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Mythology: A Study of Puerto Rican Myths, Legends and Folktales

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DESCRIPTION

The following is an educational unit designed to supplement the existing curriculum for beginning and intermediate level Spanish courses. It is also easily adapted for use in an American History course as a parallel to a unit studying Puerto Rican history. The unit is being developed for use on the secondary level; however, much of the material included can be used with students of any level to introduce them to Puerto Rico.

The unit is divided into three major parts: the first is an overview of the study of folklore; the second is a look at some Puerto Rican myths and legends with exercises and ideas for the teaching of this material as part of a course; the third and final part of the unit is based on activities which directly involve the student. It is here that several practical applications of the material studied are explored.

For the beginning level language student, the unit provides an introduction to the study of mythology with examples and exercises in English. When studying a foreign language, there is so much more to explore than the mere grammatical construction of the language. It is widely understood that the purpose of a foreign language is both to communicate in the target language and to understand the people of the target country—their traditions and customs. The folk literature of a country can tell so much about the country's people, customs, and traditions.

Folk literature was first transmitted orally from generation to generation and later captured in writing. Folk literature explores many varied phenomena which run the gamut from natural occurrences such as weather conditions to religious beliefs. This literature can furnish people with a doctrine by which they run their daily lives, and also an explanation of almost every event which affects their lives.

Early folktales and legends dealt with origins of life and with different natural phenomena which early man was unable to explain logically such as fire, flood, thunder, and lightning. An excellent source containing several myths in English is *Myths, Fables and Folktales* by Albert R. Kitzhaber and Stoddard Malarkey. This text contains fables, parables, proverbs and myths of Greek, Norse, and African origins along with many folktales. This source is included to provide both teacher and student with an introduction to the terminology and imagery often seen in and used during the study of mythology.

For the most part, this unit concentrates on Puerto Rican mythology and folklore. It is to be used in

conjunction with the current curriculum for first year Spanish students who are required to be familiar with Puerto Rico as a part of their introductory language study. Most Puerto Rican folktales are based on religious beliefs. Why does one study folk literature as a means of getting to know Puerto Rican culture? The answer is twofold. First of all, it affords the opportunity to understand family life, and secondly, it helps explain why so much of the traditions from the island are retained in this country. This unit will help students relate folktales to their lives, and in turn use these tales to understand some distinctly unique ideas, ideals, and philosophies.

OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

Objective One

The first, and perhaps most elementary objective of the unit is to increase students' vocabulary. In public schools, students are taught Castillian Spanish which is quite different from the Spanish spoken in Puerto Rico. Many of the myths and legends read, therefore, will expose students to a different vocabulary than one they would normally encounter. A strategy for presenting such new vocabulary would be to present it in a new way. Instead of introducing new vocabulary in a traditional list, it could be learned VISUALLY.

A. Have students cut pictures out of magazines illustrating actions, events or ideas expressed in one of the myths being studied. Place each of these images on a piece of poster board or a large index card. Then have students attribute a specific action, event or idea to each image. Use the cards as flash cards, at first, having the class give the desired response for each card. After the cards have become familiar to the students, use them as a drill for individual students in the class.

B. Using the same cards, divide the class into two equal teams. Have one student from each team go to the board. Showing the same card to each of the two students only, have them draw a representation of the action, event or idea on the board. The first member of the class to identify the representation wins a point for his team.

C. Another activity to test vocabulary comprehension would be to play charades. For this activity, if your classroom contains mobil desks, arrange them in a circle so that each student has an equally clear view of the action taking place. Pick one student at a time to be the "bobo" ("clown"), and give him an activity to act out. The other students will guess the charade, win individual points, and then get a chance to either perform the next charade, or to choose the next "bobo". If an open and "free" classroom atmosphere has been established through the previous games and activities, students should not be reluctant to perform in order to demonstrate what they have learned.

Structured games and student involved/organized activities provide a great stimulus for learning. Students tend to learn without realizing that such extensive learning is taking place, and more important is that retention is very high.

Objective Two

The second major objective of the unit is to have students understand several facets of Puerto Rican life through mythology with particular interest paid to religious values, family customs and traditions.

