



IF GOD IS WILLING AND DA CREEK DON'T RISE

A FILM BY SPIKE LEE

Photograph © Home Box Office, Inc.

STUDY GUIDE

TRIBECA
YOUTH
SCREENING
SERIES

FALL 2010: **HBO** DOCUMENTARY FILMS.

TRIBECA
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ABOUT THE FILM

In *If God Is Willing And Da Creek Don't Rise*, director Spike Lee continues his examination of the devastating impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans and its citizens as well as the new challenges they face as a result of the catastrophic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Throughout the film, Lee revisits the individuals, communities and institutions that he encountered in his epic 2006 Emmy and Peabody-winning documentary, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* and highlights the successes and failures of the ongoing efforts to restore housing, healthcare, education, economic growth and law and order to a battered but undefeated community.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER



Photograph © Home Box Office, Inc.

SPIKE LEE, DIRECTOR/PRODUCER

Spike Lee is an award winning writer, director, producer, actor, and author who revolutionized both the landscape of independent cinema and the role of black talent in film. Widely regarded as a premiere African-American filmmaker, Lee is a forerunner in the 'do it yourself' school of filmmaking with a body of work that spans feature film, documentary, commercials and music videos. His most notable works include *Do the Right Thing*, *Get On the Bus*, *Inside Man*, *25th Hour*, *The Original Kings of Comedy*, *Mo' Better Blues*, *Clockers*, *Four Little Girls*, and *When the Levees Broke*.

THINKING AHEAD

- Q:** What words and images come to mind when you think of New Orleans? What do you think life is like for teenagers living in that city today?
- Q:** Do you remember Hurricane Katrina? What do you know about it? Do you think that Hurricane Katrina changed the United States? In what ways?
- Q:** The BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is the biggest environmental disaster in US history. How long do you think it will take to repair the damage? What impact is the spill having on your life?

THE FILM IN CONTEXT

KATRINA: 5 YEARS LATER

One of the strongest storms ever to affect the United States, Hurricane Katrina came ashore on August 29, 2005 causing massive devastation to cities and communities along the coasts of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. New Orleans suffered the worst damage due to the failure of the levee system (a man-made structure designed to protect the city from floods), and five years later the impact of the disaster can still be felt in every aspect of life for the city's residents. Did you know:

- Hurricane Katrina was the most devastating and costly natural disaster in United States history causing about \$75 billion in physical damages. It is estimated that the long-term economic cost for the region will exceed \$150 billion.
- Over 1 million people were evacuated from South East Louisiana, nearly 500,000 of which were from New Orleans. As of 2008, an estimated 100,000 people still had not returned to New Orleans including 37% of the city's African-American population.
- An estimated 275,000 homes were destroyed across the region as a result of the hurricane, which is ten times more than any other natural disaster in US history. In addition, an estimated 400,000 jobs were lost after the storm, sending the Gulf Coast into a financial crisis.
- The official death toll for Katrina is 1,836 people, primarily from Louisiana and Mississippi. This figure does not include over 700 people who are still listed as missing and the thousands of deaths that are related to but not directly caused by the storm.

Adapted from www.discovery.com, www.hurricanekatrinarelief.com, www.hurricane-katrina.org, www.thinkprogress.org, and *New Orleans rebuilding, but Katrina scars remain*, by Mike Tolson, Houston Chronicle

BP OIL SPILL: DEEPWATER HORIZON

The massive oil spill that occurred in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 is **the worst environmental disaster in US history**, affecting over a hundred miles of coastline and hundreds of square miles of open water.

BP Oil Spill Timeline:

- On April 20, 2010, an explosion aboard the Deepwater Horizon, a drilling rig leased by the oil company British Petroleum, started a fire that killed 11 crewmembers.
- Two days later, the oil-rig sank about 50 miles off the coast of Louisiana and crude oil began gushing out of a broken pipe 5,000 feet below the surface.
- Within a month, after a series of failed attempts to plug the leak, oil began to reach the coasts and marshes of Louisiana.
- The damaged well was sealed in August 2010 after releasing more than 5 million barrels of oil into the Gulf.
- The clean up continues and it is estimated that the impact may take decades to repair with much of the damage being irreversible.

