

The Ancient Civilizations of Mesoamerica and their Heritage

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INTRODUCTION

What This Unit Will Teach

The topic of my curriculum unit is “The Ancient Civilizations of Mesoamerica and their Heritage.” The region occupied by the ancient Aztec and Maya, nowadays generally referred to as Mesoamerica, is an area comprising southern and eastern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, western and southern Honduras, and the Pacific side of Central America as far south as Costa Rica.

I want to take my students into an amazing voyage of discovery to the land of their ancestors. By studying different aspects of the ancient cultures of Mesoamerica, I intend to introduce my students to their own history. The goal of this unit is to create a link of communication and knowledge between their heritage and their present lives.

In Ancient Mesoamerica, people shared a series of cultural characteristics, such as the two calendars of 260 and 365 days that permutated in a cycle approximating fifty-two years. They developed hieroglyphic writings, created screen fold books and built masonry ball courts. Even though the people that inhabited this area were of many distinct cultures, who spoke different languages, nevertheless there was extensive contact through out the region over time due to migration, trade, conquest and pilgrimage (Taube 7).

In comparison with some civilizations of the Old World, such as Sumer and Egypt, the civilizations of Mesoamerica are of relative recent origin. The first great culture of this region was the Olmec. By twelfth century BC the Olmec were constructing ceremonial centers of worship and massive sculptures representing their gods and leaders. Another early civilization was the Zapotecs. By 600 BC they were recording information of historical significance. By 300 AD, an array of complex societies had begun to develop over much of ancient Mesoamerica. By 900 AD Maya writing had evolved in to a complex and artful form of communication and recording.

A place in particular became one of the most outstanding centers of culture, trade, and power. By 300 AD the city of Tenochtitlan in central Mexico, had become the capital of the Aztec empire. “Planned cities of the order of those in the Old World were rare anywhere in Mesoamerican, one of few that existed, and the greatest of all was Tenochtitlan, the most important site in the whole of Mexico” (Coe & Koontz 103). The capital of the Mexica Empire covered up about 8 square miles and enclosed a population of perhaps 200,000. The city’s plastered walls were decorated with brilliant mural paintings, many of which portraying gods known to the Toltec and Aztec cultures of central Mexico (Taube 10).

UNIT BACKGROUND

Who Are My Students?

Currently, I am teaching in a bilingual setting, and all my students are “new arrivals” from Latin America. They have been living in this country for a year or less. A high percentage of my students are considered “at risk” because their parents move frequently looking for work, and the likelihood of them getting a consistent traditional education is slim. New students always arrive after Christmas, and the flow of students will continue until the end of March. At least one third of my students will leave before the end of the school year.

I teach a combined class of fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students. The school does not have enough students that fall into the category of “new arrivals,” to create a class for each grade level. That is the reason why these students are all together in one classroom. I teach them all the subjects required to their own grade levels, and also teach them English as a Second Language. My fourth and fifth grade students benefit from the advantage of being exposed to higher knowledge and a friendly atmosphere of peer tutoring and the cooperative learning that has developed among all of my students. The older students enjoy helping the young ones, and at the same time they review and reinforce their previous knowledge. The young ones love the idea of reading the books that their older peers recommend to them. For the last three years that I had instituted this program, my class achieved the highest points on accelerated reading testing by the end of the school year, and we were one of the smallest classes on campus.

The majority of my students’ parents never finished middle school. They do not have the academic knowledge to be able to help their own children with their studies. They do not stress to their children the importance of a formal education, and think that they can do well with just making it to middle school.

My student’s view of the world outside their communities and culture is very limited. Their only traveling consists of going back to their homeland in Central and South America to visit their relatives. Their academic knowledge is below their grade level. Their knowledge of world geography and history is remarkably low. The information they possess about their own history is very limited, and their knowledge of the English language amounts to a few words. They feel out of place, confused and a little embarrassed in their new school setting.

I want to introduce my students into the exciting topic that comprises their exotic and diverse heritage. I want them to discover the lives of their ancestors, their daily routines, responsibilities, home life and festivities. I also want them to compare those lives to their own and discover their similarities, and find the groundwork that eventually developed into some important factors and traditions of their lives today. Teaching my students about their own history and rich heritage will allow me to model learning and scholarship with a subject they are deeply interested in. It will also enhance their knowledge, encourage them to keep learning, and improve their own self-esteem.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

By introducing my students to their own history in a new and exciting way, learning about their own culture, traditions, legends and art, may spark in them a curiosity for their unknown past and a thirst for knowledge. They will develop skills such as creating time lines, reading maps, and making charts following a narrative. My students will be able to study their ancestors and their land. They will be able to go back in time and learn where they came from.