After students have become more familiar with the vocabulary used in some of the legends, they will be better prepared to delve deeper into the legend to explore its meaning, and to discover how the tale relates to Puerto Rican philosophy.

A. Begin by reading some legends in English with the students. *Once in Puerto Rico* by Pura Belpre (included in the bibliography) contains three charming tales of Old San Juan which can be used to introduce students to Puerto Rican folk literature. These tales (three among a collection of sixteen) have a religious significance (The Cistern of San Cristobal, The Chapel on Cristo Street, The Rogativa), and can help students understand the importance of religious values for the Puerto Rican people, as the religious values of these legends transcend three entirely different life situations. The first tale deals with the building of a church on the site where a horse racer was miraculously saved from death; the second is the story of a drought caused by moving a statue of San Cristobal; and the third is the story of how a religious procession through the city of San Juan ended the English siege of Puerto Rico in 1797. These stories, translated into English, are easily read and understood by students.

B. After reading the tales, draw up a set of questions for each, and some questions about religious values in general. Use these as GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS getting as many students as possible involved in the discussion. Have students pay particular attention to the points raised during the discussion. It may even be helpful to have a student act as secretary for the activity and list important points on the board.

C. After the questions have been answered completely, and the discussion has finished, a good follow-up activity would be to have students compare the three tales (or any tales with similar themes) in writing as either a short or long term outside writing assignment.

In the first lesson plan included in this unit, an example of this discussion/writing method of analysis of a folktale dealing with either family life, customs or traditions will illustrate the strategies and activities proposed in this objective more clearly.

Objective Three

The third objective of the unit is to explore the ritual of mythology. Although the word “ritual” has religious connotations, the ritual of mythology connotes much more than religious values. Many festivals both religious and secular, are based on ancient myths. Myths are meant to explain or justify the occurrence of phenomena which, in ancient times, had seemingly no logical explanation. These myths became themes for different festivals. The festival of the harvest in Puerto Rico is a prime example of how a myth evolved into a ritual. The evolution is relatively simple. The myth is based on an invocation to a muse (or a supernatural power) during planting time to ask for a bountiful crop—plenty of rain, sun, and good seed. Then, during the harvest, the people celebrate their good fortune with dances and songs in thanks for the bountiful harvest and the

protection of the muse.

A ritual is a repeated event that has a specific significance for the people participating in the ritual. A mythological ritual is, therefore, the repetition of an event that has a mythological basis.

A. In order to explore the ritual of mythology, have students compare several of the legends they are reading according to the STRUCTURE of the tale. Do most myths begin in a similar fashion? (ie: Once upon a time, Long long ago.) Are the characters portrayed similarly? (Are they believable, or rather super-human?) Do the folktales have similar themes? Do they end in a similar fashion? (Many folktales end with a moral.)

Looking at these questions and others, students will begin to see that there is indeed a pattern to the myth. Seeing this pattern will help them later when they create original tales patterned after what they have read.

B. There are many theatrical groups throughout the community that stage celebrations of festivals. The Comprehensive Arts Program of New Haven sends artists of all kinds into the public schools to work directly with the students. As another activity, bring students to a festival or organize a school assembly to expose students to folk and ethnic dances or theatrical productions. The Bowen Peters Dance Company of New Haven is an excellent source. This will not only give language students an opportunity to understand folk literature, it also allows the entire studentbody to become involved in a cultural event.

Objective Four

The fourth and final objective of the unit is to have students use the information which they have gained through their exploration of Puerto Rican mythology in a productive and entertaining way in the classroom.

A. Students will participate in the creation of original folktales patterned after things they have read or heard about. These tales can be written either in English, in the beginning level courses, or in Spanish in the advanced level courses.

B. Students' original folktales can then be presented as skits as a part of a foreign language festival. Students would create sets and costumes for the skits based on historical events or on mythological creatures with which they are familiar.

The second lesson plan included in the unit will clearly illustrate how to create an original tale, and how to transform it into a visual presentation. Teachers will find that this idea is very popular and works well because student interest is high. Such student involvement helps develop student potential in both language and creativity. They gain a personal sense of accomplishment in seeing the fruits of their labor come to life.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan I

Topic Analysis of a folktale through discussion and writing. The discussion segment of the activity will last one class period. The writing assignment which goes with it is an outside writing project. Students should be given two days to complete the assignment.