Before the accident, the US Government announced plans to open new offshore areas for oil and gas drilling.

- Do you think companies should be allowed to continue drilling for oil offshore? What are the benefits? What are the drawbacks?
- Should limitations be put on the oil industry, and if so, what should they be?
- What other energy sources could the United States invest in to break our dependence on oil?

President Obama and his administration have received a great deal of criticism for their management of the BP oil spill, with many people comparing their response to the mistakes made by the Bush administration during the Katrina disaster.

- Do you think that President Obama has managed the crisis well?
- Is there anything you think the government should have done differently?
- What would you do if you were president?

Adapted from www.restorethegulf.gov, www.hurricane-katrina.org, and *The Gulf Oil Spill in the Classroom*, The Learning Network: Teaching and Learning with the New York Times, By Katherine Schulten and Catherine Hutchings

HOW TO BE A CRITICAL VIEWER

Being a critical viewer is different than simply watching a movie. Critical viewing is about being able to examine the information that a movie, commercial, music video or TV show is giving you and ask meaningful questions about the information that you receive. Media makers create work for many reasons: to inform, persuade, entertain, shock, sell, etc. A critical viewer asks, “What goal is the media maker trying to achieve, and what impact do they want to have on me?”

A critical viewer is someone who:

- Listens carefully to what is being said in the movie
- Pays attention to the details used by the filmmaker to convey the message of the film
- Asks meaningful questions

Being a critical viewer will help you understand:

- The themes and issues that the filmmaker is addressing
- The reasons why the filmmaker chose to make the movie
- The message of the movie

In this study guide you will find background information, activities, and questions that will help you practice being a critical viewer.



CRITICAL VIEWING REFLECTION

Now that you've watched the film and worked through the Study Guide, take some time to reflect on the following questions. These worksheets are an important step in practicing your critical viewing skills. Write down your answers and compare with your friends and classmates.

Every film has a **MESSAGE** that the filmmaker wants to communicate. There are a few key questions you can ask yourself to help figure out a film's message.

What do you think the film is about?

What is the filmmaker trying to say about the subject? What evidence is used?

Why do you think the filmmaker made this film?

PRODUCTION describes the process of making a film and includes writing the script, choosing different types of shots while filming, editing the final footage, and choosing music. The choices made during production affect how we experience the movie.

How is the story of the film told? Does it remind you of other films you have seen? If so, which ones and how? If not, how was it unique?

How does the way the film is made change the way you understand the topic? (Think about the structure of the film, the music, etc.)

CRITIQUE: WHAT DO YOU THINK?

When you **CRITIQUE** a film as a critical viewer you are doing more than saying whether you like it or not, you are forming your own opinions about the quality of the film, clearly explaining your thoughts, and using evidence from the film to support these opinions.

What did you find interesting about the film? Why?

Why is the film interesting to other viewers (even if it wasn't interesting to you)?

Why do you think the filmmaker took the time to make this film?

What would you have done differently if you were the director?

What kind of audience is the film targeting? (Remember, one film can target many different kinds of audiences!)

RESOURCE GUIDE

FURTHER READING IF YOU'RE INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT SOME OF THE ISSUES PRESENTED IN THE FILM, CHECK OUT THESE BOOKS.

The End of Oil

By Paul Roberts

Global oil supplies are being used-up at an alarming rate. This timely and essential book looks at the energy sources that could replace oil and explores who will control the new energy economy and what impact this transition will have on the way we live.

Life in the Wake: Fiction from Post-Katrina New Orleans

Edited by Joe Longo and Jarret Lofstead

A collection of short fiction set in post-Katrina New Orleans by writers from the region.

Silent Spring

By Rachel Carson

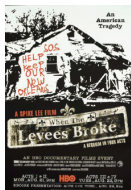
Released in 1962, this seminal book offered the first shattering look at widespread ecological degradation and launched the modern environmental movement.

Zeitoun

By Dave Eggers

The true story of a man who decides to stay in New Orleans to protect his property after his family flees Hurricane Katrina.

