

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute 1998 Volume III: Art and Artifacts: the Cultural Meaning of Objects

Artifacts: Bringing the Past Back to Life -- The Mexican Case

Curriculum Unit 98.03.10 by Luis Recalde

Bringing the past back to life is a difficult task that requires knowledge of the past and identification of objects of culture necessary to make this happen. It is a matter of communication and focus. I have identified the focus of our work. I want to center on the city of Tenochtitlan (now Mexico City) to bring back some of the past at the time that the Conquistadores penetrated into the Mexican highlands in 1519 in this curriculum unit directed to students of the fifth grade level. Our media are writing, drawing, painting and building models of the city with the help and collaboration of other teachers and students. The use of chronicles, books, maps, paintings, codexes and models is essential for the reconstruction of the most important parts of the city. One of our objectives in undertaking these tasks is to address historical issues proper to the academic development of the student. We also address academic issues of literacy and mathematics together with the virtues of the arts. Our purpose is to instill critical thinking in the student, to promote research and writing skills, to tap the artistic talents of students and to utilize mathematical thinking in the reconstruction of models. Further, we want students to have a sense of how history is made and how it works. The use of task assessment lists is an opportunity for the student to exercise self-reflection and growth.

I want to recreate this majestic city by building models accompanied by writings, paintings and drawings depicting the culture of the city. Everything starts and ends in the ceremonial center of Tenochtitlan, the temenos, in the world of the Mexica this sacred enclosure contained several monumental constructions from which the affairs of the government took place. At the center of all was the great monument of Mexican power and ideology--el Templo Mayor--the great temple. This represents the pivotal point for our construction of the model. It is easier to build from the major pyramid out to the walls surrounding the sacred precinct, building all the major structures in order of importance. In Tenochtitlan this center embodied the incarnation of power, both temporal and spiritual. Here, the great temple, the pyramid, embodied the sacred mountain of the genesis of the Mexica. It was the beginning and the end of the pilgrimage. The forces of life and death come together at a point in this structure, the most sacred place in the Mexican realm. Once we have the location of this center in place, the rest of the city can be built more easily. Reading some of the chronicles one can come up with approximations about the location of certain monuments and buildings. The palaces where the Spanish stayed surrounded the sacred precinct. The texts of the time and the archeological sites corroborate the oral traditions of the witnesses of the day. Bernal Diaz del Castillo has one of the best descriptions of the palaces where the Spanish soldiers were housed, but there are others too.

In a previous curriculum unit I have focussed on the symbols of power in the city of Tenochtitlan. Students built a model of Tenochtitlan out of paper and balsa wood that could be carried around by rolling it like a map.

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It was in a way a three dimensional map that could be placed vertically or horizontally anywhere. That particular unit talks about the symbols of power in the city at the time of the conquest. Our unit now will benefit from ideas initiated then, but will incorporate new vistas and insights about objects of culture in what used to be one of the most powerful cities in the world. Now we are interested in bringing back to life the past through the interpretation of objects that incarnate this powerful past. This means that after a rigorous analysis of an artifact, going through several steps of careful scrutiny, emerges a better understanding of that particular object in itself and in the context of the culture. In the lectures and literature of the seminar we have been able to assimilate methods of studying and analyzing an object of culture that can increase the understanding of the cultural value of that particular object, and, these in turn can give a better and clearer picture of the culture of the Mexicans. We have applied the same procedure in exercises in the classroom, taking a cultural object, and placing it under the scrutiny of the eye. We made a description of the object, including observations of the lines, colors, shapes, textures, points of articulation, values and icons. Once this is done we have defined new terms for the student so as to make them understandable. The "iconography" is one of these terms. Students have looked for icons of all sorts. The texture also augments understanding of the object, for example, were sculptures painted? Once this was done we were able, sometimes with difficulty because students have so many ideas, to include feelings and ideas stemming directly from the formal analysis.

Coming back to Tenochtitlan, the most powerful object of all would be the Templo Mayor, since this edifice was "the quintessential sacred space within the Aztec empire." This building had at least three values for the Mexica culture. First, for millions of people, "...it was the axis mundi of the empire, the main center in the political, economic and religious sense. It was the great meeting point of heaven, earth and the underworld from which emanate supernatural authority for priests and rulers to organize the world." The Templo Mayor was also an image mundi; it served as an image of the power of the ruling class and a stage for its dramas of power. Finally, this central structure of the empire served also for keeping in motion activities of the ruling class that promoted economic mobility and authority in the empire such as the redistribution of luxury goods on a massive scale and human sacrifices.

