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Researching Columbus: Encounters and Exchanges

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At the present time I teach English to fifth and sixth graders at Betsy Ross Arts Magnet School. Because our school is an arts magnet school, fully staffed by academic teachers and artists, our children are given a very full program. Ideally the students would be involved in a collaboration between the arts and the academics. Unfortunately, however, this is not the case. Both groups become too involved in teaching or at least introducing the mandatory basics and get inundated by the demands of following the curriculum. As an English teacher, I am responsible for working with my students in all areas of communication skills—spelling and grammar, as well as reading and writing. The writing we practice is both creative and expository. Most students, I think, really like creative writing assignments because they are free to draw upon their imaginations and because they can also use their own experiences. They like being given the chance to explore freely, even if they are given a topic or a suggestion.

Expository writing, however, has been less successful with my students. The essay contests draw a groan and the results usually show this lack of enthusiasm. Recently I have also noticed, at least in my school, an interest by administrators, parents and some staff in introducing the students to “research” projects. This year many of the artists assigned research projects to the students. Most of these seemed to follow the form of studying the lives of certain artists. I am not sure how successful these research projects were in terms of originality, but I thought they were an interesting attempt to bridge a gap between the arts and the academics. I am always interested in finding new ways to engage the interest of my students in reading, writing and learning, but am also always trying to find ways to connect with the arts experiences of a Magnet school. I think this unit, combining research with reading, with an arts oriented product, could do this.

Since this is the year to take advantage of the interest in Christopher Columbus and his voyages, I plan to center the unit on Columbus and the exploration and settlement of the islands. I will also try to include as much as possible on the span of years around 1492 on both sides of the ocean. Already a lot of material on Columbus is available, and students are interested because they have been hearing so much. Is Columbus a hero? Is he a villain? Was he a failure? He did not do what he set out to do and he never fully realized this. Students will be hearing various opinions so they should be able to come up with their own opinions.

Objectives

1. The students will read a biography of Columbus and be able to map out at least one of his voyages.
2. The students will read a version of the log of Columbus and keep an individual log or diary.
3. To keep a literature connection and to start to understand the culture of the people Columbus met, the students will read some mythology of the peoples of the islands and Mexico.
The students will research (learn more about) on their own some aspect of the discovery of
4. the new world and share or demonstrate this learning for the whole class. Students can work individually or in small groups.
The students will learn or go through the process of researching for information. They will be
5. expected to ask questions, to read, to watch, to take notes, to record sources and to produce a bibliography of at least three sources.

For one common reading, students will read a biography of Columbus which is both interesting and accessible to fifth and sixth grade readers. This book, *Christopher Columbus, Admiral of the Ocean Sea* by Jim Haskins, is an excellent introduction to the story of the discovery of the New World. It informs the reader about Columbus, his family and background, making it clear what is known and what is assumed according to the custom of the times. The student sees Columbus as an eager explorer, a self-taught but, brilliant navigator, but also as a man who makes some big mistakes in judgment. The four voyages of Columbus are all detailed as much as possible, especially the first. Maps show the routes of all the voyages, and various illustrations show artists' versions of Columbus, the voyages and the landings. The politics of the time are also discussed so that students have some understanding of that time period. They see that slavery, for example, was already considered as a profitable commercial enterprise, and that Africa had been "discovered" and to some extent explored and exploited. They realize that the zest for adventure was important, but the quest and desire for gold and power was all important; that although Columbus could persuade Ferdinand and Isabella to finance his dream, he lost his influence as the gold did not materialize; that although he was granted authority over the lands he discovered, he was a poor administrator and an even poorer politician, and ended up in jail for a time.

Also available is a book which is a highly edited version of his log, *I Columbus*. This is a very easy book for younger readers, but a book which could also be used as a stimulus for keeping a log or a diary. Although it is easy to read, this is also a perfect book for young people to get the feeling and the excitement of the first voyage. Columbus details his problems with the crew and with the weather and discusses the provisions he has on board. I think it will give students a feeling that they have an insight into the mind of Columbus and that they also can keep their own journals. I will have them keep daily short journals.

