

Comparing Societies from the 1500s in the Sixth Grade

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It was no typical day in my sixth grade classroom. The students were anticipating a social studies unit of study that would last three weeks. They were looking forward to the prospect of conducting research and digging up facts. It was first noted by educational philosopher John Dewey in 1933 that children have a natural tendency to investigate.¹ Inquiry-oriented teaching of social studies helps to nurture that desire. Inquiry is the process by which teachers give students an open-ended question, and then students investigate the evidence and draw conclusions based upon their findings. This method promotes critical thinking, as students cite evidence to support their opinions.

Building on Background Knowledge

Inquiry is most effective when it builds upon students' prior knowledge.² This project took a closer look at cultural groups that my students had already studied to some extent. According to Linda Levstik and Keith Barton, authors of *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools*, "Historical inquiry develops most easily when the creation or discovery of a problem challenges prior knowledge, providing opportunities for students to outgrow what they already know."³ These sixth graders were going to study the Inca, the Aztec and Maya, several Native North American Tribes, and a few European societies in more depth. Our goal was to decide which of the groups appeared to be the most "civilized" based upon our investigation. (I will explain how the students defined "civilized" later in the article.)

In the weeks prior to this study, we read *Secret of the Andes* as part of our reading curriculum.⁴ In that fictional story about an Inca boy growing up in the Andes, students learned about the culture of the Incas and what motivated Inca behavior. Although students were familiar with the Aztecs and Mayans from a previous unit on South America, they had only used a textbook, so more research was required if their understanding of these societies was to deepen.

The students had studied Native North American tribes in fifth grade, in conjunction with American History, during which they presented reports about the religions, languages,

and the survival techniques of North American Indian nations.

Finally, the class was familiar with the outline of European history during medieval times from lessons conducted earlier in the sixth grade. With this background knowledge, students would have some points of reference for exploring new material. As the sixth graders reviewed and expanded upon information that they had learned previously about each of these cultural groups, I encouraged them to form personal opinions about which ones were more "civilized," and what the concept of "civilization" might mean.

Cooperative Learning Sets the Stage

I divided students into four groups, with five to six members per group. These student teams were mixed by ability levels





and gender, so no one demographic group would “overpower” another in conversations or work. I assigned four roles to team members: time-keepers, note-takers, material-handlers, and researchers. Assigned roles helped students become independent workers and allowed me to act as a facilitator, free to circulate among the student groups and lend assistance as needed with ideas and research. As I circulated, I also took notes about student behaviors and conversations for assessment purposes. The groups had about two weeks to research their culture groups before presenting their findings to their classmates, so I also helped them pace their work.

Allowing Questions to Lead the Way

Students suggested that we study each group during the sixteenth century, roughly from the original voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492 to the arrival of the Pilgrims in 1620. These familiar dates acted as “bookends,” limiting our inquiry to a reasonable length of time.

In order to determine the extent of cultural advancement for each society, students began by looking in the dictionary for a definition of “civilized.” One dictionary defined “civilized” as “To bring from a primitive to a culturally advanced state.”⁵ I wrote that definition on chart paper so that students could refer to it whenever they needed to. This definition, however, raised another question: What is a cultural advancement? I asked students to make a list of attributes that indicated advancement within a civilization. One of the students said that “civilized” was not just material advancements, but included ways of thinking, interacting, and believing. The class came up with twelve items which they thought should be included in a definition of civilized:

- Advancement in architecture
- Government structure
- Manners, humane treatment of others
- Advancements in weaponry
- Written language
- Stewardship of the Earth

- Trade and economy
- Communications and transportation
- Technology and innovations
- Personal hygiene and cleanliness
- Provision, methods for hunting and farming
- Style of clothing

From this list of items, I developed a rubric to grade the students’ final projects. (Figure 1) Each group would create a diorama of their civilization’s typical homes, draw examples of artwork and clothing, illustrate and label the civilization’s innovations on large sheets of butcher block paper, and write a paper to support their findings about their assigned civilization. (See photos of student work).

