



OCTOBER 11, 2011, 3:44 PM

Who Are the 99%? Ways to Teach About Occupy Wall Street

By *SARAH KAVANAGH, HOLLY EPSTEIN OJALVO and KATHERINE SCHULTEN*

Michael Appleton for The New York Times On Columbus Day, students from Central Park East I and II schools joined the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations in Zuccotti Park. [Go to related post on City Room »](#) | [Go to related Times Topics page »](#)

Overview | Why are protesters occupying Wall Street? What are they protesting, and what are their goals? In this lesson, students are introduced to Occupy Wall Street and then investigate the movement more deeply.

Warm-Up | Provide students with the following six slogans that have been displayed on placards during demonstrations being staged as part of a political movement. (At this point, do not identify the movement; you may also want to obscure the fact that the movement is contemporary.) Invite the class to guess which movement the placards are from.

Slogans:

“Democracy Not Corporatization”

“End the Oligarchy”

“Human Need Not Corporate Greed”

“Jobs, Justice and Education”

“Save the American Dream”

“We are the 99%”

Elicit or reveal that the slogans have been displayed at a series of protests called Occupy Wall Street.

Alternatively or additionally, have the class take the Opinionator blog’s [Occupy Wall Street quiz](#). And if desired, show [photographs](#) and/or video (above) of protests in downtown Manhattan and elsewhere around the country. Invite students to share their impressions.

Ask: Based on what you may have heard and on these slogans, what do you think the activists are protesting? What do you think they care about and want? If desired, note that the protesters and their adherents [oppose corporate greed, social inequity and other](#)

Current Events

Teaching ideas based on New York Times content.

- [See all in Current Events](#)
»
- [See all lesson plans »](#)

disparities between rich and poor. What other movements and protests does this one remind you of, and why?

Related | Students read the [Times Topics page](#) overview of the Occupy Wall Street protests focusing on the following questions:

Occupy Wall Street is a diffuse group of activists who say they stand against corporate greed, social inequality and other disparities between rich and poor. On Sept. 17, 2011, the group began a loosely organized protest in New York's financial district, encamping in Zuccotti Park, a privately owned park open to the public, in Lower Manhattan.

The idea, according to some organizers, was to camp out for weeks or even months to replicate the kind, if not the scale, of protests that had erupted earlier in 2011 in places as varied as Egypt, Spain and Israel.

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

Questions | For discussion and reading comprehension:

- Do you think that there is a central message of protestors at Occupy Wall Street? If so, what would you say it is? What leads you to believe that this is the central message? If you think that there is no one central message, what do you think is holding these protestors together?
- From what you have read, what would you classify as the most important events of the protests thus far? Why do you think these events were the most important?
- How would you characterize the police response to the protests? Do you think that the police overreacted or enacted an appropriate response? Defend your position.
- What more do you want to know about these protests?
- Would you consider joining these protests? Why or why not?

Activity | The following activities approach the Occupy Wall Street movement from a variety of angles. Choose the activity or activity set that best aligns with your curricular goals.

Investigate the History of the Protests: Read about the [history of the protests](#). What [sparked](#) the first protest? [When and where did it begin](#)? How has it [changed](#) over time? What has remained the same? What controversies have arisen? What helped the protests [grow](#) and [spread](#)? What [organizations](#) have gotten involved? How is the movement different now than when it first started? How is it continuing to evolve? Create a paper or interactive timeline illustrating important events that sparked, changed or grew the movement, then analyze the movement's development.

RELATED RESOURCES From The Learning Network

- [Lesson: The Life of the \(Tea\) Party: Comparing Social Protest Movements](#)
- [Student Opinion: Will the Millennial Generation Achieve the American Dream?](#)
- [Student Opinion: How Do You Define Wealthy?](#)

From NYTimes.com

- [Times Topics: Occupy Wall Street](#)
- [Room for Debate: Is It Effective to Occupy Wall Street?](#)
- [Interactive: What's Your Economic Outlook?](#)

Around the Web

- [Occupy Wall Street](#)
- [We Are the 99 Percent](#)
- [Adbusters: Occupy Wall Street](#)

Debate the Movement's Potential: Examine [different opinions](#) on whether the Occupy Wall Street protests could help bring about political and economic change. Use our [Debatable Issues](#) graphic organizer (PDF) to keep track of arguments. Hold a [debate](#) over the protest's potential.

Compare Occupy Wall Street With Other Movements: Two major American political and economic movements today are Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party. Is Occupy Wall Street [the left's answer to the Tea Party](#)? Or does it have a [long way to go](#) before it gains that kind of legitimacy and power? Find out similarities and differences exist between the two movements, and between these movements and past [social protest movements](#) in United States history. Or, to broaden the perspective, compare Occupy Wall Street with social movements around the world, like the [Arab Spring](#) and the [anti-austerity protests in Greece](#), taking into consideration [how the world sees Occupy Wall Street](#).