To start this task of reconstruction, we have taken the old model as an example of what could be done when we want to build a city. Students analyzed the elements and materials utilized in the construction of that model. This identification and familiarization with Tenochtitlan were matched with the readings of texts of the conquest and exercises on a small scale modeling some of the architecture of the city. At the same time, we gave students a few task assessment lists underlining the important aspects of working with a model. Students reviewed the task assessment lists, in some instances generating new questions for the list. It is a fair procedure to advise students about what is expected of them and how they are going to be evaluated. It is also important to make this evaluation a participatory activity for several reasons: students learn how to think and organize their ideas and their work; they get engaged with language to develop critical thinking strategies; they learn about the task and what to do with it, and they have an opportunity for self-reflection. This is probably one of the most important steps in the process of building a model or of any other task performed in a learning environment. They have to stop and reflect and think about their own work. This is a path for improvement in both their writing and analytical skills. They have the opportunity to check their progress and to come up with recommendations for the next step. In this way students feel, rightfully, that they have control of their learning, and they get involved in class activities more readily and with interest.

When students learned that this city of such grandeur was destroyed by the Conquistadores, their reaction was of puzzlement that little by little turned to pain and then to anger. This kind of reaction is normal for their age group. It just reflects their relationship with the world. They want to build. They want to be the

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mythological heroes. They do not understand destruction on a massive scale. Nonetheless, when asked whether they would like to use again the materials of the model made out of paper and balsa of the old Tenochtitlan, their eyes lit up in a sign of approval. These same students ripped the old model to pieces alleging that they were the Spanish Conquistadores destroying the old beautiful city. Once this old city was destroyed, and once students got to taste a little symbolic exercise of destruction, they were able to play with the different objects from the city. They rearranged the buildings into centers and neighborhoods. They were fond of building with ritualistic centers and markets. One student actually placed the Templo Mayor as a center of the building patterns on the new model. This is still a movable model, and students play and experiment with it. Yet, the center always seems to come back to the structure of the great pyramid with the two temples on top, Tlatoc's and Huitzilopochtli's.

We have designed several exercises in balance and symmetry in a way that resemble the symmetries of the structures of Tenochtitlan. The dualities inscribed in the pantheon of the religion and philosophy of the Mexica depict a balance attained in the construction of the buildings and in the layout of the city itself. This type of mathematical and philosophical approach is attuned to the curriculum of the student and includes the exercises that we experienced in the seminar. More concretely, symmetry is a part of the curriculum in mathematics, as is the study of three-dimensional figures. The latter, coupled with an elaborate program that includes the necessary reading, writing, research and critical thinking, is indispensable for putting this project together. As noted before, building the model has involved the expertise of other teachers and students in the school. We must mention in particular the help of our art teacher, Victor Leger, a member of the seminar, who has been instrumental in bringing forward the design and some of the calculations of the model.

The reading and writing exercises have to do with the issue of student literacy. As we define it in this work, literacy is the ability of a student to identify valuable reading material and the ability to select and discriminate relevant reading and writing materials that would serve as a stepping-stone to further literacy, applicable and usable in the classroom setting and in the real world. It is also the ability of the student to read and write with proficiency. Students are at different levels in this area, just as much as in any other academic field. The matter of literacy in the classroom has to be addressed with fairness, patience and information based on facts. Typically in a fifth grade classroom of a fifth grader there are some students who excel in reading and writing, and others who have serious difficulty keeping on task, concentrating and elaborating a piece of work. In this unit we want to address some aspects of this problem by exploring possible paths of action that would enhance reading and writing skills

