Teaching with Primary Sources—MTSU

LESSON PLAN:

HISTORICAL EMPATHY: COLUMBUS AND THE INDIANS

Grade: 7th
Subject: Social Studies, English Language Arts
Time required: 1-2 hour-long periods
Created by: Teaching with Primary Sources—MTSU

OVERVIEW
Christopher Columbus’s first voyage to the New World in 1492 brought him and his crew into contact with the indigenous peoples of the Americas. This voyage led to more expeditions on the part of Columbus and other Europeans, and because these expeditions led to violence and genocide inflicted on the indigenous peoples. Because of this, some modern interpretations cast Columbus in a negative light, even to the point of advocating for the replacing of Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples’ Day. Many people no longer consider Columbus the hero who “discovered” America.

Historical empathy is a historical thinking skill that calls on students to understand why people in the past acted and thought in certain ways—particularly in ways that are hard for us to understand today because we are so opposed to them. It tries to look at people and events in the larger context of their time period to make sense of their motivations and causes.

UNDERSTANDING GOAL
Students will understand what historical empathy is and how to use this skill to evaluate people and events in history. Students will understand how the actions of Columbus towards the Indians fit into the larger contexts both of his expedition as sponsored by Catholic monarchs and of the European world view in the late 15th/early 16th centuries.

OBJECTIVES
Students will
- Complete a close reading of a primary source text.
- Analyze and synthesize primary source maps and texts.
- Learn and exercise the skill of historical empathy.
- Evaluate Columbus’s actions based on primary sources created during his time period.

INVESTIGATIVE QUESTIONS
Why did Columbus act towards/think of the New World Indians the way he did? How do these actions/attitudes make sense in the context of his time?

Concerning Discovered Islands: Letter of Christopher Columbus, to Whom Our Age is Greatly Indebted, Concerning Islands Recently Discovered in the Indian Ocean [1493; woodcut on image p. 5]

CURRICULUM STANDARDS
Social Studies
SSP.05 Perceiving and presenting past events and issues as they might have been experienced by the people of the time, with historical empathy rather than present-mindedness.
7.72 Analyze why European countries were motivated to explore including religion, political rivalry, and economic gain.

English Language Arts
7.RI.KID.1 Analyze what a text says explicitly and draw logical inferences; cite several pieces of textual evidence to support conclusions.
### PRIMARY SOURCES FROM THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS
- Columbus Taking Possession of the New Country
- Columbus’s 1492 letter (as published in 1493 with woodcut illustrations; also, English translation)
- Ptolemaic map (scroll down to third item)
- Waldseemüller map

### PRIMARY SOURCES FROM OTHER EDUCATIONAL SITES
- Vasco de Gama in Africa, 1497
- Expulsion of the Jews from Spain, 1492
- The Papal bull Inter Caetera of Alexander VI, 1493

### MATERIALS
- PowerPoint in which images are hyperlinked to their locations on the Web
- Columbus and the Indians worksheet, taken from the English translation of Columbus’s letter
- Primary source text excerpts which includes all three texts in question

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Tell students they will be learning about historical empathy by examining the case study of Columbus’ encounters with Indians in the New World. Show them the illustration of Columbus Taking Possession of the New Country (slide 2). Ask them first of all which person they think Columbus is in the picture and how they decided. (Get them to think about the focal point: Columbus is in the center, in a grand pose, facing fully forward, wearing the brightest-colored clothing, holding the banner, with sword drawn.) Then ask them how Columbus is portrayed. (Heroic, important, destined, pious, even extravagant might be words they think of.) Ask if the depiction is overall a negative or positive one.</td>
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<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Ask them if they, as students in 21st-century America, have a negative or positive view of Columbus. What information are their views based on? Have they heard of efforts to replace the Columbus Day national observance with Indigenous Peoples’ Day? Show slide 3. Go through the linked article with students to further explore the movement behind Indigenous Peoples’ Day. (Make particular note that Columbus Day was designated in 1937 to court the Italian American vote.)</td>
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<td>Step 3</td>
<td>Now look at the Columbus illustration again (slide 4), and ask students when they think it was created. They might know that “In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue,” but when you show them the bibliographic page they will see that this illustration is from 1892. Therefore, this can only be a primary source for how people in 1892 viewed Columbus, not people in 1492. Why might this illustration have been made in 1892? (You want to get students thinking about how people/events are remembered on important anniversaries. If you have time, look up how Columbus was commemorated in 1992.) What has changed in how Americans perceive Columbus from 1892 to today?</td>
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<td>Step 4</td>
<td>Inform students that the purpose of this lesson is not to get them to love or hate Columbus. It’s to practice the skill of historical empathy, so that they can better understand Columbus’s actions towards the Indians (even if/especially when they don’t condone them). Turn to slide 5 and ask what historical empathy is. Note: Empathy may be putting yourself in another person’s shoes, so to speak, but historical empathy is somewhat different.</td>
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<td>Step 5</td>
<td>After taking responses from students about what historical empathy is, turn to slide 6 for a definition from a professional educator. Discuss this definition and make sure students get that understanding is the point (not feeling sorry for). Turn to slide 7 to show them that this is a skill articulated in the Social Studies Practice standards. You may also wish at this time to show them the Social Studies curriculum standard that this lesson meets.</td>
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<td>Step 6</td>
<td>Turn to slide 8 to briefly remind them of the 1892 Columbus illustration. Then turn to slide 9 to show students how Columbus’s landing in the New World actually was depicted at the time. This is an early printed edition of a letter which Columbus wrote to Ferdinand and Isabella to report his initial findings in the New World (in order to get them to give more money for more voyages). This edition contains woodcuts from 1493 that someone in Europe made to go along with Columbus’s letter, based on what he said in it. You can click on the image to get to this item’s page in the World Digital Library and have students read the short blurb describing it. Explain that this information is all important context for helping us understand how people received Columbus’s news at the time.</td>
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**Step 7**