Although I am interested in having the students research and learn on their own, I do not want to get away from a literature connection. I also think it is very important for the students to understand the Taino people as real people and not as ignorant savages or as noble primitives. I will introduce the students to a myth of the Taino people called *Atariba and Niguayona*. This lovely myth, which in the version I will use is told in English and Spanish, details the story of a young boy, Niguayona, who sees that his best friend Atariba is very ill. No one knows what to do. Not even the bohique, the village healer, could cure her. The little boy is very worried, but a macaw comes to him and tells him that if he can find the caimoni tree, the fruit will save Atariba. He goes on a quest for the fruit, taking with him only a cassava cake that his mother has packed for him. Although very young, he is not afraid of the dark or the unknown, only of failing to find the fruit to save Atariba. Because he listens to the forces of nature, they combine to help him and he saves Atariba. They grow up to be leaders and heroes of the Taino people.

This is a simple but complex myth and a lot can be done with it. This particular edition is beautifully illustrated with authentic depictions of Taino life. This can lead quite naturally two ways—the study of more mythology and the understanding of the Taino culture. The Taino people cultivated cassava root (manioc) as the mainstay of their way of life. As a result, their major god was Yucaju, meaning “giver of cassava” and images of Yucaju, called zemis, carved from stone in the shape of volcanoes, were in all their dwelling places. Smaller zemis were buried in the fields and worn around their necks so that the people were always conscious of the presence of Yucaju. The illustrations show the kinds of houses the people lived in, the way of making cassava bread and the hammocks they used for sleeping.

Another story the students will read is *Encounter* by Jane Yolen. This beautifully illustrated book depicts the landing as told by a young Taino boy who is immediately suspicious of these strange newcomers. Again although the story and the telling is simply done, the impact is powerful. The illustrations show Taino culture and beliefs and how these people would view the strange hairy beings landing on their shores. The gifts which were exchanged showed the regard with which each group was held—the Tainos gave the Spaniards cotton balls and spears to fish with, while the sailors gave bells and beads. The Tainos feasted the invaders with pepper pot stew and cassava bread and fish, and taught them to smoke.

I will have other myths for the students to read, especially from the Mayan, a selection from the “Popol Vuh,” and a creation myth from the Sumu Indians of Honduras, “Sun Papa.” These will connect with the study of the early history—customs, encounters, explorations. So much is made of the “noble primitive savage” that I think it important for the students to realize that the native peoples had their own strong cultures and their own agendas in dealing with the invaders.

Students will be writing their own myths as well. What would these people make of the explorers? What kind of mythology would be created from the first encounter? Could the students create myths that would illustrate the landing of Columbus from the Taino point of view? What could follow the end of *Encounter* as Columbus leaves with some of the Taino people, including the narrator of the story? What kind of myth could students create to explain the strangeness of these beings?

The research projects that the students will do will be process oriented. I want the students to learn about the various ways they can gain information. How can they learn about the attitudes of the early explorers towards the native peoples they met? Some of the early or source reading might be too difficult, but what about paintings of the period? I want to help students really look at and understand what they are seeing. What can they learn from looking at these early paintings? How can they try to learn about the feelings of the native peoples?

The process will be the important part. Choosing a topic, formulating questions, asking more questions, taking notes, learning from the questions and deciding on a final activity which will illuminate and illustrate the information—these will be the real activities. How can the students use the computer effectively and properly? How can they learn to use it as a tool, as an aid to research? How can they decide on other ways to find information? I will insist they must use different kinds of sources. For example I have taped the PBS series on Columbus which would be available for student use. Perhaps we could arrange trips to the Yale Art Gallery. I have material from the Circa 1492 exhibit at the National Gallery in Washington. The Knights of Columbus has an exhibit on Columbus that will be open until October of 1993. I will also have photographs and videotape of the replicas of the Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria that recently visited New London.

Whatever the topic, wherever they gain the information, students will need to follow specific guidelines and timetables. They will learn proper note-taking and outlining of information and learn how to include proper

bibliographical formats.