A main objective of my curriculum unit is to introduce my students to the reading and interpretation of the ancient pictographs, so they can learn about their past from their own ancestors. I want to empower my students with the basic skills needed to be able to interpret some

of basic illustration of the codices on their own. Other teaching strategies will include research at the library and the Internet. My students will view films and documentaries, and will work in cooperative learning groups. They will analyze, organize and classify this information.

We will use a set of pictographs portraying the people, their costumes and places. After learning the basic “vocabulary,” the students will be able to put together some samples to tell a short segment of a story. They will be able to learn the basics of the calendar, and give their stories the right place in time. My students will learn to analyze different aspects of their ancestors’ culture, such as their clothing and its variations depending on the regions of origin, their religious beliefs and the rationale behind some of their rituals, the social classes, and the responsibilities of each group. They will also look into some of those traits of ancient Mesoamerican culture that are still alive today and find the reasons why. My final goal is for them to write their own story or that of their families using the pictographs and symbols they learned in class. Some of them will prepare a pictographic story of their elders, and others will write a fictional story, creating their own characters with their own attributes and setting.

The activities developed for this unit will require critical thought on the part of the students. They will use a number of different skills such as discerning fact from fiction, forming hypothesis, categorizing and drawing conclusions. All of these elements form part of the curriculum standards for social studies education released by the National Council for the Social Studies (Dill IV). These elements also form integral part of HISD curriculum and model lessons for Reading, Language Art, Social Studies and Science.

“One of the most important and long-standing goals of American Education is to promote constructive relationships and positive attitudes among heterogeneous students. Extensive research indicates that cooperation among students produces greater effort to learn, more positive relationships among students, and greater psychological health” (Johnson & Johnson 3). We will have a variety of assignment settings including individual work, pairing, grouping, and whole class configuration.

THE MESOAMERICAN LEGACY

The Ball Game

The birthplace of the first team sports played with a rubber ball was the ancient Americas. In the ancient language of Central Mexico, Nahuatl, the ballgame was called Tlaxtli. It was not conceived as a sport, but as a religious ceremony, which sometimes ended with the decapitation of the players. In the countries where the rubber ballgame was once played: Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and even the United States, more than fifteen hundred ball courts have been discovered. These courts were sacred places in the ceremonial centers of Mesoamerica (Whittington/Bermudez 9).

The Popol Vuh, the Maya story of creation, provides the framework for much of the interpretation of the ballgame. The protagonists of the story are the Hero Twins and his forefathers Hun Hunahpu (One Hunter) and his brother, Vucub Hunahpu (Seven Hunter). According to the story, the clamor created by the ballplayers, One Hunter and Seven Hunter, while they bounced the rubber ball, disturbed the Lords of the Underworld. The Lords invited the brothers to play a game in the Underworld of Xilbaba. The brothers lost the game and were sacrificed, and as a final humiliation the head of One Hunter was displayed in a calabash tree. One day a young goddess visited the tree to see the unusual display, and the head of One Hunter spits in her hand impregnating her with the Hero Twins. When the Hero Twins came of age, they discovered their ball playing gifts. The Lords of the Underworld summoned them for a game and a series of tests. The Hero Twins won the game and ultimately retrieved the bodies of their father and uncle, and placed them in the sky to become the sun and the moon (Whittington 17).

Rubber, a natural material from Mesoamerica made this mythology possible. Rubber was unknown in the Old World. When the Spanish first saw a bouncing ball, they thought it was possessed. The games and their players made such an impression on the Spanish, according to Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, that among the New World riches Cortez took back with him to Europe was a team of ballplayers (Whittington 18).

The origin of the ritual ballgame is lost to ancient times, but the presence of female players suggests that it began as a game played by ordinary people and evolved into a religious ritual controlled by their chiefs. The game was played with the hips and the players wore a loincloth and padded belts to lessen the sting of the ball impact. They also wore armbands and kneepads. The rulers who were also ballplayers, wore a mirror pectoral that represented their claims to rule not only by inheritance but also by divine right, the players also wore elaborate corn headdresses as symbols of fertility (Whittington/Bradley 34, 35).