FURTHER WATCHING IF YOU LIKED THIS FILM, YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE SOME OF THESE OTHER FILMS.



When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts

Spike Lee's award winning four-hour documentary examining the devastating impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans and the institutional failures that transformed a natural disaster into a human catastrophe.



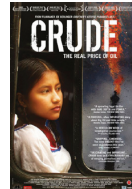
Trouble the Water

Academy Award nominated documentary that follows the story of a couple surviving failed levees, bungling bureaucrats, and their own troubled past and a portrait of a community abandoned long before Hurricane Katrina hit.



Treme

From David Simon who created *The Wire*, this HBO TV series is set in the New Orleans neighborhood called Treme and follows the lives of struggling artists and musicians in aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.



Crude

Award-winning documentary that investigates the largest and most controversial legal case in history as 30,000 indigenous Ecuadorians sue Chevron oil company for the environmental and public health disaster caused by multiple oil spills at drilling sites in the Amazon rainforest.

ONLINE RESOURCES DISCOVER MORE INFORMATION ON THE WEB ABOUT THIS FILM AND RELATED TOPICS.

If God Is Willing And Da Creek Don't Rise:

www.hbo.com/documentaries/if-god-is-willing-and-da-creek-dont-rise/index.html

Official film website featuring a video interview with director Spike Lee and additional information on how to take action.

Bridge the Gulf Project

www.bridgethegulfproject.org

A storytelling project that is run by activists, filmmakers, and artists to promote cultural survival, environmental justice and sustainable development in Gulf Coast communities.

Make It Right Foundation

www.makeitrightnola.org

Founded by Brad Pitt, this nonprofit organization works to help to return former residents of the Lower 9th Ward in New Orleans to their community.

Restore the Gulf

www.restorethegulf.gov

The official federal website for the Deepwater BP oil spill response and recovery. This site provides the public with information on the response, current operations, news and updates.

GET INVOLVED

Speak Out: Urge your local representative to support efforts to restore the ecosystems in Coastal Louisiana. Protecting the region's natural habitat is key to the survival of the people and wildlife that depend upon it. Check out www.audubonaction.org for details.

Donate: Launch a "Pennies for the Planet" campaign at your school and help save and protect birds and wild life all along the gulf coast who have been threatened do to the BP oil spill. Visit www.togethergreen.org for information on how to get started.

Volunteer: Help improve NYC's habitat by joining the New York Restoration Project's (NYRP) Volunteer Corps at www.nyrp.org.

ABOUT TRIBECA YOUTH SCREENING SERIES

This program provides NYC public school students and teachers with access to free, educationally-relevant and challenging films. Each screening is followed by a Q&A, study guides and supplemental educator materials are provided, and teachers are strongly encouraged to utilize films as part of their curriculum. This monthly-series strives to expose New York City students to independent films and help educators and students incorporate film-viewing into their classroom work. For more information about TFI's youth programs, please visit www.tribecafilminstitute.org/youth or email youth@tribecafilminstitute.org

ABOUT HBO DOCUMENTARIES

Whether measured by awards, critical acclaim, subscribers, profitability or viewers, Home Box Office, Inc. is America's most successful premium television network and home to two 24-hour premium television services—HBO® and Cinemax®. Together, both networks reach over 40 million subscribers in the United States via cable and satellite delivery. In the documentary area, HBO Documentary Films is consistently at the forefront of programming, producing and developing some of the most provocative, ground-breaking and award-winning films. HBO Documentary Films focus on contemporary issues, allowing viewers entry to worlds rarely seen. These films have won virtually every major programming award including the Academy Award®, the Emmy® Award, the George Foster Peabody Award, and the Alfred I. DuPont-Columbia University Award.

Program support provided by:



Honorable Melissa Mark-Viverito,
New York City Council

Honorable Scott M. Stringer,
Manhattan Borough President



The Tribeca Film Institute (TFI) is a year-round nonprofit arts organization that empowers working filmmakers through grants, professional development and resources, while also helping New York City students discover independent film and filmmaking.



