The Role of Dissent in a Democracy: Lessons from Kent State University

We must protest against injustices and use our voices to speak out when we disagree with what’s happening. As we learn to speak our truth, even in the face of danger and opposition, we bring change and harmony. ~ Laurie Krause

Overview
On May 4, 1970, 13 college students protesting on the campus of Kent State University were shot by the Ohio National Guard. The shooting spawned hundreds of protests by youth across the country and America became further divided on the already socially contentious issue of the Vietnam War. In this lesson, students will explore the role of dissent in a democracy as they learn about this time period and the events surrounding the 1970 Kent State shootings.

Grade
11

North Carolina Essential Standards for American History II
• AH2.H.1.1- Use chronological thinking...
• AH2.H.1.2- Use Historical Comprehension to:
• AH2.H.1.3- Use historical analysis and interpretation...
• AH2.H.1.4- Use historical research...
• AH2.H.2.1 - Analyze key political, economic, and social turning points since the end of Reconstruction in terms of causes and effects (e.g., conflicts, legislation, elections, innovations, leadership, movements, Supreme Court decisions, etc.).
• AH2.H.2.2 - Evaluate key turning points since the end of Reconstruction in terms of their lasting impact (e.g., conflicts, legislation, elections, innovations, leadership, movements, Supreme Court decisions, etc.).
• AH2.H.4.1 - Analyze the political issues and conflicts that impacted the United States since Reconstruction and the compromises that resulted (e.g., Populism, Progressivism, working conditions and labor unrest, New Deal, Wilmington Race Riots, Eugenics, Civil Rights Movement, Anti-War protests, Watergate, etc.).
• AH2.H.4.3 - Analyze the social and religious conflicts, movements and reforms that impacted the United States since Reconstruction in terms of participants, strategies, opposition, and results (e.g., Prohibition, Social Darwinism, Eugenics, civil rights, anti-war protest, etc.).
• AH2.H.4.4 - Analyze the cultural conflicts that impacted the United States since Reconstruction and the compromises that resulted (e.g., nativism, Back to Africa movement, modernism, fundamentalism, black power movement, women’s movement, counterculture, Wilmington Race Riots, etc.).
• AH2.H.6.2 - Explain the reasons for United States involvement in global wars and the influence each involvement had on international affairs (e.g., Spanish-American War, WWI, WWII, Cold War, Korea, Vietnam, Gulf War, Iraqi War, etc.).
• AH2.H.7.3 - Explain the impact of wars on American society and culture since Reconstruction (e.g., relocation of Japanese Americans, American propaganda, first and second Red Scare movement, McCarthyism, baby boom, Civil Rights Movement, protest movements, ethnic, patriotism, etc.).

Materials
• Kent State Power Point, available in the Database of K-12 Resources (in PDF format)
  o To view the PDF as a projectable presentation, save the file, click “View” in the top menu bar of the file, and select “Full Screen Mode”
Optional: Recording of “Ohio,” by Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young (available for purchase via an internet search)
“Speaking Your Truth,” speech excerpt by Laurie Krause, attached
“Exercise Your Patriotism, Speak Your Truth” assignment sheet, attached

Essential Questions
• What role should dissent play in a democracy?
• How did students at Kent State respond to America’s invasion of Cambodia?
• What events took place throughout the weekend of May 1, 1970 at Kent State University?
• What lessons can be learned from the Kent State shootings?

Preparation
Students should have a basic understanding of the events and history of the Vietnam War.