The ballgame was not only a pastime but also a way to mitigate social violence through sacrifice. It was a way of settling territorial disputes and functioned as a metaphor for warfare. The deepest meanings of the game were connected to rites of fertility. In pre-Hispanic cultures, the taking of life was necessary in order to perpetuate life. The sacrificial players were associated with the rain, vegetation, and fertility, as well as the sun's victory over darkness. The ballgame also fulfilled a social function. The enemy defeated in war maintained his honor because he was allowed to die in the game (Whittington/Uriarte 41, 44).

Some ball courts were as large as a football field, while others were big enough for only two players. Most average 120 by 30 feet. They were shaped like a capital "I" with parallel masonry walls enclosing a long narrow alley that connected two end zones. The rules for playing and the significance varied through Mesoamerica. In the Aztecs form of the game, only the buttocks and the knees could make contact with the ball. The ball was made of heavy, solid rubber and weighed 6 to 8 lb. The ball was bounced against the walls of the court and from player to player at a fast pace. Points were scored when a player either missed a shot at one of the two vertical stone hoops set opposite each other at center court, or was incapable to return the ball to the opposing team before it bounced twice, or allowed the ball to bounce outside the periphery of the court (Whittington/Stevenson 65, 66).

There are a lot of similarities between the ancient games and today's ball games. A variety of animals were associated with the ancient Mesoamerican games. The player's equipment included images of Jaguars, Peccaries, Deer, Monkeys, Eagles, etc. This is one of the more straight parallels between the ancient and modern expression of the game, the wide spread of animal imagery. Musical accompaniment and the version of a half time show was also a feature of major ancient games. "Betting also took place: The intense gambling that accompanied the Aztec games was described by the Spanish chronicler Duran in the 16th century. Our modern societies elevate our most talented athletes to the status of heroes and heroines, a costume that was also common in ancient Mesoamerica" (Whittington 133, 135).

Pre-Hispanic Writing and the Codices

The most advanced cultures of Mesoamerica, especially the Mayas, Mixtecs, Toltecs and Aztecs, developed their own system of writing. The Aztec system was a combination of pictographic, ideographic and partially phonetic characters representing numerals, calendar signs, names of persons, places, etc. The Aztecs came closest to a phonetic writing in their glyphs for place names, some of which contained phonetic analyses of syllables or even letters. For example, the sound a, e and o were indicated by the symbols for water (atl), bean (etl), and road (otli) (Portilla, *Broken Spears*, XLV).

Pictographic characters generally represented places, persons or gods. The Nahuas (Aztec) introduced certain schemas to simplify the pictures and helped to speed both their drawing and their interpretation. For example, the priest who carried the patron gods of each group, were painted in a similar manner in almost all the codices that recounted the early wandering of the founding tribes (Portilla, *Aztec Image* 52).

As in other ancient cultures, the Nahuas went beyond the pictographic stage to the ideographic glyphs used to represent ideas symbolically. They possessed adequate ideograms to represent concepts such as “movement” (ollin), “life” (yoliliztli), or “god” (teotl). They had symbols to indicate “night” (yohualli), and “day” (ilhuit). “Word” is represented by an undefined shape leaving the mouth of the speaker and “song” by flowery shapes. “War” was signified by the sign for water and fire. They also symbolized physical realities or conditions like “earth” (tlalli), “sky” (ilhuicatli), or something old (zoltic). The colors used in the pictures also had a semantic value, for example, yellow on a human figure almost always designated the female sex, the color purple signaled the royalty, and black indicated the priests. Blue represented the direction for south, and black and red also implied writing or knowledge (Portilla, *Aztec Image* 53).

Some authors consider the Nahua form of phonetic representation as “rebus writing.” This is a form of writing that uses representation of objects whose names are the basis for signifying various sounds, which constitute the desired word when joined together. For example to represent the word “fancy” in rebus writing, it would be enough to put side by side the drawing of a fan with that of ocean waves. “The Nahuatl phonetic representation has some similarities with rebus writing, but is also possesses various characteristics that are particular to it. The phonetic writing was principally used to represent names of persons and places” (Portilla, *Aztec Image* 54).