I have always resisted doing “research” projects because I have found that most students copy from encyclopedias. Now we have available in every school encyclopedias built into the computers and I have seen students hand in as papers, print-outs from the computers. Because of this and because I teach in an arts magnet school, I plan to have products other than written ones. How can students share what they have learned other than in a paper. How can they prove they have done research? For example students could learn and demonstrate some of the food exchanges made by Columbus and the natives. What were the ships like? What was life really like on the ships? I hope to see products such as murals, portraits, demonstrations, skits, models—I think that students can show their research in a variety of ways.

Strategies:

The students will have some common experiences. They will have read the biography and the log of Columbus and will have discussed many of the problems he encountered. Many questions are raised in the book and the students can think about learning more. Another book which many students should enjoy is *I Sailed with Columbus* by Miriam Schlein, a fictionalized version, narrated by a cabin boy, but containing accurate information. What kinds of provisions were carried in the ships? What were some of the food exchanges made by the Natives and the Europeans? What were other valuable exchanges? Why did the Europeans bring hawks bells? What more can you learn about the African slave trade? Students will be instructed to start asking questions and defining what it is that they will research. They should design a question or a hypothesis to be answered.

Next the students will design the shape their project will be. As I want to be sure they are learning how to research, how to find information without copying it, I will help students to brainstorm the various forms they could use to design projects, without having written projects. Examples are: Construction of a scale model of a ship, or map, or land as the end product; performance of an original play centered around the topic; a multi-media project such as a news paper about the topic, a video-tape produced by the group or class or a radio show. Students could “teach” what they had learned to the rest of the class or create a panel discussion. Students might wish to create a class project which would involve the whole group. Some projects lend themselves well to sharing, and for others, students must decide how to share what they have learned.

Once these topics have been decided, students need to learn the various ways they can obtain information regarding their topic. One requirement will be that they would use a minimum of three different sources when gathering information on that topic. I don’t want students running to our Compton’s Encyclopedia on the computer, typing in the topic, printing and presto! Information is ready. They need to use other sources. Actually I will encourage topics that are not readily available on the Computer Encyclopedia.

One of the first things students will need to do for their research projects is to write a list of questions that they want answered as a result of their investigation. The list will vary according to each student’s topic and students will have to come up with their own. However questions such as: Why was it this way? What might have caused this? How will it change in the future? Was it valid, true or believable? How has it changed? How do people feel about it? How did people feel about it? What have been the effects? What evidence do you have? What are the meanings and implications? What would happen if.....? What would be another way to.....? How would things be different if it hadn’t happened? What would you do about.....? Which is more important,.....or.....? Why do you need to know about this? How could you prove it? How is.....related to.....? How doescompare to? These are just a few examples of the kinds of questions students need to formulate for themselves to give a focus and a direction for their research.

Students should learn to take notes. I have always felt that good note-taking is the most difficult and most important element of research. However most students do not know how to take notes. They do not realize that taking notes in an orderly manner will mean that it will be easier for them to organize the information when they are ready to complete their project, What are ways to help them with note-taking?

1. They should start by writing down the specific information they are researching or the questions they want answered.
2. I will suggest that they use note cards and limit the information they write on each card to one main fact and two or three supporting statements.
3. The information does not have to be in complete sentences but should be very clear so that each card will make sense when looked at later without the source.
Students must always identify the source of each piece of information. This is so important and yet many times students forget to write down the name of the book or the film or the
4. person on the card when they record the information. Because they will need to have a bibliography, and because they may need to check facts one more time, they need to be sure they keep track of their sources.
5. If students copy information, they must use quotation marks.
6. Try to encourage students to paraphrase information and to write it in their own words.
Remind them that they still have to identify the source of the information.
7. Use a variety of sources for information.

These are some of the elements of note-taking that should prove useful to students. I plan to schedule student conferences to check progress, and to check note-cards. This way I can see if students are having problems and need extra help. If students are progressing and researching correctly, I will be able to tell from the note-cards. Whatever a student has chosen for a final project and however he or she chooses to share it, the basic work of finding information must be done first.

