LESSON
The Proverbial Activist: A Profile

OVERVIEW
In this lesson, students explore the characteristics of an activist and how activism is sustained over time, despite obstacles and consequences, in order to effect societal change. They delve into the individual roles and qualities of active or potential activists and how they might, will and do effect change.

Ai Weiwei has a serious problem with authority: The Chinese government not only kidnapped the world-renowned artist and imprisoned him in a secret location for protesting its repressive policies, but after his release it conducted a show trial on baseless charges of tax evasion and pornography. Ai Weiwei: The Fake Case, a documentary by Andreas Johnsen, dissects the persecution and shows how the government’s attempts to silence Ai Weiwei have turned him into China’s most powerful artist and an irrepressible voice for free speech and human rights around the globe.

POV offers a lending library of DVDs that you can borrow anytime during the school year—FOR FREE! Get started by joining our Community Network.

OBJECTIVES
By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:
- Characterize the attributes of an activist
- Cite how an activist can sustain efforts to effect change
- Demonstrate and put into action their proclivities for activism

GRADE LEVELS: 9-12

SUBJECT AREAS
Civics               Social Studies
Language Arts

MATERIALS
- Film clips from Ai Weiwei: The Fake Case and equipment on which to show them
- Chart paper and markers
- Masking tape
- “Characteristics of an Activist” graphic organizer

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED
Two 50-minute class periods
FILM CLIPS

Video clips provided with this lesson are from *Ai Weiwei: The Fake Case*.

**Clip 1: “Release from Prison” (1:19 min.)** The clip starts at 4:00 with Ai Weiwei watching a news clip and a broadcaster’s voice saying, “Beijing authorities say that Ai Weiwei’s release…” It ends at 5:19 with a broadcaster’s voice saying, “On June 21, 2012.”

**Clip 2: “Everything Is About Taking Orders” (1:42 min.)** The clip starts at 7:20 with a shot of food on a plate and the director’s voice, asking, “What did they first tell you?” It ends at 9:02 with Ai saying, “Kidnapping by state.”

**Clip 3: “Recreating” (2:00 min.)** The clip starts at 24:10 with an image of pieces of sculpture and a man near one piece, with Ai Weiwei’s voice saying, “Don’t take that off.” It ends at 26:10 with Ai saying, “I was shocked.”

**Clip 4: “The Charge” (1:41 min.)** The clip starts at 12:12 with an image of a statue outdoors with words on the screen about the charges against Ai Weiwei’s company. It ends at 13:53 with an image of a video camera and words on the screen about *ArtReview* magazine.

**Clip 5: “A Fake Case” (0:59 min.)** The clip starts at 26:52 with a title card that reads, “The authorities order the accountant….” It ends at 27:51 with Ai in a car saying, “…but it’s fake, it’s fabricated.”

**Clip 6: “Breaking Restrictions” (1:17 min.)** The clip starts at 29:40 with a journalist saying to Ai, “You are basically breaking these restrictions.” It ends at 30:57 with Ai saying to the journalist, “Of course, it’s very scary.”

**Clip 7: “That’s What You Want, Right?” (1:14 min.)** The clip starts at 38:33 with a title card that reads, “Ai Weiwei launches weiweicam.com with four webcams streaming live day and night from inside his home.” It ends at 39:47 with Ai Weiwei saying, “…the constitution gave to anybody.”

**Clip 8: “The Passport” (5:11 min.)** The clip starts at 45:35 with a title card reading, “The Day Ai Weiwei’s Probation Ends.” It ends at 50:45 with Ai saying, “It’s very hard to figure out.”

**Clip 9: “Back Then” (1:42 min.)** The clip starts at 10:00 with Ai Weiwei saying to his mother, “Back when you were in your twenties…” It ends at 11:42 with his mother saying, “They would have killed you already.”

**Clip 10: “Somehow” (1:22 min.)** The clip starts at 36:56 with Ai saying, “Somehow, we will have political change.” It ends at 38:18 with Ai saying, “Just one month. It’s enough.”
ACTIVITY

1. Divide students into small groups. Distribute a sheet of chart paper and a marker to each group recorder.

2. Have students in each group reflect on people who have made or are making substantial changes in the school, community, nation or somewhere in the world. Tell groups to discuss a few individuals and to select one (per group).

3. Instruct each recorder to draw a figure of a person (embellished as desired) who will represent the selected individual for that group. Ask each group to discuss what the person has accomplished and what characteristics or qualities the individual exhibited that enabled them to take action toward change. Give the groups about five minutes to do this.