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EDUCATORS' SUPPLEMENT

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FOR TEACHERS

THEMES

Five years after Hurricane Katrina, Spike Lee returns to New Orleans to find a city riddled with contradictions as massive development initiatives and political restructuring are simultaneously rebuilding the city and threatening the survival of its communities and culture. With a focus on the civic collapse that preceded Katrina, the devastation from the levee failures following the storm, and most recently, the unrivaled environmental devastation from the BP oil disaster, *If God is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise* examines the rights and responsibilities that governments, corporations and individuals have in protecting our communities and safeguarding our natural resources.

The film explores the following themes, which were drawn from the NYC Scope and Sequence for High School Science and Global History & Geography:

Geography

Economics

Civic Ideas and Practices

Individuals, Groups and Institutions

Earth Science/Geology/Ecology

Sustainability

WHY WE PICKED THIS MOVIE

Film is a powerful medium that can inform, entertain, educate and serve as a catalyst for social change. This season, the Tribeca Youth Screening Series is focusing on documentaries that have aired on HBO, a company with a strong history of creating films that tackle the most critical, and at times controversial, social issues of our times. Films such as *If God is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise* have been chosen not only for their educational relevance, but also for their cinematic merits, and provide students with access to documentary films, filmmakers, and subject matter not typically explored in mainstream Hollywood fare. In the process, they are introduced to new places and ideas, and experience innovative approaches to storytelling that highlight and reinforce the skills and themes they are studying in their Social Studies, Earth Science and English Language Arts classes.

PREPARING YOUR CLASS

Preparing students to be critical viewers is different than simply having them watch a film. Critical viewing is about being able to examine the information that a film is giving you and ask meaningful questions about the information that you receive. One key step is having students read and complete the activities in the Study Guide (which they will receive at the screening.) The following pre-screening activities will help your students engage with the film as critical viewers and prepare them to be active participants at the screening event and in the classroom work you do surrounding the film.



PRE-SCREENING ACTIVITIES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In preparation for viewing the film, you can have your students discuss some of the following questions:

- What do you think of when you think of New Orleans? What images come to mind? What do you think life is like there now?
- Do you remember Hurricane Katrina? What do you know about it? Did it impact your life?
- Why do you think New Orleans and its citizens were not better prepared for the arrival of Hurricane Katrina? Do you think the response of the local and national governments was successful? Why or why not?
- What is a refugee? Where have you heard that term used before? Do you think there are American refugees within the United States? Can you give examples?
- Do you think the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina reveals anything about who we are as Americans? Do you think that event changed the United States? In what ways?
- What is the role of the government in managing a natural disaster or environmental crisis? How did President Bush and President Obama handle the issues in New Orleans differently? What would you do if you were president?
- What is a documentary film? How does it differ from a narrative film? If a film is a documentary, does that mean that it is depicting the “truth”?
- How are film and activism connected? Does film have the potential to make change? As a filmmaker, what are the challenges inherent in trying to move your audience to take action?

RESEARCH IN ADVANCE

Goal: To help your students prepare to view *If God Is Willing And Da Creek Don't Rise* by having them research and review key terms and film vocabulary. Helpful background information on these technical terms can be found on the following websites:

- www.teachingthelevees.org
- www.restorethegulf.gov

Time: 30-60 minutes

KEY TERMS

Levee
Breach
Sea Level
Parish
9th Ward
Neutral Ground
Refugee
Diaspora
FEMA
Army Corps of Engineers
Off Shore Drilling
Deep Water Horizon
Oil Rig
Barrel of Oil
Wetlands
Ecosystem

FILM VOCABULARY

Documentary Film
Narrative Film
Director
Editing
Score
Point of View
Archive Footage

PRE-SCREENING ACTIVITIES

MANY VOICES, ONE STORY: GROUP POEMS

Goal: Spike Lee brings together many stories to create an oral history of the aftermath of Katrina and the BP Oil Spill, highlighting the vital role that spoken word poetry plays in the culture of New Orleans by raising awareness and bringing people together. The following exercise will help students develop brief personal poems and work as a team to weave them together into a collective story. For your reference, a glossary of poetic devices is available at: www.poets.org