Our task is to address this problem and give a sound directive toward feasible solutions. It has been a serendipitous surprise to discover that some students who would otherwise do very little academic work in the classroom demonstrate in the presence of models, murals, blueprints and archaeological fragments critical thinking skills and a motivation to find things out in order to make sense of the pieces in question. Their interest is multifaceted. Some students might like to draw a scene from a text. Others might take a fancy with creating large murals extracted or copied from an ancient building in Mexico. We have seen students relish the production of maps and models. This is a poetic experience in the true sense of the word. It is poetic because the learning experience leads from the whole to the part and from the part to the whole. The student who is in search of the whole by means of developing a part of the city is using a synecdochical relationship in the process. A student looking through a codex that survived the fires of the conquest finds a calendric image that he or she would like to reproduce with a narrative text. At this point the student begins to comprehend and use certain key skills necessary for the reproduction, transmission or transcription of this particular object into another medium. The student finds a piece that resembles a calendric jaguar, abstracted and stylized, and wants to take it along, away from the text, and make it his/her possession. This is the first step in a

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complex chain of mental events that leads to some level of decoding the original text. Literacy is taking place at several levels. Furthermore, this particular student who has fallen under the infectious power of a rich image would like to assimilate this image within his/her frame of mind. It is indispensable for this student to create new mental patterns and new relationships constructed in meaning represented in language, drawings, models or the like.

This learning experience is of interest to us as teachers and students of the processes of learning in the classroom because it presents to us opportunities for replication of the same procedure in other settings, and because it sheds light on some of the successful strategies that capitalize on the taste and interests of the students of today. The poetic structure of the procedure gives way now to an ironic twist in which the underachiever who did not want to do academic work now is in the front line in search of methods and ways to express an innate interest freshly discovered. This student now wants to find out the means to get this information, and once it is obtained, what to do with it and how to make sense of it. Many times this student cannot go ahead because the level of skill is very low. This is unavoidably a time of revelation for the student and the teacher because both are in search of solutions. Both want the text to render its mysteries, telling the story of Tenochtitlan with expression and order. The best immediate solution to this kind of predicament has been to pair the student with a counterpart who will help him/her and benefit by it. Teamwork works wonders; soon both students are benefiting from the experience.

When the interest of the student is built up through a meaningful learning experience, motivation gets heightened, a chain of thought follows, and he or she will search for ways to get answers to their visions. The problem at this point becomes the level of academic background the students has and the understanding of the work involved. So far my students working with Tenochtitlan, who were not doing high academic work before the project, are working with fascination and eagerness to prove to themselves that they can do it. This has to do with the interest level involved in the complexity of the task. They see the need to learn skills and methods so as to be able to participate in a project that they see as "cool."

In the time of the Aztecs, the people who were in charge of carrying the information and writing it on the texts, the historians and the artists, were named tlacuilos. These people understood what the books said. The Mexican folk would say of the tlacuilos:

the ones who are looking, the ones who tell a story, the ones who turn noisily the leaves of the books of paintings, the ones who have in their power the ink black and red, the paintings. They take us, they guide us, they tell us the way.

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When my students start to build the pages of painted texts, they say of themselves that they have become tlacuilos. This is another irony, because these are students who would not initiate a project of a written text because of their aversion to reading and writing. They did not have any problem expressing their dislikes and will add that books are boring. One student said that the way that he read was through pictures. This is the way he did his homework. In spite of this, they have been able to overcome this problem by means of sharing their strengths. They are capitalizing on the things that they can do the best; then, after a few trials, they get better and want to try something more complicated. In this way we have come to have a variety of vignettes about a myriad of aspects of the metropolis. Students depart physically from the great pyramid. From there they start to draw the world around as they deem it could have been. The products are a variety of paintings and drawings based on contemporary texts. Each and every one of these paintings and drawings is going to be coupled with a formal analysis in narrative form. As time goes by and more observations about the work of the student are available, new ways to reconstruct meaning will be elucidated. At this point all the work of the students is collected to create a text by the class and for the class. These vignettes will be part of a portfolio where students will see their efforts come to fruition.

The study of the history of the conquest of the empire of the Aztecs is a fascinating experience for students and teachers equally. Focusing on a theme such as Tenochtitlan has been of great interest to students of the fifth grade at Vincent E. Mauro Elementary School. This work has been going on for a few years; there has been several classes working with models of Tenochtitlan continuously during the last six years. As time went by, new students participated in the re-building of the city and added what they thought the city appeared like to the Spanish invaders. In this process, cities were built and cities were destroyed. Students used pieces from old cities to make a fresh new Tenochtitlan, adding their own flavor and color into it. Each time a new Tenochtitlan has been re-built, a new detail and piece of information about the city came to light.

