Intersecting Trails: Westward Expansion through Hands-On History and Literature

Learners grasp not just events but consequences when they view Manifest Destiny through multiple lenses.

Ruth Baxter, Amy Kiszka, and Genna Rooke
National Council for the Social Studies Annual Conference, Austin, Texas, November 2019

Students will be able to:

- See themselves as historians, knowing that they can create stories of the past just as the experts do.
- Be skeptical about facts of the past, recognize that the information has been collected, interpreted, and presented by people who have varying points of view.
- Be able to generalize about similar aspects of the past while still recognizing the uniqueness of each event.
- See purpose in studying history; see how knowing the past affects the present and the future.
- Discover new things about the past, new ways of thinking, new ideas, and new interpretations that amaze us all.

Was Manifest Destiny JUSTIFIED?

Students answer hard questions through:

- Sourcing
- Contextualization
- Corroboration
- Close Reading

MODULE 1: Work with primary and secondary history sources

THE PROCESS

Students read a historian’s background article and debate the question, “Was Manifest Destiny justified?”

Students engage four hands-on stations that include primary sources and visual artifacts.

In pairs, students categorize details into a justified/not justified t-chart to assess their evidence.

Students consider their evidence and determine their position on the question “Was Manifest Destiny justified?”

Students create a product to answer the question and show their thesis with evidence.

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MODULE 2: Read period and modern poetry

Students will be able to:

- Cite textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text
- Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of a text
- Compare and contrast the structure of two or more texts and analyze how the differing structure of each text contributes to its meaning and style
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative language, analyzing the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone

How can art help us UNDERSTAND Manifest Destiny?

Students consider the perspectives of period and modern poets:

- “O Pioneers” by Walt Whitman, 1865
- “Migration” by Deborah Miranda, 1998
- “Prairie” by Carl Sandburg, 1918
- “The Pioneers” by Charles Mackay, 1850s
- “The Graves of the Emigrants” by Catherine Parr Traill, 1860
- “O Nicodemus” by Sunni Patterson
- “The Other Pioneers” by Roberto Felix Salazar, 1939
- “Peace Path” by Heid E. Erdrich

THE PROCESS

Students read “O Pioneers!” by Walt Whitman and respond by analyzing theme, text structure, and technique.

Students choose a second and third poem to read in addition to Whitman.

Students choose to respond to the poetry as literary critics. Students analyze the text for author technique, theme, and diction.

Students compare the poet’s depiction of pioneers and the pioneer experience. Students determine how the author’s technique enabled or hindered the poetic depiction of pioneers.

Students choose to respond to the poetry as historians. Students treat the poetry as a primary source.

Students must determine whether this poem is a reliable primary source to understand the pioneer experience.

MODULE 3: Advocate for change in historical interpretations

OPTIONAL BONUS ASSIGNMENT

Evaluate a museum presentation of westward migration and propose changes

- Students research the “public history” about American westward migration in the 19th century.
- Students assess whether the public history encompasses multiple viewpoints and experiences.
- Students communicate with public historians about what they recommend should be added or changed to present a fuller, more nuanced representation.