

Listening to Children Think Critically about Christopher Columbus

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*"In fourteen hundred and ninety two
Columbus sailed the ocean blue.
It was a courageous thing to do,
But someone was already here"*

Picture a group of elementary school children dutifully reciting "In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." This is a familiar verse to most elementary students. Now picture a group of those same elementary school children reciting, "In 1493, Columbus stole all that he could see." Perhaps this second scenario is a bit more difficult to imagine. This less familiar verse is not a part of your average elementary school curriculum; however, it does prompt thinking about how children learn empathy for others, multiple perspectives, and cultural sensitivity.

The striking difference between the two quotes offers a glimpse at the task that elementary teachers face when blending two different perspectives in the teaching of the "true discovery" of America. In preparation for the 1992 Columbus Quincentenary, many teachers learned about a variety of ways to teach about Columbus. In some classrooms, teachers still wonder, how do I teach about Columbus in a way that is accurate and promotes my children's critical thinking? This is the story of two fourth grade teachers' journey to create lessons that would be developmentally appropriate, culturally sensitive, and historically accurate in teaching children about Columbus's encounter with Native Americans.

Point of View

Some children and their families embrace Christopher Columbus as a hero. Columbus embodies the virtues of bravery, calculated risk-taking, persistence, and leadership. Students can view websites from the Order Sons of Italy in America (www.osia.org/public/culture/columbus.asp) or the National Columbus Celebration Association (www.columbuscelebration.org) to read about how such virtues were embodied in the life and work of Columbus. After reading *Rethinking Columbus*² and *Lies My Teacher Told Me*³, it would be hard to teach about Columbus from an exclusively positive or admiring vantage point. When

their school district purchased the book *Encounter*,⁴ which focuses on the Taino people's perspective of Columbus's arrival, the teachers were inspired to present activities that incorporated multiple perspectives. There had to be some way to teach lessons about "Explorers" that would relate to a previous unit on "Native Americans." The aim of this four-week unit of study was to have fourth grade students look at multiple perspectives and consider the accuracy of different reports of historical events.

What It All Means

The following quote from *Rethinking Columbus* inspired our efforts to develop new materials and activities for the curriculum:

Our goal is not to idealize native people, demonize Europeans, or present a depressing litany of victimization. We hope to encourage a deeper understanding of the European invasion's consequences, to honor the rich legacy of resistance to the injustices it created, to convey some appreciation for the diverse indigenous cultures of the hemisphere, and to reflect on what this all means for us today.⁵

By exploring several different children's books about Columbus, we wanted to create a more meaningful unit that would offer students a balanced approach to Columbus's encounter with the New World. The benefit of these lessons was evident in students' abilities to empathize with people from different times and cultures, and to apply their understanding to current events.

The School Setting

The lessons described in this article were taught in a district that integrates language arts and social studies through teacher-developed interdisciplinary units of study. Teachers write original literature-based units that integrate language arts, social studies, and sometimes science. These units are then shared with other teachers and taught at all ten elementary schools throughout the district. Rather than relying on textbooks, children use trade books (both fiction and non-fiction) to learn language arts around social studies themes. The units are aligned with state and national standards, but children's interests are also incorporated.

Children who experience this curriculum are generally middle class, with most of the ethnic diversity a result of international faculty associated with a nearby university. The two fourth grade classrooms, which are discussed in this article, included children with a variety of abilities, interests, and aptitudes. Teachers were assisted in the curriculum work described in this article by a professional development school at a state university.⁶ The collaboration included a social studies professor with Native American expertise.⁷

Lessons on Christopher Columbus

As they designed these lessons, teachers imagined their students as “literature detectives” who would explore three texts that illustrated three different perspectives and author biases. The unit began with a simulation of one of the teachers “stealing” a student’s backpack and claiming that it now belonged to the teacher—the teacher had discovered it, had she not?⁸ So began an inquiry into the meaning of “discovery” that set the tone for the entire unit of study.

