

The Universe of Obligation

The Universe of Obligation

Rationale/Objective: Students will explore the circle of individuals whom they feel responsible to protect, reflect upon the concept of “social responsibility”, and discuss how we can begin to expand our own “universes” to include others.

Materials: Universe of Obligation worksheet

Duration/Length of Lesson: 45- 90 mins

ENGAGE

Share the term “Universe of Obligation” with students and ask them to discuss what the meaning of the term might be. The “Universe of Obligation,” a term coined by sociologist Helen Fein, is a concept used to describe the circle of people whom we feel responsible to protect and care for – individuals whom we should offer help and assistance to during a time of need or when they find themselves in danger.

EXPLORE

Ask students to consider who is in their “Universe of Obligation” (family, friends, neighbors, classmates, teammates, etc.) by having them complete the “Universe of Obligation” worksheet, (see attached chart). Lead a class discussion and have students share who they included and who was left out of their Universe of Obligation.

EXPLAIN

Ask students to consider the following questions: (Think, Pair, Share or Whole Group Discussion)
What factors influence the extent to which we feel an obligation to help others? How does the way we view others influence our feelings of responsibility toward them?

In what ways might an individual show others who is part of their universe of obligation and who is not?

Under what conditions might your universe of responsibility shift?

What is the difference between an individual’s universe of obligation and that of a school, community, or country?

What factors influence the way a society defines its universe of obligation? In what ways might a nation or community signal who is part of its universe of obligation and who is not?

What do you think might be some of the consequences for those who are not within a society’s universe of obligation?

In the 1800s, sociologist William Graham Sumner wrote, “Every man and woman in society has one big duty. That is, to take care of his or her own self.” Do you agree with Sumner? Why or why not?

The Universe of Obligation

ELABORATE

If students are reading “The Hiding Place” or have seen the stage performance, discuss how the Ten Boom family defined their “Universe of Obligation”. How did they put their beliefs into practice?

EVALUATE

Have students reflect on the idea of “social responsibility.” Do we have a responsibility to protect and care for every member of society? What would a society that embodies the principle of “social responsibility” look like? What changes would occur? Have students brainstorm actions they can take to expand their universes to include others.