll draw just a drumbeat—or a drum. And if you can figure out, "Well, I just hear a drum." You know, why would that have been? Why is there not a whole orchestra? Why is there not a whole band in here? And it helps them figure out why we have the song in the first place.

But if you pull those papers back out a week later, and you say, “What is this all about?” They can re-tell the story just from their sketches and their colors. After they did their art project, they were then allowed to talk with their friends and share what they had done. We came back together and we talked about their art projects and what they meant.

We had two sets of guiding questions. One set was for musical composition, which is the easiest one to start with, because the questions ask, “How does it make you feel? What instruments do you hear? Who do you think is singing? How do you feel? Does the song make you feel like moving?” So, we listened to the song twice and the first time the kids just got to listen to it. The second time, as they listened, they had to answer their questions. And then after the second time they shared their answers. And compared what they heard and what they drew, and came up with some pretty interesting questions. And they got a better sense of who John Brown was and how important he was in the beginning of the Civil War, and his views of slavery and how he wanted to end it. Most kids indicated that they felt happy when they heard the music. A couple of kids said they felt proud. And the word “brave” and “courageous” came up a lot too.

5. Lesson: Lyrics

Then we pulled the lyrics back out again. I read the words out loud so they could hear them. Then they were put with a partner. We had them do some guiding questions on the lyrics of the song. Those questions—asking them to look closely at the words and make some comparisons. Starting really easy with, “Who was the song about?” And they knew right away that it was John Brown. Asking them, “What does the song say about John Brown?”

And what I do while they do that is, I visit each group just for a little bit to sit and listen to what kinds of things they’re talking about. If they’re focused on one specific thing, we talk about that a little bit. But I let them do all the exploration with it. If they ask questions I’m there to answer them—not necessarily directly, but maybe to answer their question with another question, because I want them to be the ones thinking it through and figuring it out.

For lyrics the hardest part is making sense of the words and figuring out what it all means. But our students are so well-versed in context clues that they’re able to read through it and figure it out and they know what to ask. So in the song, they didn’t understand the word “mouldering.” But the sentence it’s in says, “Old John Brown’s body lies mouldering in the grave.” When they talk with their friends, somebody would say, “Well, it looks like moulding. Does that make sense, would a body be doing that? Yes. So we think that mouldering means moulding.” So they get the sense of what a word is just by the sentence around it.

They looked at the line that says, “John Brown was a hero, undaunted, true and brave.” And that was easy for them. They may not have known undaunted, but based on the words hero, true, brave, they knew undaunted was a good word. So when the questions asked them, “Was John Brown a good person?” They could look at those four words and say, “Well, apparently in this song he was.”

Lines like, “He captured Harper’s Ferry,” they understand that. And “Frightened old Virginny.” They understand that what he did was frightening. And Virginia was a southern state, and for the South it was a frightening thing that somebody was able to do this.

So then when you take it to the next verse, and you say, “For the dawn of old John Brown,” and you say, “What does dawn mean?” Dawn means beginning of something, “has brightened into day.” What he started has now come to fruition and then he has—the Union army has fulfilled what John Brown started. So it helps them understand the Civil War and it helps them to place into context that John Brown started something, he came first, and what he started continued on to something bigger.

And they all could summarize that as they said that he was a hero, and he did good things. And when we talk about why those specific words were chosen, they got into a good conversation about: Who wrote them? Was it someone from the North? Was it someone from the South? And they agreed that it was a northern perspective because it was written about the South.

6. Lesson: Wrap-up (0:48)

After we’ve talked about it we usually do writing. Our kids have what we call “Write to Learn” journals. And we ask them to take five minutes and to somehow get their thoughts onto paper. What have we done today? Why is this important? We tell them they can write, they can do poetry, they can write a song, they can sketch out—we teach them how to do picture notes—just something to get their learning onto paper. And then they’re allowed to share that, to bring it to a closure. But we’ll bring the song out afterwards because they like the song a lot and they like to sing it.

So we’ll play it periodically afterwards, just so it keeps fresh in their mind. And as we go through the unit on the Civil War and talk about what are they fighting for, we bring back, “Remember John Brown. What was he fighting for? He kind of sparked some of this.”

7. Teaching Tips (0:31)

I would say this is one of the best ways to teach John Brown. They have to understand what else was going on in the country at the time, and I think it takes a little bit of research into how people felt. Because all the textbook tells kids is, we have this guy, he wanted to end slavery, he led a raid, he was executed, the end. And that’s it. But to play them the song and to let them look at the lyrics and have a discussion about it you get so much more out of it than just reading the textbook.