Objective Students will read a folktale in English and analyze it as a group according to a set of questions drawn up by the teacher. They will then be asked to write about the legend.

Procedure The following is an adaptation of a short legend by Pura Belpre. The actual legend can be found in translation in a collection of Belpre legends entitled *Once in Puerto Rico* (included in the bibliography).

The Legend of the Hummingbird

Long long ago . . . far up in the hills there was once a small pool fed by a waterfall that tumbled down the side of a mountain. It was the favorite place of Alida, the daughter of a great and powerful Indian chief.

One day when Alida came to the pool to rest after a long walk, she was startled by a stranger—a young indian not from her tribe who was picking fruit from the trees.

He told her about himself to make her feel at home. He was a member of an enemy tribe who had been left behind after an attack and had lived in the forest by the pool ever since. Alida and Taroo became good friends. They would meet often at the pool. Their meetings were always brief so that no one would discover their secret friendship. In spite of Alida's precautions, there came a day when someone saw them and told her father. Alida was forbidden to return to the pool, and her father decided to arrange a wedding to a man of his own choosing in order to put an end to Alida and Taroo's romance.

Alida was grief stricken and prayed to her god for help. "Do not let me marry this man whom I do not love!" The god took pity on her and changed her into a beautiful red flower.

Meanwhile, Taroo, knowing nothing of Alida's sadness, still waited for her by the pool, but she never arrived. One night, the moon took pity on him and called out "Do not wait for Alida. Your secret has been found out, and to avoid marrying another man, she cried out to the gods for help and was changed into a delicate red flower." "Help me to find Alida", Taroo cried out. The gods took pity on him also and changed him into a small multi-colored bird saying "Fly, Colibri, find your love among the flowers." His wings made a humming sound as he rapidly flew away.

In the morning, the indians saw the new bird darting among the flowers as swift as an arrow and as bright as a jewel. They heard the humming of his wings and saw him hovering over every flower he passed and kissing the petals. They liked the bird with the music in his wings and called it a hummingbird.

Ever since then the little bird has hovered over every flower he finds, but he returns most often to the red ones still looking for Alida. He has not found her yet.

GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Use the following questions as the basis for a class discussion about the legend.

1. Who are the four characters of the legend?
2. Where does the legend take place? Does the location have anything to do with the end of the legend?
3. Why is it important for Alida and Taroo to keep their relationship a secret?
4. How does Alida's father find out about Taroo?
5. What happened to prevent Alida's marriage to an unknown suitor?
6. Of whom does Alida ask assistance to avoid the marriage? Why is this typical of a legend?
7. What is the significance of changing Alida into a beautiful red flower?
8. Why do you think the gods called Taroo "calibri"?
9. What do we learn about hummingbirds from the legend?
10. What is the purpose of this legend? What makes it a myth?

TOPICS FOR COMPOSITION: Students will choose one of the following topics and write a brief composition about how it relates to the legend.

- A. Briefly explain the importance of the gods in this tale. What purpose do they serve?
- B. Tell how the myth explains a philosophy. Why is this philosophy Puerto Rican?

Here are several charming tales in both English and Spanish that can be analyzed according to the discussion/writing method. They are easy to understand and are excellent examples of a rich Puerto Rican folk tradition.

In English-(from *Once in Puerto Rico* by Pura Belpre)

Three Tales of Old San Juan
The Little Blue Light
The Parrot Who Wouldn't Say Catano

In Spanish-

Santiago— by Pura Belpre

El perrito que deseaba un niño— by Catherine Wolley

Juan Bobo y el hermanito (y otros) by Rafael Ramirez de Arellano
(from *Folklore Portorriqueno*)

(See the bibliography for other possible suggested tales)

Lesson Plan II

Topic Create an original legend. This is a week long creative writing assignment.

Objective Students will write original legends based on the Puerto Rican folktales they have read throughout the year. These tales may also be presented as skits.

This activity is meant to be the culmination of the exploration of Puerto Rican mythology, and as such will be used near the end of the school year.