Duration
60-90 minutes

Procedure
Warm Up – The Role of Dissent in a Democracy
1. As a warm-up, project slide 2 of the Power Point and ask students to respond to what they see:
   • What do these four images have in common?
   • What time periods do these images represent? What issues does it appear are being protested? What evidence makes you think this?
   • Based on these images, what are some common aspects of protests? (i.e. signs, large number of people, chanting, marching, art, etc.) What aspects do you think are part of protests that aren’t necessarily pictured here?
2. Continue to slide 3 and further discuss:
   • Why do people organize and participate in protests?
   • Have you ever participated in a protest of any kind? Explain.
   • What issues do you care enough about that might make you join a protest? (Teachers may want to probe students by noting issues that they might care about. For example, “If our school decided to implement mandatory school uniforms, how would you feel? If you didn’t like it, what could you do about it?” Or, “What if our school decided that classes would be more focused if we had single-sex only classrooms. If you didn’t like it, what could you do?”
   • What gives Americans the right to protest? (Discuss the First Amendment.)
   • While we have the right to protest, are their limits to this right? (Discuss the guidelines regarding protests, such as getting a permit to protest, protesting responsibly, etc.)
   • Should protesting ever be prevented? If so, when and why?
   • Have you ever seen a protest that’s angered you? Explain. (Discuss with students how issues that elicit protest are often very controversial issues, such as abortion, gay rights, war, etc. Thus, they are often issues that we have strong feelings about.) What if the group protesting is a hate group, such as the KKK – should they still be allowed to peacefully express their opinions publically? Why or why not?
   • What about when protestors are directly disagreeing with our government (dissent)? Is dissent important to having a healthy democracy, or does it weaken our democracy? Explain.
   • Do you think the role of protests has changed throughout history? Is there any particular time throughout history when you feel protesting was more popular or less popular? If so, when and why?
   • Why do you think protesting abounded during the Vietnam War era? Particularly, why do you think so many high school and college-aged students protested? (Review main themes with students, such as
the heated controversy surrounding Vietnam and America’s involvement, the draft, the fact that this was the first time a war was visible to the public via heavy media coverage, etc.)

- Is there any danger you may face when protesting? Explain.

**An Overview of the 1970 Kent State Shootings**

3. **Project slide 4** and explain to students that today’s lesson is going to focus on one of the most infamous protests during the Vietnam War era, occurring at Kent State University in 1970. Unfortunately, this weekend of student protests ended with the National Guard being called onto Kent State’s campus and 13 students being shot. Use the accompanying PPT presentation as an overview and basis of discussion regarding the Kent State events. (The PPT is available in the Database of K-12 Resources or by sending a request to **Carolinak12@unc.edu**)

The following are optional discussion questions to use on various slides:

- **Slide 5:** Why do you think students were upset regarding the U.S.’s decision regarding Cambodia?
- **Slide 7:** What do you notice about the group assembled? (i.e. they are young, they appear peaceful, etc.)
- **Slide 8:** Why do you think the students buried a copy of the Constitution? (symbolism that the Constitution was dead based on the US invading Cambodia)
- **Slide 9:** Why do you think protests turned aggressive by Friday evening?
- **Slide 10:** At this point, do you think the Mayor made the right decision in requesting assistance from the National Guard? Why or why not? Why do you think emotions were so heightened during this weekend?
- **Slide 11:** One of the first things the arriving National Guard was confronted with was a burning building. How might this have affected their impression of the situation in Kent? There is no solid evidence regarding who set the building on fire. Who would you guess did this and why? Why do you think protestors have transgressed from peaceful gatherings to more aggressive groups, setting fires and destroying property? Is this an effective means of protest? Why or why not?
- **Slide 14:** What is your impression of the Governor? Why do you think he called the student protestors the “worst type of American”? Do you agree or disagree and why? Do you think his disparaging comments regarding the protestors was a smart move? Why or why not? How do you think this affected the protestors?
- **Slide 15:** Think about a typical college campus and the towns that surround them. What sights to you typically see? (students lazing about on grassy areas, groups of students studying, fraternity or sorority parties, etc.) Now, imagine your campus is suddenly filled with men in fatigues holding guns. How would you feel?
- **Slide 16:** How do you think the presence of armed guards affected the protest?
- **Slide 19:** Why do you think the students were angry that the protest was canceled? How did they respond to show their discontent? How did the Guard respond? Was this a fair response in your opinion? Why or why not? Does anyone know how tear gas affects you? (Tear gas, often use to control unruly crowds, causes incredible discomfort and its very name comes from the immediate flow of tears that comes upon exposure. Upon exposure to the gas, people are unable to function to extreme irritation to the eyes, mouth, throat, lungs, and skin. The term “tear gas” comes from the immediate flow of tears that typically follows exposure.) Symptoms include: eyes- excessive tearing, burning, blurred vision, redness; nose- runny nose, burning, swelling; mouth- burning, irritation, difficulty swallowing, drooling; lungs- chest tightness, coughing, choking sensation, wheezing, shortness of breath; skin-burns, rash; nausea, vomiting)
- **Slide 20:** If you were the group of guards facing this crowd, how would you feel? If you were a student, and saw this line of guards coming toward you (clad in gas masks and yielding machine guns) how would you feel?
- **Slide 22:** It is difficult to know what actually occurred in the moment of the shooting at Kent State. None of us were there so we can only make inferences based on what we learn from other’s accounts. The authorities and the Courts themselves grappled for years over trying to figure out exactly what happen, and as said previously, we still don’t know beyond a shadow of a doubt. That said, why do
you think the Guard fired into the crowd? Why did some fire into the air, others into the ground, and still others directly at students?