The Aztec codices were produced in the main cities, and other varied places of the Aztec empire, where over a dozen different languages were spoken. Many signs had to be codified in order to communicate over differences of language and culture. The codices paintings look more or less like cartoons with their demarcated outlines and intense colors. The manuscripts are full of representations of animals such as dogs, rabbits, eagles, architectural motives, and plenty of other picture signs that make up the Aztec writing system. For the Aztecs there was no difference between writing and painting; the word for the two was the same “tlacuiloa.” The novice codes painter had to master both to become a “tlacuilo,” a scribe artist. Young male nobles throughout the empire were taught the writing and reading of codices in the elite schools or “calmecac.” They learned to write with feather quills and animal hairbrushes on bark paper, with inks made from several different minerals. Some codices describe the nature of time by illustrating each day in the calendar. Keeping a record of the days was the most important duty for a scribe. Every scribe had to master the interpretation of the sacred calendar that combined twenty day names and thirteen numbers. They believed that each day had a special meaning and the addition of certain numbers; they could predict the future (Koontz, “Cracking the Code” 44).

The paper used in the codices was made by pounding and burnishing strips of bark from the amate tree (*ficus petiolaris*). The painted books of Mesoamerica represent an amazing legacy of the religious and historical knowledge acquired by the pre- Columbian people of Mesoamerica. A few of these documents survived the destruction of the Spanish priest. We have perhaps fifteen surviving books and manuscripts that were produced before the conquest or in the years after the arrival of the Spanish. The surviving pre-Conquest style screen fold, include three classes of books: Mixtec histories, Maya religious books and Highland religious books. The historical books deal with people, places, politics and genealogy. The religious documents deal with the calendar, ceremonialism and divination. Overlap between them is found in areas where historically important people participated in divination or other ceremonies, and where politically significant places also had sacred significance (Diaz & Rodgers XIV).

The Calendar

The Mixtecs, the Mayas and the Aztecs had two main calendars, and their daily life was determined by the ceremonies dictated by the workings of the calendars. One was a “year count,” based on the astronomical year and made up of eighteen groups or months of twenty days each, with a remaining period of five days before the beginning of the next year, these five days were considered extremely unlucky. An extra day was added to every fourth year, as with our leap year (Portilla, *Broken Spears* XLVI). Every month had its own special ceremony in which all the citizens participated. The months were correlated with the agricultural year.

The other form of calendar or “day count,” was not based on the astronomical year. This calendar consisted of 260 days, the average length of a human pregnancy, with 20 months of thirteen days each. Each day had a given name such as Crocodile, Wind, House, etc. This calendar was adjusted to a fifty-two year cycle (Portilla, *Broken Spears* XLVI).

The ancient Aztec believed that the close of every 52 year Calendar Round was a point at which the Fifth Sun could be destroyed. On this day, all fires in every temple, palace, and household were extinguished. “On the Hill of the Star, just east of Colhuacén in the Valley of Mexico, the Fire Priest watched to see if the Pleiades would cross the meridian at midnight of this day, if they did, then the universe will continue. A fire was kindled on fire sticks in the newly opened breast of a captive, and the glowing embers were carried by runners to every part of the Aztec realm” (Coe & Koontz 210).

To every single one, each day brought good or evil incidents according to the prognostication of the priest. Since the Aztecs believed birthdays could determine an individual’s future, parents tried to have control over their children’s future by conceiving on particular auspicious days, hoping their child would be born on the same date one round of the calendar later. Also the bad effects could be mitigated. If a child was born on an inauspicious day, his naming ceremony could be delayed to a better day (Koontz, “Cracking the Code” 45).

The ritual rounds of the calendars provided yearlong excitement and meaning to the life of the ordinary people, with feasts, decoration of the idols, and the dances and songs with the accompaniment of drums, conch-shell trumpets, rattles and flutes. The worship of the gods prescribed individual atonements, the burning of incense, and the ritual sacrifices of hundreds of human captives every year. The most famous sacrifice was that of a handsome young captive chosen to impersonate the god Tezcatlipoca. For a year he lived a life of honor, worshiped as the embodiment of the deity. By the end of the year cycle, he mounted the steps of the temple, smashing one by one the clay flutes he had played in his brief moment of glory and was sacrificed to the gods. All this information was recorded in pictorial codices, folding screen books of deerskin or bark paper, kept in the temples by the priest (Coe & Koontz 211).