Procedure The following lesson plan is laid out by day to illustrate a particular progression of events.

Day One:

TOPIC SEARCH

- A. Organize students into groups of three or four. Each group is responsible for one legend.
- B. Search for a topic within each group. Students will make a list of all the possible themes they can think of as a basis for their legends.
- C. Eliminate any theme that does not appeal to the group as a whole. Only one theme is to be agreed upon; this is the topic for the legend. At the end of the class period, each group must turn in a topic for its legend.

Day Two:

FACT FINDING—This day is devoted to coming up with as much information about the chosen topic as possible.

- A. Students must decide on the **CHARACTERS** of the legend. What kind of characters (human or supernatural) are going to take part in the legend? How many characters are involved? (There

should only be the number of characters in the legend as there are students in the group.) Who are the characters? What are their individual “personality” traits?

B. Students must also decide on a SETTING (place and time period) for their legends. Character and setting information will be collected at the end of the class period.

Day Three:

THE OUTLINE

Students will spend the period in groups working on a chronological outline for their legends. They must decide what is going to happen in the legend, and in what order it will take place. It is best to have students set up an actual outline for their legends, taking into account all the major events and details they want in the legend.

Example:

- I. Major Event I
 - A. Detail A
 - B. Detail B
- II. Major Event II
 - A. Detail A
 - B. Detail B

Major event I should be the first event to take place in the legend. Major event II should be the second and so on, so that every aspect of the legend follows as strict a chronological order as possible.

Since it is often difficult for students to organize their ideas clearly, it may be useful to do outlining with them as a separate note taking activity in order to insure that this vital skill is learned well. Once the legend is organized in the students’ minds—the events and characters are in proper sequence—it is time to think about writing the legend.

Day Four:

THE ROUGH DRAFT

With outlines in hand, the students are ready to begin writing the first drafts of their legends. It is important that they realize they are writing a tale, so it is at this point that the teacher steps in as structural coordinator.

- A. Put a list of possible opening phrases on the board: “Once upon a time; Long long ago; In the beginning” etc. The students’ legends must read like legends and must therefore begin in this fashion.
- B. The body of the legend is left up to the students. As long as they are following their pre-approved outlines, everything should progress properly.
- C. The last paragraph of the legend should be devoted to a moral—the purpose or lesson of the tale. Tales were told expressly to teach something and therefore, the students’ legends must also contain morals or lessons.

Day Five:

THE LEGEND

The day has finally arrived to put the finishing touches on the legends. Students copy over their first drafts, incorporating any corrections and doing any last minute polishing that may be necessary.

- A. The teacher may suggest that students with drawing ability design covers for their myths.
- B. The group may also want to include illustrations within the legend.
- C. The legend may be accompanied by a time line illustrating the main events which took place during the particular time in history. In short, any cosmetic embellishment that the student might wish to undertake would be done at this time.

For the following weeks:

All the material has been presented, countless Puerto Rican folktales have been read and analyzed, students have created original legends. Now, the teacher may wish to present the legends as skits for other students possibly as part of a festival. The transformation of the legends is not complicated. Staging is rather simple and quite entertaining.

- A. Make the characters from the legends come to life. Each student is responsible for one character since the legends have the same number of characters as students per group. The best way to make a character come to life is to make a visual representation of the character. This can be done in any number of ways. Students could make sock puppets to represent the characters and put on puppet shows using their original legends. They could get even more involved in the activity by making paper mache masks which they would paint, decorate and wear to act out the legends themselves.
- B. Each student then plays the part of a character in the legend. Using dialogue from the legend, students would reenact the stories. One student from each group would act as narrator and give a brief introduction to the legend explaining what was taking place in the skit, and perhaps the reasons the group had for writing the particular legend.

By the end of the year, students have gained a storeroom of knowledge about Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican people through the country's folk tradition. They have also learned to be more creative and hopefully will not be reluctant to explore other cultures on their own. The key to understanding is a willingness to explore new and varied avenues of thinking. It is our hope as educators that, through knowledge and exploration, the students will gain a clear understanding of people and events which affect their lives.

ANOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Background sources

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