- **Slide 25:** What do you imagine the moments were like on campus after the shots were fired? (Discuss the likely situation of mass confusion, shock, anger, surging adrenalin, mob mentality, etc.)
- **Slide 26:** What do you think is most dangerous about the situation at hand? If you were a school official, what would you do?
- **Slide 28:** Evaluate the decision to close Kent State for the remainder of the year. Do you think this was the right thing to do? Why or why not?
- **Slide 33:** Based on the evidence that exists and what you’ve learned thus far, why do you think the guards fired into the crowd of students? Do you think the courts made the right decision? Why or why not? How do you imagine the families of the killed and wounded students felt? What negative consequences, beyond the terrible deaths of young people, resulted from the shootings? (i.e. mistrust in government, civil rights restricted, etc.) With the benefit of historical hindsight, what things do you believe should have been handled differently throughout the weekend and on Monday at Kent State?
  - Let students know that while the courts found the Guard innocent in court, the debate over why they fired into the crowd reopened in 2007, when an audio recording that a student had taped from his dorm window was released. In the static-filled recording, yelling war protesters can be heard, followed by a voice and gunfire. The shooting survivors claim the tape proves a military order was given to fire on the demonstrators, thus proving the government at fault for the killings. (See http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,269561,00.html for more information.)

**Remembering the 1970 Kent State Events**

4. Move on to slide 35 and ask students to share their thoughts regarding why it is important to remember the events at Kent State. Probe further thinking by discussing:
- What do the events at Kent State symbolize? What can the events at Kent State teach us about First Amendment rights and protesting?
  - Discuss with students how the May 4 shootings have come to symbolize a great American tragedy which occurred at the height of the Vietnam War era, a period in which the nation found itself deeply divided both politically and culturally. The May, 1970 events at Kent State and the Vietnam War era remain controversial even today, and the need for healing continues to exist. Healing will not occur if events are either forgotten or distorted, and hence many feel it is important to continue to search for the truth behind the events of May 4th at Kent State. May 4th at Kent State should be remembered in order that we can learn from the mistakes of the past. The Guardsmen in their signed statement at the end of the civil trials recognized that better ways have to be found to deal with these types of confrontations.
- How should citizens respond to a government they disagree with? How should a government respond to dissenting citizens?
- What are the various ways to remember or commemorate important events such as the Kent State shootings and lessons? (Teachers are seeking answers such as construct a memorial, hold remembrance speeches/festivals, art, songs, books or stories, oral histories, etc.)

5. Optional: As an example of the various ways to remember and commemorate important events, project slide 36, which contains an excerpt from the song “Ohio” by Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young. If possible, teachers should also play the beginning of the song at this point. Discuss:
- What do you think this song is about? What evidence makes you think this?
- What message do you think the artist is trying to convey?
- How do you think youth in the 1970s responded to this song?
- Is music an effective form of protest and/or remembrance? Why or why not?
6. Finally, project slide 37 and without giving students any background information regarding the image, ask them to share what they see. Discuss:
   • What do you see? What do you notice first?
   • Does anyone have any guess as to what this might be?
   • What might the stone walls represent? The flowers?