Time: 45-60 minutes

- Introduce the students to the concept of a group poem and explain that they will each write four lines of poetry that will be joined with the work of other students and presented to the class as a collective poem.
- Review the concepts of simile, metaphor, refrain and stanza with the students and work as a class to brainstorm some examples of where we find these creative elements in literature, popular culture and music.
- Working individually, have the students write four lines using the prompts below. Encourage them to be creative and use vivid imagery.
 1. I am the person who _____ (What do you do or think that defines you in a positive way?)
 2. I am (like) _____ (What metaphor or simile illustrates your defining trait? Be creative.)
 3. Who dreams of _____ (What dreams do you have?)
 4. So I can _____ (How do you want your gifts and dreams to strengthen or improve your community?)
- Divide the class into teams of three to five students and have them develop a one-sentence refrain for the group using the following prompt:

As one voice we are _____ (What simile or metaphor describes your team's identity?)
and together we can _____ (What can you accomplish when you come together that you can't accomplish alone?)
- Once the teams have developed their refrain, have them join together their individual poems to create one collective poem. The students can repeat the refrain between each individual poem or vary the order based on their team's creative vision. Students can also add additional elements such as choreography, beat-boxing, singing, and call and response.
- Once the poems are complete, each team will perform the poem as a group for the class as a spoken word performance or in the style of a poetry-slam competition.

CROSSWORD BRAINSTORMING ACTIVITY

Goal: Thinking about what they expect to see in a film can help to actively engage young audiences in the viewing experience. Through the following activity, students will brainstorm words and ideas that they expect to encounter in *If God Is Willing And Da Creek Don't Rise*.

Time: 20-30 minutes

You will need: Kraft paper and markers or pen and paper.

- Divide the class into teams of three to five students and give each team a sheet of kraft paper. (If kraft paper is not available, the activity can be carried out on a white board or with pen and paper.)
- Have the teams write the phrase "Hurricane Katrina" in large letters across the sheet of kraft paper.
- Using the style of a crossword puzzle or scrabble, students have five minutes to come up with as many words as they can think of that relate to the subject of Hurricane Katrina and that have a letter that corresponds to a letter in the phrase. They can also build off of the new words they have added.
- When time is up, the team with the largest number of accurate words wins.
- You can then repeat the exercise using the phrase "BP Oil Spill" or "Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill".
- Ask the students to keep the results from the crossword activity in mind when they watch the film.
- When the class returns from the screening, revisit the crosswords results and discuss how their prior knowledge about Hurricane Katrina and the BP Oil Spill compares to what they learned through watching the film.

POST-SCREENING LESSON PLAN OPTIONS

EPISTOLARY POETRY: AN OPEN LETTER TO THE PEOPLE OF NEW ORLEANS

OBJECTIVE

This activity is designed to engage students as active audience members, critical viewers and storytellers. Through the medium of epistolary poetry, students will explore the themes of *If God Is Willing And Da Creek Don't Rise* and will be challenged to imagine the personal experiences of the citizens of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the BP Oil Spill. Students will be able to:

- Identify and understand the themes and messages of the film
- Engage with the film's material as critical viewers
- Understand the role of poetry as a story-telling device
- Write and present an Epistolary Poem

Time: 60-90 minutes

MATERIALS

You will need: writing paper and *If God Is Willing And Da Creek Don't Rise* Study Guide
On-line resources can be found at the following websites:

- Teacher's College Curriculum, *Teaching the Levees*: www.teachingthelevees.org
- Epistolary Poetry FAQ: <http://www.tabayag.com/epistolary-poetry/epistolary-poetry-faq>
- PBS Poetry Extra: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/economy/jan-june06/poetry_4-10.html
- Poetry Resource Page (including a bibliography of epistolary poems): <http://www.poetryresourcepage.com/teach/epassignment.html>

PREPARE

When possible, introduce the ***Pre-Screening Activities: Discussion Questions*** and ***Many Voices, One Story: Group Poems*** before the class attends the screening. These activities will prepare the students for the poetry lesson and will provide the jumping-off point for further discussions.