Students defined “discovery” before and after the unit so that the teachers could assess how these lessons affected students’ understanding. Students also compiled their prior knowledge of Christopher Columbus, which was lengthy, and their prior knowledge of the Taino people, which was sparse. In the children’s experience as “literature detectives,” they were required to respond to questions for each of the three books such as:

- How many times did Columbus talk in this book?
- How many times did the Native people talk in this book?
- What did you learn about Columbus’s life from the pictures in this book?
- What did you learn about the Native people’s life from the pictures?
- What did you learn about Columbus’s life from the written descriptions?
- What did you learn about the Native people’s life from the written descriptions?⁹

These questions provided the impetus for charts designed by the literature detectives to examine issues of author bias and multiple perspectives (Figure 1).¹⁰ The teachers focused the children’s attention on the spoken words of various historical persons, pictures and illustrations, and written descriptions in the books in order to maintain developmental appropriateness for fourth graders. Children spent three days per book—reading, tallying, filling in the charts, and having follow-up discussion.

Applying Critical Thinking Skills

The students’ views of the Taino people grew remarkably over the course of four weeks. As students read three different books (*Christopher Columbus: A Great Explorer*,¹¹ *Columbus Day*,¹² and *Encounter*¹³), their understanding of Columbus evolved accordingly. Students’ observations at the end of the four weeks of discussing Columbus included: He was a great explorer; He gave the Taino people invaluable things, and got valuable things from them; He was more interested in gold than in the friendship of the Taino people.

Students’ appeared to gain a more balanced and more complex viewpoint of Columbus and the Taino people as they investigated the books in order. For example, the students’ perceptions of the Taino changed after reading each book. After reading *Christopher Columbus*, most student remarks had to do with the fact that the Tainos were naked or did not wear clothes. After reading *Columbus Day*, the children described how the Tainos traded with Columbus and helped him build his fort. After reading *Encounter*, they recognized that the Taino people were wise in many ways.

In particular, these lessons and the experience of inquiring about multicultural literature provided the students with an opportunity to gain an understanding of author bias in the depiction of historical events, as well as to learn a large set of information about those events. In early discussions, the class already understood that there are differences in how the information is presented, and that Columbus and the Tainos were not equally represented in all of the books available to their age group. In the following example, a student demonstrates an understanding of how the author’s point of view can influence the story:

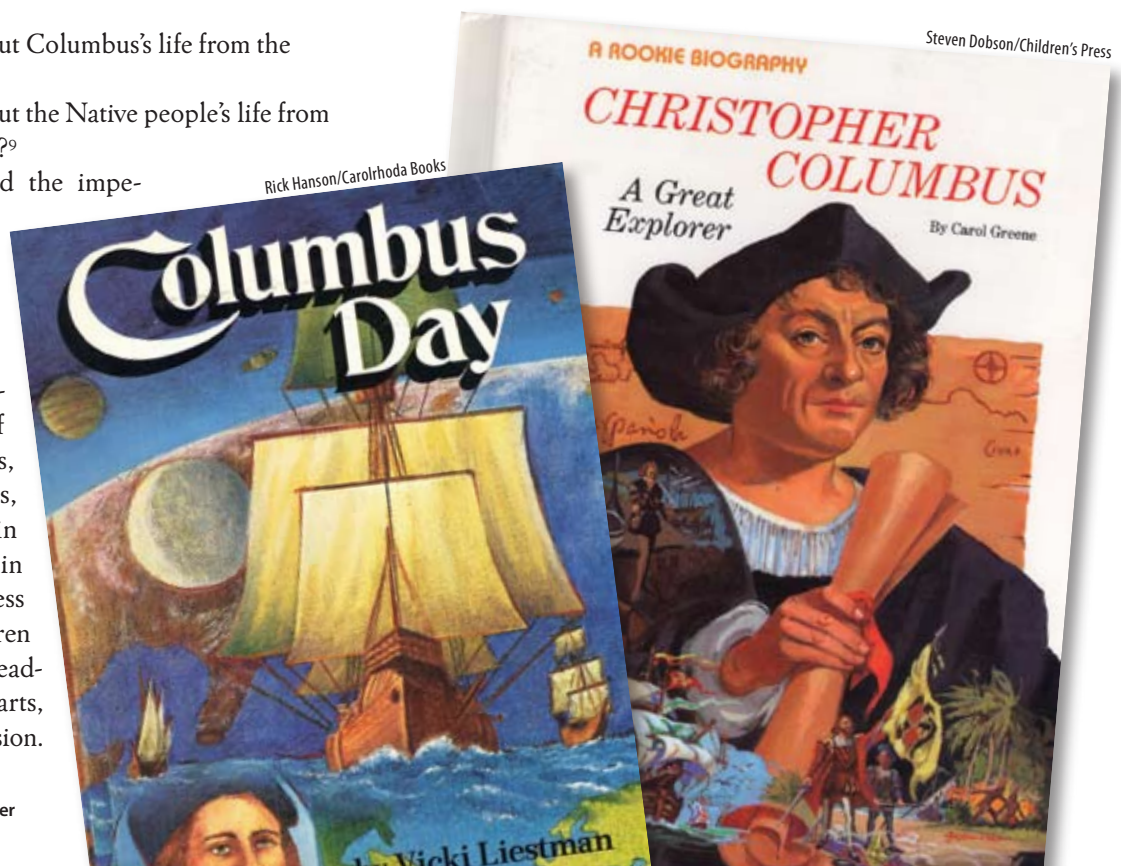


Figure 1
Literature Detectives: Comparing Sources

	BOOK 1 <i>Christopher Columbus: A Great Explorer</i>	BOOK 2 <i>Columbus Day</i>	BOOK 3 <i>Encounter</i>
Who speaks in the book?			
<i>How many times does Columbus speak?</i>			
<i>How many times do Native Americans speak?</i>			
What is shown?			
<i>What did you learn about Columbus's life from the pictures?</i>			
<i>What did you learn about Native People's lives from the pictures?</i>			
What is described?			
<i>What did you learn about Columbus's life from the words?</i>			
<i>What did you learn about Native People's lives from the words?</i>			
What is the author's perspective?			
<i>Does the author of this book favor one point of view? If so, which one? Columbus's point of view? The Native Americans'? Or does the author achieve a balance?</i>			

TEACHER: Look at the count you made of who speaks in each book. Why does the number of times that each person talks change from book to book?

STUDENT: It is in the author's language, so they only have certain people talk.

TEACHER: How does the author influence this?

STUDENT: The person who wrote *Columbus* was in favor of Columbus, and Jane Yolen was definitely in favor of the Tainos.

TEACHER: Then who was the book *Columbus Day* in favor of?

STUDENT: Both.

TEACHER: And *Encounter*?

STUDENT: The Tainos because they were the main characters.

STUDENT: The author is going to get facts that will support their "side." For example, Columbus had an evil grin [in *Encounter*].

The way an author can influence a story was beginning to become clearer to the students. Students were beginning to formulate an idea that history might be presented differently depending on who the author was "favoring," as measured primarily by whose voice was heard the most throughout the story.

Connecting to a Current Event

Children were able to transfer the concept of author bias to news reporting. Several students made a connection to an upcoming presidential election, which was in the news a lot. Sample student comments from this discussion include:

STUDENT 1: This reminds me of the elections. People who want Bush to win say nice things about him, and others say nice things about Gore.

STUDENT 2: The authors [of newspaper articles] are going to write more about the person who they are in favor of.

STUDENT 3: The author is similar to the voters, and the people [Tainos and Columbus] represent the different parties.