7. Let students know that the image is of the “May 4 Memorial,” located on the campus of Kent State University. The serene memorial built in the natural setting of the hillside commemorates the events of May 4, 1970. It is surrounded by 58,175 daffodils to symbolize those U.S. servicemen and servicewomen who lost their lives in the Vietnam War. Engraved in the stone floor where visitors step onto the plaza are the words "Inquire, Learn, Reflect." Discuss:
   • Are physical memorials such as this one effective in remembering important events? Why or why not?
   • Why do you think the words “Inquire, Learn, Reflect” were engraved onto the plaza? (After discussing, let students know that the memorial committee emphasized that the site should present visitors with the opportunity to inquire into the many reasons and purposes of the events that led to the killing and wounding of students on May 4, 1970, and to encourage a learning process to broaden the perspective of these events. The site should encourage visitors to ask what differences were confronting this community and this nation at that time and to reflect on how those differences may have been resolved peacefully.)
   • If your loved one was shot during the Kent State events, how would you want her/him remembered?

8. As a culminating reading, give students a copy of the attached speech excerpt, “Speaking Your Truth,” and in partners or small groups, have students read the speech and discuss the questions provided. Before having students read the excerpt, teachers should give students a brief overview of the Jackson State killings, which are mentioned in the speech.
   • The Jackson State killings occurred on Thursday and Friday, May 14–15, 1970, just ten days after the Kent State shootings. A group of student protesters were confronted by city and state police. The police opened fire, killing two students and injuring twelve.

9. After students have completed their reading and discussed the questions, allow students to share some of their thoughts regarding the discussion questions with the entire class.

10. As a final homework assignment, give students the attached “Exercise Your Patriotism, Speak Your Truth” assignment sheet in which they will choose an issue that they care about and then express their opinion and/or desire for change regarding the issue via a chosen medium. At the start of the next class meeting, teachers should have students discuss Howard Zinn’s perspective regarding dissent as a patriotic action, then share their work in small groups.
Speaking Your Truth

Speech given on May 4, 2009 at the 39th Annual Kent State University Memorial, by Laurie Krause

My name is Laurie Krause. I am the sister of Allison Krause, the daughter of Arthur and Doris Krause…I am here to honor people who follow their truths, to respect people who live their ideals, and to focus on the healing of Kent State and our community at large.

39 years ago today, my sister, Allison Krause, was murdered by the Ohio National Guard for protesting and demonstrating against the Vietnam War. Also killed were Jeffrey, Sandra and William, and nine other Kent State students were seriously injured. I’m pleased to see a number of the surviving protestors here today, thank you for being here.

Allison was a freshman at Kent State who was incredibly passionate about life. She was a peace-loving, confident, altruistic, honor-student wanting to get the most out of college, and she was also deeply in love with her boyfriend, Barry. As my older sister, Allison was someone I looked up to. She was so creative. I still look up to her and continue to be inspired that the whole world may be changed by any real person, like you or me, walking forward with hope and living our ideals and truths.

Let me ask you, today, are you living your truth?

Allison vehemently disagreed with the US government and its involvement in Vietnam so she assembled with many others and protested on Friday, the first of May, not knowing that she was putting her life in jeopardy, yet feeling strongly that the actions committed by our government were wrong. On that day, a group of 500 students assembled to protest the US invasion of Cambodia. Rallies were planned for Monday to continue protesting the expansion of the Vietnam War.

The Ohio National Guard was sent in on Saturday and Kent State became a war zone overnight. Students were tear gassed and wounded by bayonets during demonstrations taking place over the weekend. The ROTC building was burned down in retaliation for the students being attacked for expressing their right to protest and assemble.

Press conferences held by Gov. Rhodes called protesters “un-American.” Rhodes declared a state of emergency, banned any further demonstrations and imposed martial law at Kent. Curfews were set. Students had to run from Guardsmen on campus late at night and Allison ran from them that night. Students couldn’t return to their dorm rooms and were stuck wherever they could find shelter for the night. Over the following days, the Kent State University campus ignited into one of our country’s worst nightmares.