OUTLINE

1. Review

- Begin by discussing the screening of *If God Is Willing And Da Creek Don't Rise* and the students' experience of the film.
- Ask a volunteer to provide a brief summary of the film for the class.
- Revisit the ***Discussion Questions*** listed above and the ***Critical Viewing Reflection*** from the Study Guide, and examine how their expectations about the film compare to what they actually experienced and learned at the screening.
- Discuss the role that poetry and poets played in the film and reflect on the following questions:
 - Why do you think Spike Lee chose to feature poets in a documentary film?
 - What does a poem tell or show the audience? How is that different from what we learn in a regular interview? What do you remember from the poems?
 - Other than the poets themselves, in what way is the style of this film poetic?
 - Who do you think the poets were talking to in their poems? Who was their audience? What were they hoping to accomplish by writing and performing these poems?

POST-SCREENING LESSON PLAN OPTIONS

2. Introduction: What is an Epistolary Poem?

- Explain to the students that they will each write an epistolary poem—a poem written in the style of a letter.
- Provide students with the following brief summary of epistolary poetry:
The word “epistle” comes from the Latin for “letter” and epistolary poetry traces back almost 2000 years. Epistolary poems are still popular today in a variety of poetry styles, including hip-hop and spoken word poetry. While there are many possible variations, there are several standard characteristics of epistolary poems:
 - They are written in the first person and are addressed to a specific person or group.
 - They are personal and provide insight into the thoughts of the writer.
 - They have a sense of urgency. The speaker needs to convey something important or cause something to happen.
 - The reader should have the experience that they are eavesdropping on a private conversation.
- Introduce or review poetry vocabulary such as form, stanza, simile, metaphor, imagery and tone, and work as a class to brainstorm where we find examples of these creative elements in literature, popular culture and music.

3. Writing Activity: An Open Letter to the People of New Orleans

Students will each imagine that they are a character from the film and write a one-page epistolary poem to another person or group of people from the film. For example:

- From: A pelican in the Gulf Coast
To: A BP Oil Company Executive
- From: A real estate developer who is building new apartment complexes in New Orleans
To: A resident of a public housing project that was torn down after the hurricane.

Each letter poem will be 5 stanzas long and each stanza will have 5 lines. The poems should be specific and detailed and students should use techniques such as metaphor and simile to make the imagery more vivid and compelling. Each of the five stanzas will address the following:

- **Stanza 1** - Introduction: Who are you and who are you writing to?
- **Stanza 2** - What is happening in your life that inspired you to write this letter?
- **Stanza 3** - What is your relationship to the person/people you are writing to? What impact have they had on your life? What impact have you had on their lives?
- **Stanza 4** - What do you need the recipient to understand? What do you want them to do?
- **Stanza 5** - Conclusion: What do you think or hope will happen next? How will this situation turn out?

The class can present their poems as a spoken word performance or as part of a poetry slam. The poems can also be collected into a chapbook, published on a school blog and displayed in the school with a description of the project.

4. Reflection

Discuss the impact that the film and the activity had on the students’ understanding of Hurricane Katrina and the BP Oil Spill and the people whose lives have been touched by these tragedies. Also take time to review how the process may have changed the students’ opinion of their own creative skills. Did they think of themselves as poets before the activity? How about after they finished their poems? Do they think poetry can have an impact on the way we understand major world events? In what ways?

GOING FURTHER

These writing activities are meant to serve as a follow-up to the Pre-Screening Activities and the Lesson Plan. Assignments can be used as in-class writing activities, homework assignments, or the jumping off point for longer-term art, creative writing, or research projects.

GET INVOLVED

Speak Out: Urge your local representative to support efforts to restore the ecosystems in Coastal Louisiana. Protecting the region's natural habitat is key to the survival of the people and wildlife that depend upon it. Check out www.audubonaction.org for details.

Donate: Launch a "Pennies for the Planet" campaign at your school and help save and protect birds and wild life all along the gulf coast who have been threatened do to the BP oil spill. Visit www.togethergreen.org for information on how to get started.

Organize: Help improve NYC's habitat by joining the New York Restoration Project's (NYRP) Volunteer Corps at www.nyrp.org.



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We'd love to know how you are using these study guides in the classroom!
Email youth@tribecafilminstitute.org to share lesson plans and ideas.