Chocolate: Gift from Mesoamerica

Cacao trees grow in the hot, damp shade beneath the leafy canopy of the taller trees in the rain forest. There, the cacao trees blossom with pink and white. Unlike other trees, these flowers grow directly from the trunk and main branches. Tiny insects called gnats carry pollen between the blossoms, fertilizing them so cocoa pods will grow. Only a fraction of the hundreds of blossoms develop into cocoa pods. Like the blossoms, the pods grow directly from the trunk and branches of the tree. Many cacao trees grow both blossoms and pods all year around. After about four months, the cocoa pods grow to the size of melons. It takes another month before they are fully ripe. The color of the ripe pods ranges from yellow to dark red, depending on the tree. The pods are hard and must be split open with force to reveal the beans. Each pod contains about 40 cocoa beans surrounded by sticky white pulp. These are the precious beans that make chocolate (Polin 8).

Cacao trees grow in the ancient area called Mesoamerica. Many experts believe that the first people to crack open a cocoa pod and use the bean were the ancient Olmec. The Mayan and the Aztec civilizations followed. The Mayans were the first people to plant the beans of wild cacao trees. This was the beginning of cocoa farming. In return for other goods, the Mayans traded cocoa beans to the Aztecs, whose lands were too dry to grow cacao trees (Polin 10).

Both the Mayans and the Aztecs used cocoa beans to make a drink know as *chocolatl*. The beans were dried and crushed, and then mixed with water. The Mayan drank *chocolatl* hot, while the Aztecs drank it cold. They flavored their drink by adding spices such as chili or vanilla. The result was a drink which taste must have been very bitter. The word *chocolatl* is said to mean bitter water. “*Chocolatl* was served on special occasions, such as rituals and royal feasts. The mixture was usually poured from a height into the drinking vessel to make a thick foam on top” (Polin 12).

Cocoa beans were used as money by the Mayans and the Aztecs, and they also gave beans as special gifts and as offerings to the gods. The land where cacao trees grew was very valuable. Over several centuries, the Aztecs expanded their empire and took over much of this land, including Mayan territories. The rulers collected taxes from the people in the form of cocoa beans, and the Aztec kings filled their storehouses with the valued beans. “It is said that the emperor Montezuma had more than 960 million beans in his storehouses. Some of the emperor’s cocoa beans were made into wafers for his army. This was an early type of instant cocoa mix” (Polin 14).

When Hernando Cortes arrived to Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec empire, the emperor Montezuma honored him by serving him a feast that ended with a chocolate drink for dessert. The taste of chocolate was too bitter for the Spanish explorers, but with the addition of sugar to sweeten the flavor, the exotic drink became a favorite treat. They also took the custom of using the cocoa bean as money. The Spanish conquerors also added their own twist to the drink, using a wooden stick called a molinillo to whip up the foam on top of their hot chocolate, a custom still in practice all over Latin America today. In 1753, the Swedish scientist Linnaeus gave the cacao tree its scientific name, Theobroma, meaning “food for the gods” (Polin 18).

AZTEC SOCIETY

The Social Classes

The Aztec had a great admiration for the Toltec culture, so they chose for their first king or “tlatoani,” a noble man of Toltec origin named Acamapichtli. He fathered many children by various Aztec women, and his descendants formed the nucleus of the social class of nobles, or “pipiltin.” The nobles received a more rigorous education than other people; they were allowed to own land in their own names and filled the most important posts in government. The king could be chosen only from their ranks (Portilla, *Broken Spears* KLII).

The nobles did not themselves engage in cultivation, but drew their support from the agriculturally based economy in several different ways. “Land in conquered areas might be assigned by the state to support the public office occupied by a noble, and the local inhabitants then supplied a labor tribute as part of their tax burden. A son received his father’s office, in which case the land support continued, but this was not guaranteed by any legal rights” (MacLachlan & Rodriguez 52).

The merchants or “pochteca” were considered commoners, but they occupied an uneasy position within the social structure. They were not connected with any office holding and the wealth that accompanied state service, and their social standing was ambiguous. The power they possessed was derived from their careful use of assets to influence the political structure. The pochteca could not indulge in fine clothing, especially since the degrees of luxury dress indicated

rank. They could not construct palaces or increase their status by public display of wealth (MacLachlan & Rodriguez 54).