As tensions heightened over the weekend, Allison called home to my parents to let them know what was happening on campus. My father told Allison to be cautious; he even asked her to back down and not involve herself. My parents, like most parents, were coming from a place of love for their daughter. They wanted her to be safe.

But Allison was aware of the risks involved. Still, she never considered not protesting against something she was incredibly passionate about. The Vietnam War had just taken a turn for the worse, it was a time when hope for peace was fading. To Allison, it was an obligation to show dissent to the government invading Cambodia. She made her decision, and we all know the outcome.

That Monday, despite school officials attempting to ban the demonstration by sending out leaflets, more than 2,000 people arrived to protest the government’s actions. The dispel process began that morning with leaders telling student protestors to go home or be arrested. Students responded to these infringements of rights by
throwing rocks. Wearing gas masks, the National Guard used tear gas to exert control over the growing crowds.

After some time with a lot of maneuvering Guardsmen turned in unison and took aim. The shooting lasted 13 seconds. Dumdum bullets were used – a type of bullet that’s illegal in warfare – and explodes on impact. My sister died in Barry’s arms.

Allison’s death symbolizes the importance of our right to protest and speak our truths freely. The day after the shooting, my father Arthur Krause spoke on television, telling the public how Allison’s death shall not be in vain. Afterwards, my parents followed their truth through the legal system and in the courts over the next nine years. They sought the truth about Kent State and the reason for the murder of their daughter … going all the way to the US Supreme Court. Their final appeal was settled and the federal government issued a statement of regret.

It’s no secret that my family holds Nixon, Rhodes and the State of Ohio responsible. Also, with a recently re-discovered audio tape, proof of an order to shoot has been found. We now know that our government intentionally committed this deadly act against the youth of 1970, calling them ‘bums’ as they protested the Cambodian Invasion. Triggers were not pulled accidentally at Kent State. What happened was malicious, what happened was irresponsible, what happened was evil. The shooting was at best, without any forethought, and at worst, with total forethought. Firing on a group of unarmed students, who were simply exercising their First Amendment rights to express dissent with their government was a crime.

What do we do with an order to shoot? What can you do when the government gives permission to use ultimate force, to use deadly force, against its dissenters? It was the government’s goal to make a defining statement and shut down student protest across the country that day… and they did… for years! There is no such thing as a true democracy when this happens.

The local, state and federal governments never accepted responsibility for the murder of Allison, Jeffrey, Sandra and William and the injuries sustained by nine others that occurred 39 years ago today. The people injured in the protests are reminded of it everyday. The Kent State shooting has changed all of our lives forever, both on the inside and the outside. My family lost its eldest child and were robbed from seeing her blossom in her life past 19 years. I lost my only sister and I miss her each day.

Looking back, did the Kent State protest and killings make a difference? Well, there was a huge response by Americans. The Kent State shooting single-handedly created the only nationwide student strike with over 8 million students from high schools to universities speaking out and holding rallies afterwards. And Jackson State also culminated in murderous acts in a similar quest to silence student protest. We became a nation at war with itself. But how did we let it get that far? How did this happen?

People will never forget that day at Kent State. Today marks an event that still hits deep for so many of us. People who were directly involved, people who believe in the Bill of Rights and the freedom to disagree with the government, people who continue to share a vision of harmony and peace for all. We’re all active participants; we are all involved in what happened. Today is about remembrance, honor, respect and a focal point for a change in the way we handle dissension with governmental actions...

Despite harsh criticism by local residents, even by her own president, Allison and others continued on. Allison believed in making a difference. Being anti-war and pro-peace and harmony, she was called to action. Although it was not her clear intention, Allison spoke, participated in and died for what she believed in. The spirit of Allison asks “What are we but what we stand for?”
Don’t hope for a new tomorrow, live it today and live your truth each day. We all make a difference by speaking our truths against all odds. Through-out my life I looked to my big sister for inspiration. Allison taught me the importance of living a life of intention and truth and I am now consciously and busily speaking my truths. That is Allison’s message and it not just for me...

