

The Learning Network

Teaching & Learning With The New York Times



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Altered States: Reflecting on State Medical Marijuana Laws

By SHANNON DOYNE AND HOLLY EPSTEIN OJALVO

Overview | What are the ramifications of the legalization of marijuana for medical purposes? In this lesson, students consider the issues related to the use of medical marijuana in the thirteen states where it is legal. They research relevant issues and then have a panel discussion about their own state's medicinal marijuana laws.

Materials | Index cards or strips of paper, computers with Internet access and projector, research materials

Note to teachers: This lesson is about a potentially thorny and polarizing issue: the decriminalization of marijuana for medicinal purposes in thirteen states, and the federal government's recent [decision](#) to no longer prosecute people who use and distribute marijuana legally in those states.

Prior to starting the lesson, to help students stay on task, you may want to establish certain "givens" such as the fact that recreational marijuana use by people who do not have prescriptions is still illegal in all states and at the federal level. Depending on your students' maturity level and the dynamics in to your classroom, you may also wish to establish ground rules to ensure that discussions stay respectful and productive.

This lesson is designed as an interdisciplinary inquiry-based activity in which students choose or are assigned a social, legal, behavioral, economic or ethical issue related to medicinal marijuana to research. Adapt and focus the lesson as needed to suit your curriculum. For example, for a health/science focus, you may want to draw from the Learning Network lessons [Substance Use or Abuse?](#) and [Constant Craving](#).

We invite you to use the comment box below to share with us, and your teaching colleagues who also use this blog, your experiences teaching about medical marijuana.

Warm-up | Distribute copies of the [K/W/L](#) graphic organizer to students. Ask them to write in one or two of the boxes in the K column what they know, or think they know, about medicinal marijuana. Then have them write one or more questions that express what they want to know about it in the W column. To help them get started, you might ask: Which states allow medicinal marijuana? For what conditions is it prescribed?

Distribute an index card or strip of paper to each student. Have them write one of their "I know or think I know" statements and one "what I want to know" questions. Tell them not to write their names. Collect the cards/strips and share the statements and questions with the group. On the board, create a



Monica Almeida/The New York Times

[Go to related Room for Debate post »](#)

Lesson Plan

CIVICS
Teaching ideas based on New York Times content.

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About The Learning Network

The Learning Network provides teaching and learning materials and ideas based on New York Times content. Teachers can use or adapt our lessons across subject areas and levels. Students aged 13 and older can respond to our opinion questions, take our quizzes and learn our Word of the Day.

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Comments of the Moment

" I find the Sly [Cooper] games more interesting because I can be a master thief and not break the laws. "

— Ryan

running list of students' W column questions; you might want to create a class-wide K/W/L chart using our sheet on a SmartBoard or a large sheet of chart paper.

Tell students they will continue to add to their K and W columns as they watch the Times video "The Marijuana State." Encourage students to write down anything that seems important or surprising and to make any necessary corrections to their K columns. (You may want to introduce or review key terms, such as dispensary or cannabis, as defined in a reputable source, such as HowStuffWorks.com.)

When the video ends, give students time to reread what they have written and finish their W column questions. Have students share what they have written in both columns. If students are reluctant to share, ask such questions as these: How long has medical marijuana been legal in California? How do patients obtain it? What loopholes seem to exist in California state laws? How has the state benefitted economically from the legalization of medical marijuana? etc. Accordingly, make adjustments to the class chart to ensure that all information in the K column is correct before proceeding.

Ask: What other issues arise from the legalization of medical marijuana at the state level? If necessary, you may wish to prompt students to ponder issues related to health and safety, ethics, regulation, and so on.

Related | The introduction to the October 19, 2009 post "[A New Course on Medicinal Marijuana?](#)" on the Room for Debate blog states that:

The Justice Department announced on Monday that federal drug agents will no longer arrest or prosecute people who are legally using, selling or supplying medical marijuana in the states that allow it.