Even if the product of the research is arts-oriented such as a skit or a mural or a series of drawings, the resources used by the student must be documented. I will expect a bibliography, a list of all the sources the student has used. I will give students practice in listing sources, and the form that they should use for various materials and sources—such as books, interviews, magazines, letters, brochures, newspaper articles and films and television programs. Although I do not want a written product from my students, I do want them to go through the same process of information gathering and recording. The bibliography will be an important part of their research.

Once the students have been working and researching, they should form some opinions about Columbus and the whole “discovery” vs “encounter” debate. What about the place of Columbus in history? What do they think his greatest contribution was? Can we set up a debate or some form of panel discussion about the merits of Columbus and his achievements? Someone would have “discovered” the New World eventually anyway. Would later have been better? Would the native peoples have been more prepared to meet with explorers in the future? Was Columbus as bad as those who came after him? What about today? Should we celebrate the five-hundredth anniversary of the landing?

Working with the arts department, I will try to connect learning more about Columbus, his travels and explorations, the views of his contemporaries and the reactions of the native Americans, and the ramifications of his arrival and the arts and crafts and materials of the time. I think this could be an exciting learning

experience and I look forward to it.

Lesson PlanS

1. Mythology: The Encounters

Reading the mythology of the period will be important because the myths reflect the beliefs of the period and in some cases the customs of the tribe. The Taino were peaceful people with strong religious beliefs.

Atariba and Niguayona is one example. After reading and discussing the myth, the students can act out the story, showing the animals and objects that help Niguayona in his quest to save his friend. This is a very simple story. Students can make stick puppets of the main characters and use the illustrations to help them recreate some of the bird, animals and vegetation. Also available are materials like the Dover coloring book of Columbus and a bi-lingual coloring book which give good examples of the life of the Tainos.

Encounter can be used as a lead-in to myth writing. After Columbus left the island with some of the natives, what happened? How did the Tainos view this? How did they incorporate the encounter into their mythology? The students will create their own myths. Once they have understood some of the culture and customs of these people, they should be able to write some imaginative stories, using the customs of the Tainos they have learned about. I would particularly want my students to dramatize the encounter by creating the myths that they think the Tainos would have told. What did they (Tainos) see or feel when the big ships landed and these strange looking men appeared? Why would they hold a feast? What would a feast have been like? How did they feel when some of their people disappeared? What would they ask of their great god? What stories would they tell around the fire as they smoked their pipes?

Petroglyphs were drawings which were scratched on rock by the Tainos used to idolize their gods. Although the Tainos did not have an alphabet or a written language, these pictures express their beliefs. I have pictures of some of these lovely petroglyphs and will have my students write myths that could connect with them. Students can also illustrate with *cemies* (*zemies*), the representations of the gods that the Tainos had every where in their lives. These were protectors that guarded them from evil and guided them dally.

Lesson Plan 2 The Voyages

Using the biography and the journal as the starting points, the students will learn about the actual trip across the ocean, concentrating on the first voyage, although some students may want to focus on the later voyages.

How did Columbus start his trip? What were the maps that he might have shown the King and Queen and everybody else? How and where did he get his boats? What was the expense of outfitting such an expedition? What did the ships carry? What were the provisions? Who was the crew?

Students can research all these aspects. On a large outline of a replica of the *Santa Maria*, they can locate the sections and parts. Only Columbus, the Admiral, had a room and a bed. Everyone else, including the owners of the boats, who were on the journey, slept on the deck, or below in the hold. The decks were steeply pitched, so the sleeping arrangements must have been very uncomfortable. The sailors did not sleep in hammocks until after the encounter, when they first saw them being used by the native peoples.

How was a ship prepared for such a journey into the unknown? How did they know what to take. Students can write in their journals—what would they take if they were going on such a trip? What would they expect to be provided? Food for such a journey was a problem. Meat was salted and could keep. The bread was hardtack,

which was flour and water baked and dried to a hard rock-like state. It would last for a while, and then become full of weevils. Water became brackish and wine grew sour. The hot food, usually some kind of meat stew, was cooked in a fire box, on the deck. This was the only fire allowed on the boat, and if a storm blew up, was immediately put out.