The craftsmen or “amantecas,” had a secure and respected place within the class system. Their skills often received an extravagant praise. Different status levels existed within the class, based on the skill or the material that they worked. Those involved in working fine or precious materials could expect a higher degree of public appreciation, such as feather work or the elaboration of fine jewelry. The son of a noble could become a craftsman without any family disappointment (MacLachlan & Rodriguez 56).

The ordinary citizens formed the social class of the “macehualtin,” which means to work to acquire merit. They were divided into geographical clans, groups of related families living in specific localities and making communal use of the land assigned to them. They were required to attend the communal schools, but they were not taught reading, writing, astrology, theology or other cultural legacies of the Toltecs. They were trained in agriculture and warfare (Portilla, *Broken Spears* XLII).

Distinguished military service led to advancement into the noble class. Top military leaders and their officer corps enjoyed a personal status based on their military exploits, and the state recognized their influence by rewarding them politically. The common soldier who established a military reputation was absorbed into the nobility without regard for his low origins. “Merit operated to drain leadership from the lower class and reinvigorating the nobility” (MacLachlan & Rodriguez 53).

One became a slave or a “mayeque,” in several ways, such as judicial slavery for nonpayment of debts, or in order to make restitution for some injury or criminal activity. It was a common practice in time of famine for individuals to sell themselves and their families into slavery. The contract between the slave and the master could be terminated after an agreed time or by return of the original purchase price. “A slave relied on well defined rights which protected him from arbitrary or cruel treatment. A master who stepped beyond these well defined limits could be executed for causing harm to his slave” (MacLachlan & Rodriguez 58).

Education

In Tenochtitlan education was obligatory for all male children. They studied in the specialized “calmecac” or the “telpochcalli.” Most of the students in the calmecac were sons of nobles or priests, but children of modest origin who showed exceptional aptitude, were also admitted. The students in the calmecac were taught to read and interpret the codices and calendars. They also studied their ancestor’s history and traditions, and memorized the sacred hymns and other texts (Portilla, *Broken Spears* XLIV).

Almost every subdivision or clan in the city of Tenochtitlan had its own telpochcalli. These were the schools for the lower classes. The students were taught the fundamentals of religion and ethic, and were also trained in agriculture and the arts of war. In comparison with the calmecac, the telpochcalli offered a more fundamental and practical education. Every boy had to attend one of these two types of school, and every father had to make a fervent promise, on the birth of a son, that he would send the boy to school when he reached the suitable age, which seems to have oscillated between six and nine years. Students left both types of schools at the time of marriage or when they were initiated into the priesthood. Most priests also got married (MacLachlan & Rodriguez 54).

Formal training in the usage of armaments did not begin until the age of fifteen. While most youths from the noble class began their formal education in the calmecac, they too were turned over to senior warriors for rigorous training in the use of weapons at about age fifteen. When the apprentice warriors turned eighteen, they were allowed their first incursion into the battle field

where they were required to observe the conduct of a consummated warrior. On their second venture they were to take a captive, on this occasion only the capture could be done by a group of young soldiers. Up to six novices could combine to drag a warrior down. The great warriors were solitary hunters. After that initial group capture the novice soldiers were in direct competition with their peers. "Honor and reputation came only with the taking of captives from Nahuatl cities, tough warriors with much the same system shaping their training and aspirations. If a man took his fifth captive from these opponents, he was awarded a 'quauchic,' and on dress occasions he would be distinguished by his vivid red netting cape and blue lip plug" (Clendinnen 114).

Regardless of social classes, most females shared the same destiny, marriage. At the naming ceremony a male child was given a tiny bow, arrows, and a shield, signaling his warrior destiny. A female child was given a miniature spinning and weaving implements and a tiny broom. A boy's social duty was to be a warrior and a girl's to be a wife. From puberty the daughters of nobles were more restricted than their commoner counterparts; they were secluded for some years in the girl's division of one of the priest schools, where they were instructed in embroidery. Weaving and embroidery were separately valued as the highest and only exclusive female arts. At puberty commoner girls also began to attend their section of the local House of Youth. They also began to learn the songs and dances for ceremonial performances along with the local boys at the House of Song. When girls danced and sang in public rituals they were led by their male partners. Women had no right to speak on public occasions, and only men could become public musicians or poet-singers (Clendinnen 156).