Turn to slide 10 and tell students that they will be reading an excerpt from this letter and answering questions about it. You may wish to divide them into pairs or have them work individually. Distribute copies of the worksheet to each pair/student and give them time to complete this in class. If you need to save time, you can split the class into four groups and have each group focus on one of the text segments. Allow some time for students to discuss their answers out loud with the class as a whole. Ask students if they can understand, from his own words, why Columbus treated the Indians the way that he did.

**Step 8**

Turn to slide 11 and tell students that you’re going to look at the larger context now—that is, what’s going on in Columbus’s world that helps us understand his actions better. Turn to slide 12 and explain that they are looking at a world map from 1482 that depicts the Ptolemaic view of the globe. This is what Columbus and most other educated Europeans thought the earth looked like on the eve of Columbus’s voyages. (You can click on the map and scroll down to the third item in the online exhibition to read more about this map and what it signifies.)

**Step 9**

Turn to slide 13 and have students compare the Ptolemaic world map with this map, which was created in 1507 by Martin Waldseemüller and based on the most up-to-date cartographic information available in Europe. How has the way the world was viewed changed between 1482 and 1507? How might this have impacted the way Europeans viewed their place in the world?

**Step 10**

Now split the class into three groups. (You may wish to split them into further sub-groups to make group work easier.) Turn to slide 14 and tell students they will now read primary source texts from around the time of Columbus's first voyage to the New World, each of which will shed some light on the European world view at the time. Go over the two guiding questions on slide 14 and leave the slide on the projector while they’re reading and discussing the texts in groups. The three texts are:

- **Vasco de Gama in Africa, 1497**
- **Expulsion of the Jews from Spain, 1492**
- **The Papal bull Inter Caetera of Alexander VI, 1493**

  ⇒ You may wish to explain that *Inter Caetera* is Latin for “Among other things,” and that papal bulls are simply declarations made by the pope and are titled after their first few words.

Use the PDF text excerpts provided. Give plenty of time for students to get through the texts, and allow them to look up unfamiliar vocabulary.

**Step 11**

Have groups report out (slides 15-17). Pass out copies of all three copies of the primary source texts to each student so they can follow along as their classmates answer the guiding questions for each text. (Each student should have gotten one text in Step 10, so for this step they should get the two other texts as well.) After going over each of the three text sources, ask students if their thinking about Columbus’s actions towards the Indians in the New World has changed. How do they evaluate his actions now?

**Step 12**

For a homework assignment, students should write a 1-page response to the investigative questions, “Why did Columbus act towards/think of the New World Indians the way he did? How do these actions/attitudes make sense in the context of his time?” In their responses, students should support their points with specific references to the Columbus letter, the two world maps, and the three contextual sources.

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**EVALUATION**

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<td>Columbus’s letter worksheet: 25%</td>
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<td>Homework assignment: 50%</td>
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**EXTENSION**

There are several useful resources on different aspects of Columbus’s voyages available through the TPS-MTSU Web Site and the Library of Congress:

- **Culture Clash: Three Views of Columbus** (lesson plan)
- **A Matter of Perspective: Columbus in the New World** (lesson plan)
- **1492: An Ongoing Voyage** (exhibition)
- **Waldseemüller’s Map: World 1507** (lesson plan)
- **Hispanic Exploration in America** (primary source set)
- **Exploring the Early Americas** (exhibition)