Comparison

The students' ability to synthesize the information and make connections to their current world situations demonstrated a high level of thinking regarding the concept of author bias. By the end of the unit, students stated that it would be important to read many different books on the same event and compare information. They also mentioned the need to know where the authors got their information and the need to ask questions about apparently contradictory stories. Thus, fourth graders, working as literature detectives, recognized and described in their own words the importance of some of the key skills used by historians.¹⁴ In classroom conversations, the students not only made connections with their current world situation, but articulated how an author (a newspaper reporter, for example) can influence a historical event as it is developing. Teachers were surprised at how far some of the students were capable of expanding their thoughts in respect to the notion of author bias and the meaning of "discovery."

From Children's Books to Other Sources

An example of critical thinking skills developed by the children in these two classrooms follows:

TEACHER: When reading historical events, how do we know what's true and what's not?

STUDENT: I think none of it might be absolutely true, because somewhere, someone had to write it down and it was that person's point of view of the story or events.


TEACHER: If you were to take a particular event in history such as the Civil War or Revolutionary War, what would you do now to find the best information?

STUDENT: I would read many different books on the same event and compare the information.

STUDENT: I would read other [fiction] books [about the historical era] during that time.

TEACHER: If you were to read several books about an event, based on what you learned with the Columbus books, what questions would you ask or want to ask the author about accuracy?

STUDENT: I'd want to know the author's resources. I'd want to know how and where they got their information.

Children learned to ask better historical questions when they had a balance of several perspectives to consider on one event. These fourth grade students were challenged to search for multiple perspectives and investigate author bias. As a result, they appeared to develop a more balanced perception of events, past and current. 

Notes

1. Sally Rogers, "1492." *Rainbow Sign* sound album (Cambridge, MA: Rounder, 1992).
2. Bill Bigelow and Bob Peterson, *Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years* (Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools, Ltd., 1998).
3. James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: Touchstone, 1995)
4. Jane Yolen, *Encounter* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Jovanovitch, 1992).
5. Bigelow and Peterson, 11.
6. This article describes a collaboration between teachers from Radio Park Elementary School and professional development associates from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Pennsylvania State University.
7. Frances Rains, "'No, I Didn't Make It Rain Last Night' or Rethinking What and How We Teach about First Americans," in Shirley R. Steinberg, ed., *Multi/Intercultural Conversations: A Reader* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001): 527-537. The authors would like to thank Dr. Rains for her assistance with this project.
8. This "discovery" activity is from Bill Bigelow and Bob Peterson, *Rethinking Columbus*, pages 16-17.
9. These questions were suggested by Bigelow and Peterson, page 38.
10. Several handouts that we give to students were condensed onto one handout in the design of Figure 1.
11. Carol Greene, *Christopher Columbus: A Great Explorer* (Chicago: Children's Press, 1989).
12. Vicki Liestman, *Columbus Day* (Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books, 1991).
13. Yolen.
14. Samuel S. Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001).

Teaching Resources

- Dennis, Yvonne Wakim and Hirschfelder, Arlene. *Children of Native America Today*. Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge, 2003. The pictures of contemporary children are compelling.
- Hirschfelder, Arlene, Molin, Paulette Fairbanks, and Wakim, Yvonne. *American Indian Stereotypes in the World of Children: A Reader and Bibliography*, 2nd ed. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1999. Although some of the chapters are dated, teachers will find this information challenging and relevant to teaching about Columbus and American Indians.
- Hirschfelder, Arlene and Beamer, Yvonne. *Native Americans Today*. Englewood, CO: Teacher Ideas Press, 2000. A handbook of lesson plans and teaching recommendations.
- Slapin, Beverly and Seale, Doris. *Through Indian Eyes: The Native Experience in Books for Children*. Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1992. A great book for all teachers to read. It includes an excellent bibliography and book reviews.
- The March/April 1992 and 2006 issues of SOCIAL STUDIES AND THE YOUNG LEARNER provide many helpful articles about the teaching of Christopher Columbus, including suggestions for activities and books appropriate for primary-grade learners.

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