In the beginning of the year we began planning the possibility of creating a model on water. We worked with the mathematical aspect of it and decided that perhaps it would be helpful to start with a small model of the city on a small scale and build next to it a large scale model of the sacred center of Tenochtitlan. In this way, the 20 square mile city would be appreciated better because we would have a detailed view of the most important section of it, and also a view of the entire area. Students will have the opportunity to apply an integrated approach of learning by applying mathematics, reading, writing and art. Students also will have the opportunity to do hands-on work. We must recall the commentary of one of our students when referring to reading, "I learn by looking at the pictures, that is fun." In the same way, there are students who learn by working directly with the object in question.

In this type of project we identify skills proper to the fifth grade student. Research and organizational skills have to be coupled with their writing and higher level thinking skills. Students have to be able to work in teams and to integrate the subjects into a synchronic view of the time of the conquest. They have to use their imagination to be able to recreate the beautiful city of the Aztecs as it appeared at that time. We have decided to include some assessments as an integral part of our unit. These assessments are composed of three parts: what is expected from the student, what the students thinks of his or her work, and what they actually got from the teacher. Students love to assess themselves. Here, they have the opportunity to think about what was difficult or easy in the task assigned. Each task has a purpose, a background, material, procedure and audience. The student gets this assessment list before the task is assigned. What is more, many times it is motivating and productive to make these assessment lists with student participation. In this way they take ownership of the task, and the assessment becomes integrated in the curriculum. This is assessment as instruction, process that not only serves for evaluating and motivating, but also for learning

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and instruction.

Mathematics is a necessary element in the development of this project. The Aztecs city has to be reconstructed on the basis of information recorded by chroniclers and people who were there. We also have information from archeological sites. The visions and models presented by other authors are also important. To all this we can add our own interpretations and imagination of what Tenochtitlan could have been like and how it probably looked. There are several reliable sources dating from the time of the conquest. The writings of Cortes, Bernal Diaz del Castillo, and Francisco de Aguilar are some of the sources in which we can actually envision this marvelous urban jewel. There are also texts by the natives who were witnesses of the conquest of the city that present a vision from the point of view of the vanguished. Green, turquoise, bright red and yellow, black and purple echo on the walls and pillars of Tenochtitlan. This was a city of gardens and plants. Birds of all colors and shapes adorned its gardens and parks. The private mansions of the lords spilled over with opulence, power and wealth. In the streets and markets the presence of the diversity and enchantment of the mesa and the rain forests of the empire reflected a people filled with confidence and pride. Bernal speaks to us about the market of Tlatelolco where one could see an infinity of products from the most remote places of the continent. Conservatively he would estimate a crowd of about 40,000 souls busily exchanging and working on their products. Diego Rivera depicted this scene in his murals. Our job in the classroom is to use the curriculum guidelines to be able to incorporate skills of a multicultural and multidisciplinary nature to create our unit including and integrating the information and skills learned in the seminar at Yale.

The model of the city is a real motivator and organizer in this direction. Students are beginning to see a different model in their minds. We want to build a pyramid that will represent the Templo Mayor for use as the center of another model. This new model is beginning to be built in an imaginary place in the school grounds. The scale is larger than the one on water (8'x 4.5'). This new scale covers the school grounds and it is imagined. It might utilize markers to make it feasible. These two markers representing Texcoco, and Chapultepec, for example, might correspond with some area in the school grounds. We might use chalk or lime to mark the borders of the city using this scale. Let's suppose then that the scale is one mile to a meter. If Tenochtitlan was about twenty square miles, then we will use about twenty square meter as our model in the school grounds. We will draw the shape of the island and define the different neighborhoods of the city. All around it is lake Texcoco. The avenue and causeways are marked and will serve as a way to place the cities around the lake.@\$:

The objects of culture mentioned in the narrations of the Conquistadores as they advanced to the city of Tenochtitlan are varied and rich. There is a bulk of information about the use of the calendars in the Aztec empire. We have a combination of at least three calendric systems of numerations in the so called "sun calendar." We have explored in the class the ritualistic calendar of 260 days (tonalpohualli), in which twenty different days work in cycles of thirteen days. This corresponds to the solar calendar of 365 days. When these two calendars are aligned, the Mexicans came out with a ritualistic calendar of 52 years. The Templo Mayor was the ritualistic center of this cosmos. By far the best descriptions of the palaces are the ones of Bernal Diaz del Castillo. He tells us of Iztapalapa, a city at the footsteps of Tenochtitlan. "They [palaces] were very spacious and well built, of magnificent stone, cedar wood, and the wood of other sweet-smelling trees, with great rooms and courts, which were a wonderful sight, and all covered with awnings of woven cotton."