4. Invite groups to post the images and discuss with the class the characteristics they named, encouraging students to keep these traits in mind.

5. Post this Pablo Picasso quote that starts off the film: “Painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war.” Bring the class together. Have students briefly reflect on what this statement means. (They are likely to talk about how art can be used to take a socio-political stand, challenge others, as a tool of change and so on.)

6. Tell students that this quote starts off the film Ai Weiwei: The Fake Case. Instruct them to keep this statement in mind as they watch film clips that focus on Ai Weiwei’s specific role as an activist. Distribute and explain how to use the “Characteristics of an Activist” graphic organizer, which students will fill in individually as they watch the clips. (It might be best to show about four segments at a time so students can briefly reflect and take notes before viewing the next set of clips).

7. After students watch the clips, pose all or some of these discussion questions. (It is probably best to post the questions in advance so that students can reflect on them as they watch the clips.):

   - What is Ai Weiwei fighting for? Why?
   - How does he “fight” and why does he do this, despite the repercussions?
   - Does Ai Weiwei use his art only as a tool for activism? Discuss and describe other methods.
   - Does Ai Weiwei effect change? Describe.
   - Can Ai Weiwei rally sufficient support and resources from others in order to change some of China’s politics and policies? Explain.
   - In the article “Ai Weiwei: I’m Not an Activist” and accompanying video interview, (http://bigthink.com/experts-corner/ai-weiwei-im-not-an-activist), Ai Weiwei states that he sees his ongoing fight against everyday injustices as a matter of personal responsibility. Do you feel that it is a person’s responsibility to tackle what is unjust in society? What’s the difference between an individual acting on what they see as their responsibility and an activist? Is there a difference? Explain.
   - Think back to Picasso’s quote stating that painting is “an instrument of war.” How does it relate to Ai Weiwei?
8. Ask students to share some of the activist traits they identified while watching the clips. What seem to be the most important and influential qualities of an activist? Ask students to compare and contrast these characteristics with the ones they noted during their group task earlier. What is the same? What is different?

9. Encourage students to think about these qualities and honestly assess their “activist” tendencies. Do they have any or all these qualities? Would they need them all to undertake a particular cause or action they have been considering? Could they or do they want to effect change? If yes, what would be at stake and would they be willing to do what it takes?

10. Either as a written assignment or as part of a discussion as a group or in pairs, students can share stories of work they have done to make something happen at any level, affirming that they do have the capability to effect change.

EXTENSIONS

1. MEDIA AND ACTIVISM
In the film, the media (all types, including social media) plays a significant role in Ai Weiwei’s activism. And Ai has an interesting relationship with the media, at once cultivating and using it to his advantage and rejecting it. In this extension, students examine Ai Weiwei’s interaction with and use of the media. Students then are assigned to explore the relationship between media and activism, specifically of the socio-political type, and the motives of media members in this context. Do they participate to support the cause or to generate self-promotion? Sources to prompt thinking include:

   • *Psychology Today:* “Four Ways Social Media Is Redefining Activism”
   
   • *In the Middle of a Whirlwind:* “Media and Activism: Creating and Maintaining Effective Movement Media”
     [https://inthemiddleofthewhirlwind.wordpress.com/media-and-activism/](https://inthemiddleofthewhirlwind.wordpress.com/media-and-activism/)

2. CHINA’S GOVERNMENT: HOW MUCH HAS CHANGED?
Ai Weiwei’s mother speaks of how the Chinese government made people’s lives difficult in the past. In fact, those who challenged the Communist Party were in danger of severe punishment. Ai’s mother indicates that things have changed, but only somewhat, and that those who publicly protest against the government still face serious repercussions. Show the following segments in the following order to jumpstart discussion about whether or not things have changed in China:

   • Clip 3: “The Charge” (1:41 min.)
   • Clip 4: “A Fake Case” (0:59 min.)
   • Clip 5: “Breaking Restrictions” (1:17 min.)
   • Clip 10: “Back Then” (1.42 min.)
   • Clip 8: “Everything Is About Taking Orders” (1:40 min.)