Connect the Protests to the Economy: What are the [facts and figures](#) underlying Occupy Wall Street's focus on the top 1 percent of the economy? What economic conditions helped give rise to the movement? What is the government doing to [stimulate job growth](#) and address [declining incomes](#)? How do Americans [feel about the economy overall](#)? Choose a specific data set related to the economy and see whether it can be traced in some way to the rhetoric and goals of Occupy Wall Street. If you were participating in the protests, how would you use that data to make a point? If you were a politician wanting to address that issue, how would you do it? If desired, register where you fall on the interactive feature ["What's Your Economic Outlook?"](#)

Place the Movement Along the Political Continuum: Many Occupy Wall Street participants have identified themselves as neither Democrat nor Republican; some call themselves anarchists. Where do the ideas and ideals fall on the political spectrum? How are politicians [responding](#)? How might the movement [start to affect political rhetoric and the 2012 presidential race](#)? Write two political speeches designed to address the movement, one from the right and the other from the left.

Investigate the Role of Digital Tools: What role has [social media](#) played in organizing the Occupy Wall Street protests? How do the approaches taken by the Wall Street occupiers compare to those of other movements, like protests that sparked the [Arab Spring](#), and the [London Riots](#)? Look at how organizers and supporters have used [Pastebin](#), [Storify](#), [Twitter](#), [Tumblr](#), [Meetup](#) and other digital tools, along with some [more traditional means of disseminating information](#). How is social media changing the way that the movement is documented, defined, organized and discussed? Create an infographic or interactive presentation that illustrates how social media has been used in this grassroots movement as a tool to [organize, define and amplify](#) it.

Brand the Movement: Examine the [Occupy Wall Street logos](#) that some graphic designers have created. Discuss whether or not you think that the Occupy Wall Street

protests should have an official logo. What messages do each of the logos in the Times feature convey? Which logo best aligns with the movement itself? **Create your own logo** for the movement and write a paragraph about how you think it represents the Occupy Wall Street protests.

Consider Law Enforcement: Examine how the police response to the Occupy Wall Street protests has **fueled the movement's spread**. Watch the **video** of a peaceful protester being pepper sprayed. Discuss how this image might influence the public's perception of the protesters. Read about how **police responses to protests** in the past have shaped public opinion as well as influenced protesters' resolve. Write a letter to New York's police commissioner or mayor describing what you believe is the role of the police and local government during **peaceful protests**, drawing on current and historical examples taken from news coverage. What steps should law enforcement take if the protests **turn violent**?

Investigate the Local Impact of a Major Protest: Examine **the map of Lower Manhattan** that shows how protesters turned Zuccotti Park into a protest camp. How large is the space? How large are the crowds? What needs do they have – food, shelter, etc. – and how are they meeting those needs in public spaces? What issues are arising as a result? What is it like to **work and live** in an area “occupied” by a protest? Analyze local impact in various terms, including business, residents, sanitation and other costs, and so on.

Occupy Wall Street, Local Edition: The Occupy Wall Street protests have begun occurring in **cities** and campuses across the country. Find out whether anyone is involved **in your community** . If the movement has spread to your town or a nearby city, read local coverage of the protests and, if possible, interview one or more participants. If there are any counter-protesters, interview them as well. Write an article for your school newspaper about how the Occupy Wall Street protests are playing out in your community.

Going Further | Students continue to **track** the Occupy Wall Street story and how it evolves as well as how it is covered in The New York Times and other news outlets.

Standards | This lesson is correlated to **McREL's national standards** (it can also be aligned to the new **Common Core State Standards**):

Behavioral Studies

1. Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity and behavior.
2. Understands various meanings of social group, general implications of group membership and different ways that groups function.
4. Understands conflict, cooperation, and interdependence among individuals, groups and institutions.

Technology

3. Understands the relationships among science, technology, society, and the individual.

Economics

1. Understands that scarcity of productive resources requires choices that generate opportunity costs.
2. Understands characteristics of different economic systems, economic institutions, and economic incentives.
3. Understands the concept of prices and the interaction of supply and demand in a market economy.
4. Understands basic features of market structures and exchanges.
5. Understands unemployment, income, and income distribution in a market economy.
6. Understands the roles government plays in the United States economy.
7. Understands savings, investment and interest rates.
8. Understands basic concepts of United States fiscal policy and monetary policy.
9. Understands how Gross Domestic Product and inflation and deflation provide indications of the state of the economy.

United States History

31. Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.