I this unit we will learn many exciting things about Mexico at the time of the Conquest, but also about Mexico at the present time. After all, what good is it to learn about the past if there is no linkage to our lives now? Students of the fifth grade understand this challenge, and are ready to take it.

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Lesson One

Analysis of a cultural object

Background information

Objects represent a myriad of images and ideas about the culture that they come from. They embody, by virtue of their structure and their history, an array of information about the culture and the people that created the object. An object of culture might contain information about the technological development of a civilization. It could also embody elements of poetry and art of the people that used it; the spirit of a culture could be present in it. In some of its physical characteristics the object can have information about the philosophy and the political and ideological organization of a culture.

Task

Students are to choose an object. It could be a picture, a painting, a picture of a painting, or an object in a museum. Whatever the case, this object of culture is going to be analyzed through very close and methodical observation of all its elements. First, students are going to establish the parameters of measurement of the object in all possible ways. The observations of the object and the organization of these observations are going to determine the depth of information and knowledge that we could attain of an object. For instance, we are going to record carefully the general characteristics of particular object. What is it? Is it a drawing? Perhaps a painting? Is it a piece of furniture? Then, once this is determined, students are going to talk about the lines of the object--the configuration of lines running horizontally, vertically and in an oblique direction. Once this is determined we are going to talk about two dimensional shapes. Are there any squares, triangles, circles, or any other shape that would gives the ground for finding three dimensional shapes?

This is exactly where we want to go. From two dimensions we go to three dimensions of the object or the image. Students in the process of observation and recording of these observations build a body of information that can be the grounds for further understanding of the object. Other elements are texture, color and the points of articulation of the different parts of the object. The virtue of this type of work is that things that seem to be non-existent in the object surface little by little, creating a basis for further development of information on other levels such as deduction and speculation.

Students take the next step in the path of knowledge of the object by formulating deduction. Students build information on facts and information of the object, and from there they should determine further other levels underlining the main characteristics of it such as use, price, age, ideological implications, power, etc.

Finally, the object that has been scrutinized and analyzed physically and deductively will open itself to further understanding by speculation and the power of the imagination. At this stage of the analysis, students should be allowed to run free with their imagination and creativity.

The natural closing of this exercise can be taken to the realm of investigation and research. Students could actually go to libraries and museums and find out about the history and cultural background of this object. All along this exercise students should write every step of the way. They should also be encouraged to talk about their vision, their findings and their opinions and suggestions on how to make this task better.

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Lesson two

Building pyramids

Background information

In Meso-America the building of a city was, as it is in any traditional society, an act of heroic dimensions that required a hero with extraordinary powers to accomplish. It existed, as Mercea Eliade has suggested, in a cyclical time that recurred ad infinitum. This is not the realm of history. This is the time of myths. Building a city always starts in the beginning of time, at that time. For the Aztecs, the building of the city of Tenochtitlan served as a realization of the power of their gods. The embodiment of the power of the earth and the gods was in the presence of a mountain. This is the origin of the power of life and death. The mountain has this power, and this power has to be represented symbolically. The pyramid is its embodiment, the representation or the powers that the Aztecs believed in. To build the city of the Aztecs we must first begin with the pyramid, and from this central piece we depart to other explorations of their culture.

The Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan represented the most sacred of places in the Aztec world. As noted above, it was here that the main transactions of the most important elements of power of the empire took place. Redistribution of goods, sacrificial rituals, and the regeneration of cultural values were enacted here, therefore the natural inclination to build this structure as a means to further construct other buildings in the city.