Students explore the history of China’s Communist Party regime to determine what has or has not changed in terms of policy, human rights practices, civil freedoms and so on and whether
the world external to China, along with its activists and dissidents, can bring about a systemic shift in the nation. For further discussion and/or research, the following sites provide useful information:

- **BBC News:** “China Profile – Timeline”
- **Council on Foreign Relations:** “The Chinese Communist Party”
  [http://www.cfr.org/china/chinese-communist-party/p29443](http://www.cfr.org/china/chinese-communist-party/p29443)
- **The Guardian:** “Activist Lawyer Who Defended Ai Weiwei Charged with ‘Provoking Trouble’”
- **Human Rights Watch:** “World Report 2014: China”
- **Reuters:** “Timeline: China Milestones Since 1978”
- **Al Jazeera:** “China’s Web of Torture and Its Critics”

### 3. TYPES OF ACTIVISM

Activism is manifested in many different ways and therefore there are myriad perspectives on what is and is not activism. There are those who say protesting, getting physically out into the streets, civil unrest and the like are the only true forms of activism. Others say effecting small, contained change is activism. And what about social media activism (which some call “armchair activism“)? If you blog about social issues online, are you an activist? In this task, students first explore what activism is and what it entails and then examine various types of activism. Students consider the following: How does change through activism occur? Do/can all types of activists effect socio-political/economic change? Students consider whether they are activists in one form or another and why that is so.

- **Activism 101:** “Thirteen Types of Activism”
- **Canadian Living:** “Community Activism: How Small Changes Can Help Make a Difference”
  [http://www.canadianliving.com/life/green_living/community_activism_how_small_changes_can_help_make_a_difference.php](http://www.canadianliving.com/life/green_living/community_activism_how_small_changes_can_help_make_a_difference.php)
- **The New Yorker:** “Small Change”
- **PBS:** “Beyond the Hashtag: Next Moves for Action”
- **PBS:** “Twitter Chat: Can Hashtag Activism Have Real Impact?”
- **Pew Research Center:** “Political Engagement and Activism”
RESOURCES

Ai Weiwei
http://aiweiwei.com/

http://animatingdemocracy.org/place-start/what-social-change

Big Think: “Ai Weiwei: I’m Not an Activist”

Center for Communication and Civic Engagement
http://ccce.com.washington.edu/

*The Christian Science Monitor*: “Can an Artist Change Society?”

https://mobilizingideas.wordpress.com/2015/08/05/who-is-an-activist-on-the-blurred-boundaries-of-activism/

PBS: “Ai Weiwei: Never Sorry”
http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/ai-weiwei/

PBS: “Ai Weiwei Sparks Social Media Flames in China”

People and Planet: “How to Be an Activist…”
http://www.planetfriendly.net/active.html

Permanent Culture Now: “Introduction to Activism”
http://www.permanentculturenow.com/what-is-activism/

POV: “Ai Weiwei: The Fake Case”
http://www.pbs.org/pov/aiweiwei/

Results: “The Activist Toolkit—Developing the Skills to Become a Trained Citizen Advocate”
http://www.results.org/skills_center/activist_toolkit/

*Smithsonian*: “Is Ai Weiwei China’s Most Dangerous Man?”
http://www-Smithsonianianmag.com/arts-culture/is-ai-weiwei-chinas-most-dangerous-man-17989316/?no-ist

Youth Activism
http://ya.ssrc.org/
STANDARDS

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects (http://www.corestandards.org/read-the-standards/)

SL.9-10.4 Present information, findings and supporting evidence clearly, concisely and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and task.

SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed and the organization, development, substance and style are appropriate to purpose, audience and a range of formal and informal tasks.

SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Content Knowledge: (http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Civics

Standard 28: Understands how participation in civic and political life can help citizens attain individual and public goals.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Michele Israel owns Educational Writing & Consulting (www.micheleisrael.com), where she works with large and small educational, nonprofit and media organizations to bolster products and programs. Her rich career spans more than 25 years of successful experience developing educational materials and resources, designing and facilitating training, generating communication materials and grant proposals and assisting in organizational and program development. Her long list of clients includes Tiffany & Co., Frost Valley YMCA, Teaching Tolerance, the Public Broadcasting Service, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, WETA Public Television, Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly and the Harm Reduction Coalition.
Characteristics of an Activist

As you view *Ai Weiwei: The Fake Case*, keep an eye out for things Ai Weiwei does and says that highlight his work as an activist. Then you will discuss with your peers which of these qualities are common among activists in general and how they bolster efforts to effect change.

**Trait:** In each of these circles, note a quality that Ai Weiwei demonstrates. For example, he challenges authority or he is unafraid.

**Evidence:** Where possible, provide evidence from the clip that points to that trait.
Characteristics of an Activist

Trait #4

Evidence

Evidence

Evidence

Trait #5

Evidence

Evidence

Evidence

Trait #6

Evidence

Evidence

Evidence