Marriage brought social maturity and the full recognition of adulthood. Save for the few women vowed to permanent temple service, and perhaps some priests, everyone married. Usually the men married at about age twenty, when ideally he had already taken one or two captives and was ready to graduate from school. "Marriage also opened a wide and new territory for women. For the commoner women attendance at the market became an obligation. Traditionally she was presented with five cotton capes by her husband as her starting capital, and so she was immediately involved in face to face and independent negotiations with strangers in the city's liveliest centre" (Clendinnen 160).

CONCLUSION

The Olmec, the Mayan and the Aztec, were some of the great civilizations that developed in the Americas long before the arrival of the Europeans. They possessed a vast knowledge of agriculture, developed irrigation systems, canals, practiced intercropping and grew crops on rafts and terraces. They built religious centers with colossal pyramids, palaces and luxurious gardens. They were sophisticated artists, producing gigantic sculptures and generating other objects of art that transcend the times. Their priests were accomplished astronomers who registered and predicted eclipses and employed a numbering system that made use of the zero.

"The arts and crafts produced by a culture tell much about the people view of themselves and the world. Many art objects have religious significance or tell ancient stories. The lifestyles of a people are also evident in their art forms" (Hierstein IV). Studying the ancient cultures of Latin America will introduce my students to their own history; it will also help to develop a sense of pride on their own heritage, and generate in them a new appreciation for reading, history and the acquisition of knowledge in general.

There are many aspects of the history of Mesoamerica that I could have also included in my unit. Taking into consideration my student's life experiences, I decided to concentrate on some aspects of the culture and history that they could relate to easily, such as the ball games, the calendar, the social structure, and chocolate. My purpose is to show my students a clear picture of some aspects of life in ancient Mesoamerica, and at the same time create a close connection between their rich heritage and their lives today.

LESSON PLANS

I try to keep my lesson plans as simple and as easy to follow as possible. I begin with a short talk on the topic they are going to learn, followed by questions from the students that usually become a friendly discussion. I generally give my students a reading assignment for homework, prior to the day of the lesson, or sometimes I just give them a brief summary and ask them to find some information on the subject, review it, and bring it next day to share with the rest of the class. After the introduction and discussion I might provide my students with more information, such as a handout, a selection of books, or a couple of “safe” website addresses for further inquiry. They also have to go further on their research and add some extra material on their own.

I follow different criteria for assigning groups. At the beginning of the school year, we do it at random, for example by selecting numbers from a bag or colors, etc. Students that work diligently on their task are awarded with the privilege of choosing their own activities, for the next project. For the first few projects a will also assign roles within each group, but later on roles can be decided by the students, for some projects, as a reward for good work. (In some of the activities I have referred to Language Arts objectives from the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test or TAKS.)

Lesson Plan 1: The Civilizations of Mesoamerica

Objectives

Students will learn about the history of the pre-Colombian civilizations of Mesoamerica.

They will study the geography of the land and their cultural traits. They will also learn about their technological advances, such as the calendar, the development of their writing techniques, and recording of events on their codices.

Activity

The teacher will give an introductory talk about the ancient civilizations of Mesoamerica, followed by a class discussion and questions. After that, the students will be divided in cooperative learning groups. Each group will be given a topic to research and will present their findings to the rest of the class. The first group will work on a map of the region, notating important sites, natural resources and geographic landmarks. The second group will work on a time line of important events in the history of Mesoamerica, such as the emerging of new cultures, the establishment of new cities and warfare. The following groups will prepare a chart with the accomplishments of one of the civilizations that flourished in Mesoamerica, such as the Olmec, the Maya, the Aztec or the Zapotecs.

Each group will have the responsibility of dividing their work and assigning roles within their own cluster. By the end of the first day each group will present to the teacher a schedule of activities and roles to be followed during class and after school by each member, for the duration of the project. Second and third days will be dedicated to research and organization, at the end of each day they have to present their progress to the teacher. On the fourth day the students will plan and prepare their presentation for the next and final day.

Evaluation

Students will prepare graphic organizers, with their information and present their facts to the rest of the class. They will also express their opinions and points of view about their findings. They will reflect on their journals about their experiences searching for new information. For example, what methods they used: the school library, the public library, the Internet, their own textbooks, etc., and their successes and frustrations with such methods (TAKS objectives 3, 4).