"It will not be a priority to use federal resources to prosecute patients with serious illnesses or their caregivers who are complying with state laws on medical marijuana," Attorney General Eric Holder said in a statement when he released the new guidelines. But, Mr. Holder said, "we will not tolerate drug traffickers who hide behind claims of compliance with state law to mask activities that are clearly illegal."

In this feature, six experts debate the significance of this change in federal drug policy and what it will mean for local and state law enforcement.

Read the entire feature with your class, using the questions below.

Questions | For discussion and reading comprehension:

1. Why does Tom Riley believe the new ruling will lead to confusion regarding the federal government's role in enforcing drug laws?
2. How does Richard N. Van Wickler think the war on drugs in America is going? Does he think the new federal ruling will help or hurt efforts to reduce crime?
3. What alternative to marijuana use does Henry I. Miller recommend for patients? Why?
4. What does Joseph D. McNamara believe is at risk when people are prosecuted for marijuana-related offenses?
5. What does Susan Manheimer say is California's biggest law enforcement challenge regarding medicinal marijuana?

Activity | Give students a few minutes to reflect on the article, adding to the K and W columns of their K/W/L charts. Have them look closely at their completed W columns and generate more ideas about the issues that arise from the legalization of marijuana for medical purposes. As a class, generate a

RELATED RESOURCES
FROM THE LEARNING NETWORK

- [Lesson: A Test Case for Individual Rights](#)
- [Lesson: Fighting Fire with Fire](#)

FROM NYTIMES.COM

- [Times Topics: Marijuana and Medical Marijuana](#)
- [Article: "Medical Marijuana: No Longer](#)

What Are Your Favorite Video Games?

"Sorry, but all the endorsement money he gets to induce people to buy products doesn't give him the right to the level of privacy he is demanding. He is no longer a positive role model for children, especially those of meager means. The age of the internet is neither forgiving or forgetful."

— Al
[Why Do We Care About the Tiger Woods Story?](#)

"People y'all really need to be healthy and active; don't go inside and play soccer on the wii. You have to feel the sweat on the forehead, the grass as you fall, and the feeling of making the ball rip through the net. Go outside"

— Miguel
[Do You Suffer From 'Nature Deficit Disorder'?](#)

"I guess I have constantly thought about myself, and myself only, not considering that others are in need more than me. I strongly encourage everyone who is like me (someone who does not do much giving), to make a turn around in their life and give back."

— Christopher
[Have You Had 'Helper's High'?](#)

"Artists like the Flobots, Owl City and Panic! At The Disco who don't sing the standard radio songs like "Oh I'm so heart broken blah blah blah" or "Oh yeah look at my bling! I got so much money in da bank and so many women! Yada yada yada" I cant stand songs like this, but the good ones almost make up for them. Almost."

— Savannah
[Is the Music You Listen to Dull?](#)

"I think that the current music in America in very dull. Rarely do they have any message. Whenever I turned on the radio, songs sound the same to me. Now uniformed rhythms unpleasantly visit my ear and gladly depart. You hear very often songs about sex and cash."

— Mireya
[Is the Music You Listen to Dull?](#)

"Honestly, I think that giving for health benefits is not in any way altruistic. You're not doing it because it helps someone else, you're doing it because it helps you. That seems pretty selfish to me."

— Iva
[Have You Had 'Helper's High'?](#)

"It can be as easy as saying 'Good Morning' to the security guards as you walk into school. What I have always wanted to try was writing little notes saying things like "have a good day", "Just saying hi" to brighten up someone's day. I do admit that I can be selfish sometimes, like not wanting to give up the TV so my brother can watch..."