Task

Students are to build, using a scale appropriate for the classroom, a model of the main pyramid in the sacred precinct in the heart of Tenochtitlan. Students are to use a scale that would allow the growth of the city to take place in a manageable way. In reality, the size of the temenos, or sacred precinct, was about eleven hundred feet by one thousand feet. The height of the pyramid was about one hundred feet. These dimensions gives us the relation 11:10. In the same way, the pyramid in this scale is one. From here students could depart to build just about any part of the city. Our task now is to build the pyramid. In this way, we might say that if the pyramid had an altitude of about 4 inches, the city itself would extend about forty feet around.

@1H:Lesson Three Build the model of Tenochtitlan

Background Information

The city of Tenochtitlan was one of the largest cities of the world. This city was thought to be indestructible. It was thought to be the foundations of heaven.

Tenochtitlan
Proud of itself
Is the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan.
Here no one fears to die in war.
This is our glory.
This is Your Command,
Oh Giver of life!
Have this is mind, oh princes,

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Do not forget it.
Who could conquer Tenochtitlan?
Who could shake the foundations of heaven?
Aztec Poem

The building of Tenochtitlan is a large undertaking that needs to be planned well in advance with plenty of time to work on a regular basis. It is said that this city had about 60,000 public buildings. It is advisable to focus on only a portion of the city to depict the grandeur of its palaces and monuments. The temenos actually depicts its greatness. The presence of the Templo Mayor and the convergence of all the roads of the empire on it give an idea of the complexity of the Aztec world. Further, the city itself could not have any meaning without the construction of the chinampas, or floating gardens that made the Aztecs the most powerful nation in the area because that would be a people without food.

Task

Students are to construct a model of the city of Tenochtitlan, using manageable scale and archeological information extracted from books about the subject.

Materials

Glue

Construction paper

Balsa wood

Water paints

Brushes

Cardboard

Cotton

Procedure

- --Give students an assessment list about a model. And follow this through the task.
- --Cut wood and cardboard in accordance to the scale determined. We used the scale 10 by 11 by

1 when building the sacred precinct and the main pyramid. Cut it in small squares and rectangles.

Glue these shapes to build pyramids and little buildings. Glue them to the surface of the

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construction paper, making sure that the surface is the configuration of water, land and plazas. Make these configurations with color and texture. Use sand or dirt for this effect. Paint the little buildings and make sure that they follow the format of the archeological texts. Make sure that students enjoy this task.

VINCENT E MAURO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

LISTA DE EVALUACION DE TAREAS DE UN MODELO

Puntaje de la Evaluación

Posibles Puntaje Obtenido Elementos Puntos Propio Maestro 1. Nosotros prestamos atención
a las instrucciones con mucho cuidado
2. Hay una explicación clara de lo que intenta
demostrar el modelo.
3. Nuestro grupo pudo llegar a un acuerdo
sobre qué y cómo hacer el trabajo
4. Preparamos los materiales con cuidado
5. Pudimos hacer buenas observaciones
durante nuestro trabajo
6. La persona encargada de tomar notas
tomó la información generada en las
conversaciones del grupo

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7. Usamos medidas a escala y estimamos

cuando necesario			
8. Usamos colores, títulos, y líneas claras			
para expresar lo que era Tenochtitlán			
9. El trabajo es nítido y bien presentado.			
10.La estructura es fuerte y durable			
PUNTAJE TOTAL 100%			
VINCENT E MAURO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL			
PERFORMANCE TASK ASSESSMENT LIST FOR A MODEL OF TENOCHTITLAN			Assessment Points
	Points	Earned Assessment	
Elements	Possible Self Teacher		
We listened to the directions and instructions very carefully.			
2. There is a clear explanation of the			
Meaning of the model			
4. We prepared our materials carefully			
5. We were able to make good observations			
throughout our task			
6. Our recorder was able to keep track of the			
information generated in the big and			
information generated in the big and little chats in our group			

the elements of model carefully

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8.We used colors, titles and made clear
lines
10. The structure of the model is strong
and safe
TOTAL POINTS 100%

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Other Resources

The New Haven area has several resources for students to learn about Mexico. The Peabody Museum, the Yale Art Gallery and the Public Library are recommended for students and teachers as well. The Public Library in New Haven has a collection of videotapes about Mexico that students enjoy very much.

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