Lesson Plan 2: Comparing and Contrasting the Different Social Classes

Objectives

Students will learn about the different social groups that shaped the Aztec's social structure. They will analyze each group unique characteristics, norms of conduct, their advantages, disadvantages, and responsibilities.

Activity One

After studying the Aztec social structure, students will be divided in cooperative learning groups. Each group will be given a social class to study. They will research and analyze the type of labor, norms of conduct, schools, and attire belonging to their social class. Each group will present its findings to the rest of the class. This activity will take two days.

Activity Two

Students will compare and contrast the different traits of each social class, and make a list of each group duties according to their gender and position within their respective social classes. They will also take into consideration the privileges and liberties that every social strata enjoyed. They will have two days to prepare their findings. The whole class will work together on this activity, providing their previously acquire knowledge to develop the charts.

Activity Three

Each student will choose a person to represent, and based on the information learned in class, they will write a description of that person's daily routine. Students will also decide on one trait that they found unique about their chosen character, and expand on the topic. They will also reflect on the similarities and differences of social mobility in ancient Mesoamerica and today.

Evaluation

Students will classify and summarize information, compare and contrast their findings with the rest of the class, make inference and reach to their own conclusions. Each student will write their thoughts and reflect about their findings in their own journals (TAKS objectives 1, 4).

Lesson Plan 3: The Ball Game

Objectives

Students will learn about the Mesoamerican ball games, their origins and religious significance. They will also learn about the similarities between the ancient and modern ball games.

Activity One

The teacher will give a brief talk about rubber, the origins and some of the many uses it had in the past and today. For homework the students will look for more information on the topic; they will also make a list of articles made of rubber that they can find in their own home, or that of their relatives or neighbors. The next day we will prepare a chart with every body's information on the properties and many uses of the material. This activity will take at least two days.

Activity Two

After reading about the ancient ball games of Mesoamerica, students will discuss the origins, meaning and consequences of the game. The whole class will help prepare a chart with their findings, such as the rules of the game, the criteria for the players, and the food and souvenirs available at the games (TAKS objective 3). This activity will take one or two days, depending on the skill level of the students.

Activity Three

The class will prepare a chronicle of a ball game. Students will be divided into cooperative learning groups, and each group will be given a task. Two groups will be in charge of preparing two adversarial groups for the game. They will design the player's attire with explanations about the different articles to wear for the game. Another group will prepare a scale model or an illustration of the ball court. Another group will write a list of the activities that may have taken place before the beginning of the game, during "half time," and at the end. This activity will take two to three days and a day or two for presentations.

Evaluation

Each student will write a story, with a fictional character, recounting the events that took place at a ball game in ancient times. Each student will decide on his or her character role, such as a spectator, a player, an official for the game, a vendor, etc. They will include the details learned about the topic, and they will also make their own inferences and write their opinions and conclusions about the ball game (TAKS objectives 1, 4).

Lesson 4: The Writing and the Calendar.

Objectives

Student will learn the basics of the "day count" calendar and the symbols used to record the birthday of a person, places and important events. Will also compare and contrast the ancient calendars with the current one we use today. They will also learn how the codices were prepared and presented.

Day One

After studying the Solar Calendar used in ancient Mesoamerica, the students will prepare a chart with the differences and similarities of this calendar with our calendar today. They will also discuss the advantages and disadvantages of both calendars.

Day Two

Students will analyze the symbols of the day sequence of the 260-Day Calendar and how these symbols were used to decide a person's name at birth. After that, they will study the copies of the codices provided by the teacher and try to decipher some of the names of the characters by looking again into the 260 Day Calendar sequence provided in the Codex Borgia, and comparing them with the symbols that accompanied the drawings of the participants in the story.

Day Three

Students will learn the basic symbols to denote a place, relationships to others in the family and significance events. They will also learn the sequence to follow to read an ancient codex. They will also take into consideration the format, designs and presentation of a codex.

Using this information, the students will write or draw a short story. This will include at least two characters, along with their names; details to denote gender; and positions to denote relationship.

Evaluation

Students will present and read their stories to the class. For homework they will summarize their experiences about writing their own codex and suggest other activities they could pursue with these recording techniques.

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Supplemental Resources

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