The crew was a mixed group of Spaniards, Portuguese, Frenchmen, Germans and Dutchmen. Most of the crew were expected to tend to any kind of task. Others were skilled tradesmen, like carpenters, sailmakers and cooks. The cooper was expected to look after the barrels which held the food and water, while the caulker was responsible for keeping the seams of the ship watertight. The important members of the crew were the captain, his mate, the boatswain, the pilot, and the steward. The mate was the captain's assistant, and helped the pilot with the navigation. The boatswain was in charge of all the ship's gear such as sails ropes, anchors, etc. The steward was responsible for the food and stores and for the ship's boys, who were young lads who carried out all the small but numerous tasks about the ship, such as turning the hour glass on half-hour shifts and singing out the time. Many of the sailors or ordinary seamen were criminals who had signed on rather than spend time in jail and who knew little about sailing.

The students can research this and more information about the journey. They can keep their own logs as Columbus kept his. What will they include in their journals? What kinds of jobs would they like on the boat? What would they hate to do? What kind of adventure can they liken this journey to? Are there any frontiers left to try? Students can role play a day on board the Santa Maria, taking a part from the list of the crew members. How close are they to land? What are they saying to the Admiral?

Lesson Plan 3: Exchanges

What were some of the exchanges between the New World and the Old World? What can we show?

The food exchanges are the most obvious and we will spend sometime preparing foods from both worlds and creating charts and games showing the exchanges.

Examples:

Plants:

OLD WORLD Herbs, rice, wheat, oats, grapes, citrus fruit, melons, bananas, onions, salad greens, sugar cane, fruit stones.

NEW WORLD Maize, pumpkin, cotton, squashes, manioc. cocoa, sweet potatoes. guava, tomato, papaya, beans, potatoes, rubber, peanuts, tobacco.

Animals:

OLD WORLD Goats, pigs, sheep, dogs, horses.

NEW WORLD Turkey, parrots, llamas, alpaca, rattlesnakes.

Products/Things:

OLD WORLD Swords, saddles, banners, plow, crosses, gunpowder, sailing ships.

NEW WORLD Wooden spears, hoes, canoes, hammocks, carving tools.

These are only a few of the many exchanges. The food exchanges are particularly fascinating, because I think we have some misconceptions. I had always thought, for example, that sugar cane came from the Caribbean Islands. Columbus, however, brought sugar cane, which originated in the far East on his second voyage. Students can develop games and quiz each other on the origins. How has the “discovery” of these foods changed the eating habits of people? Think of Italy and pasta before the tomato was finally utilized as food. Even years after the original encounter, people were afraid to eat tomatoes.

Another activity for the students makes use of their journals. As sailors they are investigating these strange islands, and the plants they see. I will bring in examples of these “strange” foods, such as sweet potatoes, peanuts, corn, pineapples, strawberries, tomatoes, squashes and peppers. The “sailors” are to describe in their journals these strange foods describe foods never before seen in Europe. How would they describe them to their friends? They have to think about color, shape, size, texture, and taste. Is the food juicy, dry, bitter, tangy, sweet or sour?

One activity I would like to try with my students is to make cassava bread from the manioc or yucca root. Since this was the food staple of the Taino tribes, it was the source of their culture and religion. The manioc root was peeled, grated, and because it was so starchy, squeezed of its juice. The Taino developed all kinds of elaborate ways of straining the yucca, and used the juice to flavor the pepper pot stew. Once the yucca is strained, the root is pressed into cakes and baked on hot stones. The cassava bread was then placed on the roofs to dry further. The cakes would last for a long time. At the Taino feast the sailors would find the cassava bread, even though rather bland, far preferable to their rotted hard bread. I think the students will enjoy researching and then preparing the cakes. Many pictures are available of the way the Tainos prepared the bread, and the yucca or manioc is available at Spanish grocery stores. Manioc is also the source for tapioca.

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SUGGESTED FURTHER RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

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PBS Video tape of “Columbus and the Age of Discovery.”

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