— R.Z.R
[Have You Had 'Helper's High'?](#)

Archive

Select Month

list of topics, which may include some or all of the following:

- Age minimums for medical marijuana prescriptions and use
- Psychological and chemical dependence
- Marijuana as a “gateway” to other drugs
- Safety and dangers, such as driving under the influence of marijuana
- Social problems, such as “grow houses” in neighborhoods, users’ decreased productivity, etc.
- Medical risks vs. health benefits
- Legal loopholes and abuse of the law; law enforcement
- Lack of [FDA](#) approval; regulation, labeling and safety
- Tax revenues, job creation and other economic ramifications

- Just for Adults”
 - Slide Show: “Cannabis 101”
- AROUND THE WEB
- Time: “A Brief History of Medical Marijuana”
 - U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration
 - ProCon.org: Medical Marijuana

Have students turn each topic into one or more questions. For example, “medical risks vs. health benefits” can generate such questions as these: “What are the health hazards associated with marijuana use?” “What are the documented medicinal benefits of marijuana use?” “For what medical conditions is the drug prescribed?” “What research is being done on the health benefits and risks of marijuana use?”

Have pairs or small groups of students choose one of these questions to research; encourage students to let their research topics and questions narrow to greater specificity as they work. Direct students to begin with [Times Topics: Marijuana and Medical Marijuana](#) or Procon.org’s “[Should Marijuana Be a Medical Issue?](#)” They should also use classroom and library resources in addition to Web sites.

Review, if necessary, strategies for gauging the reliability of information on Web sites; recommend that students check the sources of all information and that they double-check anything they learn from the literature of advocacy groups. Relevant Learning Network lesson plans include [Topics of The Times](#), [Is the Internet a Web of Deceit?](#) and [Searching With Certainty](#).

When research is complete, have students present their research to the class. You may also assign a written report to be turned in after the presentations or have the class create a collaborative resource, such as a wiki, for information-sharing. During the information session, listeners should complete the L column with information they learned from their classmates’ presentations.

Close with a reflective discussion about the ethical, legal, health and scientific, civic and other issues and questions associated with medical marijuana. Ask: What did you learn that surprised you? What questions and concerns do you still have? Alternatively, have students submit their reflections anonymously on index cards or paper strips to be read aloud.

Going further | Students use what they have learned to inform an evaluation of [your state’s laws regarding medicinal marijuana](#). After reviewing the state’s laws, they should write a statement explaining why they agree or disagree with the current laws and arguing for them to be retained or changed, drawing on research to make their arguments.

When students have finished, place them in two groups, *State Law Should Remain Unchanged* and *State Law Should Be Changed*, based on the statements that they wrote.

Lead a panel discussion, encouraging all students to share their views and make their arguments. You may wish to provide students with a copy of our [Debatable Issues](#) handout (PDF) to track the points made during the discussion.

Be sure to probe for nuances and specifics during the discussion; for example, a student arguing for legalization of medical marijuana should be prompted to talk about how loose or restrictive the laws should be, perhaps referring to California law for point of reference.

Recent Posts

- December 04 **Altered States: Reflecting on State Medical Marijuana Laws**
Lesson Plan | Considering issues related to the legalization of medical marijuana in some states.
- December 04 **Teenage Musings on a New Life**
The “One in 8 Million” series profiles a 14-year-old who recently moved to New York City to live with his father.
- December 04 **What Are Your Favorite Video Games?**
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- December 04 **News Quiz | December 4, 2009**
See what you know about the news of the day.
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Bring the discussion to a close by asking for final statements from both camps.

Standards | From [McREL](#), for grades 6-12:

Civics

1. Understands ideas about civic life, politics, and government
3. Understands the sources, purposes, and functions of law, and the importance of the rule of law for the protection of individual rights and the common good
15. Understands how the United States Constitution grants and distributes power and responsibilities to national and state government and how it seeks to prevent the abuse of power
21. Understands the formation and implementation of public policy
25. Understands issues regarding personal, political, and economic rights

Health

2. Knows environmental and external factors that affect individual and community health
8. Knows essential concepts about the prevention and control of diseases
9. Understands aspects of substance use and abuse

Language Arts

1. Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process
2. Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing
3. Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions
4. Gathers and use information for research purposes
5. Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process
7. Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational text
8. Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes
9. Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media

Thinking and Reasoning

1. Understands and applies the basic principles of presenting an argument
3. Effectively uses mental processes that are based on identifying similarities and differences
6. Applies decision-making techniques

Working With Others

- 1 - Contributes to the overall effort of a group
- 4 - Displays effective interpersonal communication skills

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