Let’s stand up for what is right and best for all. We must protest against injustices and use our voices to speak out when we disagree with what’s happening. As we learn to speak our truth, even in the face of danger and opposition, we bring change and harmony.

So I ask you…and I ask you for Allison as well...how are you speaking your truth today?

Discuss/Answer:

1. How does Laurie describe her sister Allison?

2. According to the speech, why did Allison join the protests? Was she aware of the risk?

3. What actions taken by Governor Rhodes does the speech highlight? How does Laurie feel about the actions taken by Rhodes and other governmental officials?

4. According to the speech, what does Allison’s death symbolize?

5. Who does Allison’s family hold responsible for her death?

6. Do you think it’s possible that the government simply wanted to make an example out of these dissenting students? Why or why not?

7. Should the government have the right to stop protests against it? Why or why not?

8. What does Laurie mean when she says that during Vietnam, “We became a nation at war with itself”?

9. According to the speech, why should the events at Kent State be remembered?

10. What message is Laurie sending by asking, “What are we but what we stand for?”

11. What overall message is this speech trying to convey? Do you agree or disagree with this message and why?

12. What actions do you think Laurie would view as honoring her sister’s memory?

13. What is Laurie trying to encourage each of us to do in her final question of, “how are you speaking your truth today?” Are you already speaking your truth? If not, how can you start to do so?
Assignment:
Exercise Your Patriotism – Speak Your Truth

“While some people think that dissent is unpatriotic, I would argue that dissent is the highest form of patriotism. In fact, if patriotism means being true to the principles for which your country is supposed to stand, then certainly the right to dissent is one of those principles. And if we’re exercising that right to dissent, it’s a patriotic act.

One of the great mistakes made in discussing patriotism -- a very common mistake -- is to think that patriotism means support for your government. And that view of patriotism ignores the founding principles of the country expressed in the Declaration of Independence. That is: the Declaration of Independence makes it clear that governments are artificial creations set up to achieve certain ends -- equality, life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness -- and when governments become destructive of those ends it is the right of the people in the words of the Declaration, to alter or abolish the government.

In other words, obedience to government certainly is not a form of patriotism. Governments are the instruments to achieve certain ends. And if the government goes against those ends, if the government is not defending our liberties, but is diminishing our liberties, if the government is sending young people into war or making war which is unjustified, well then the government is not following the principles of caring about life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. When the government is taking huge sums of money from education and health, and using that money for military purposes, that’s a violation of the principles of the Declaration of Independence. And a government like that cannot be obeyed. To obey a government like that is not being patriotic. At that point, when a government behaves like that, it is the most patriotic thing to disobey the government.” ~ Howard Zinn, historian

Based on Howard Zinn’s comments above, as well as Laurie Krause’s advice, exercise your patriotism and “speak your truth” by voicing your opinion regarding an issue that you care about and that you feel requires action on the part of your fellow community members and/or legislators.

First, brainstorm local, state, or national issues that you care about. (Examples may include funding for your school, health care, immigration, climate change, war, etc.) Pick the issue that you would most like to see changed in some way. You can also choose a general theme to produce commentary on, such as the importance of free speech in a democracy, the hope of peace in the world, supporting out troops, Veteran benefits, environmental stewardship, etc.

Upon choosing the issue or theme you would like to address, use one of the following mediums to share your opinion and message:

- Write a speech that could be delivered at a protest rally (at least 5 paragraphs)
- Write a letter to a local, state, or federal representative requesting a specific change in legislation (at least 5 paragraphs)
- Write a letter to the editor expressing dissent regarding an issue you care about (at least 5 paragraphs)
- Create a blog expressing dissent (at least three paragraphs plus visual images pertaining to your chosen issue)
- Design a picket sign or banner to be carried at a protest rally (must contain original art work and a unique slogan)
- Create a protest song that could be performed at a protest rally (at least 20 lines of original lyrics, but the melody can be “borrowed”)  

Be prepared to share your finished product with classmates!