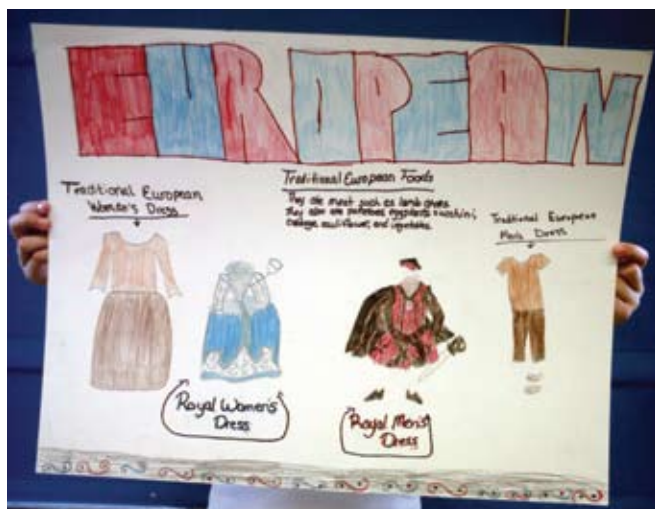
Motivated Students

As the inquiry began, I anticipated that numerous questions would arise from the controversial matter being explored. The students often paused in their ongoing work to discuss the complicated notion of civilization. Students in one group would learn by asking members of other groups for details, so I allowed plenty of time for these intra-group discussions. Students were enthusiastic, and often the class would have to cut dialogue short due to time constraints, as the quantity of information being deliberated was astounding. At times the discourse would get defensive, indicating the students were becoming emotionally involved with their arguments. Each group seemed eager to show that its assigned group was most “civilized.” In a way, it felt like a competition.

Students worked diligently during class time and devoted extra hours at home to find information to defend their positions. I credit this process of investigation and defending evidence for students’ enthusiasm and motivation to learn.

Incas

The group that was studying Incas chose the book, *The Incredible Incas and Their Timeless Land*, as their primary source of information.⁶ Students were amazed at the colorful clothing that the Inca made from llama wool and fascinated





While studying South American and Central American civilizations, students learned more about the region's history. They were incensed when they learned about the oppressive measures that Spanish Conquistadores used in pursuit of gold, hastening an end to these civilizations.

Native North Americans

Remembering previous studies from the fifth grade about Squanto, students were interested in investigating the Eastern Woodlands nation of the Wampanoag. After going to the library to find books, and conducting a search on the Internet, they found useful information about the Wampanoag. This study team also investigated the Sioux of the Plains in order to get a fuller depiction of Native life in North America.

The students were interested in the government structure of the Wampanoag, and were amazed at how advanced their implementation of democracy appeared to be, as

described in *The Native Americans, An Illustrated History*.⁸ They were also impressed with the Native Americans' frugal attitude toward the abundant natural resources in their homeland.

Europeans

Students realized that European societies in the 1500s were highly developed in many ways according to the criteria for "civilized" societies. Among technical innovations that students listed were the telescope, microscope, and pocket watch. The house that the students enjoyed constructing was a sturdy brick building with window shutters and flowerbeds.

While European musicians and scientists were heralded during this time in history, students were not impressed about the details of daily life among the common people in Europe in the sixteenth century, as described in *Historical Dictionary of the Elizabethan World*.⁹ Students did not view the feudal system (which was drawing to a close during the 1500s) as a fair arrangement. They concluded that lower class peoples were disadvantaged while royalty enjoyed overindulgence. They observed intricate designs on vibrant silk fabrics that the wealthy could afford, contrasting sharply with plain brown muslin fabrics worn by commoners. The students were disturbed by inhumane treatment of animals during blood sports such as cock fighting and bear baiting, which were common to the English.

Aztec and Maya

The group studying the Aztec and Maya relied heavily on an Eyewitness Book, *Aztec, Inca and Maya*.⁷ Using this and other reference materials, the students concluded that the Mayan calendar was a significant innovation. It took the students considerable time to re-create this intricately detailed calendar on their innovations chart, but they enjoyed this work.

Students noted that these societies had beautiful architecture and enormous pyramids. Their investigations revealed that the Aztec and Maya were usually respectful toward members of their own societies, and had very strict laws to protect natural resources.

Like the group studying the Inca society, the students who learned about the Aztec and Maya were sobered to learn that human sacrifice was an important facet of religious life for these ancient peoples. This group came to the conclusion that human sacrifices were not "civilized" based on the definition agreed upon by the class.

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Revealing the Verdict

At the conclusion of this unit of study, groups read their papers aloud, shared their culture's innovations, and displayed their dioramas of homes. Each presentation lasted about twenty minutes. The last class was devoted to a discussion in which students analyzed details and drew final conclusions. Instead of insisting on one "right" answer, I had decided to have the students vote for the society that they believed to be the most civilized based upon their inquiry. I labeled each corner of the room with the name of a culture, then instructed students to move to a corner that indicated their choice for the "most civilized" society. I was astonished when more than half of the students headed to the area designated to the Native North Americans. Students supported their choice by explaining that these Native Americans generally treated other people with respect, and that social stratification seemed minimal. These tribes had a tradition of caring for their elders, and they took only what was necessary from natural resources. Students mentioned the wars between Indians and the early colonizers, but they felt that these conflicts over land and a way of life did not show that Native Americans of that era had an aggressive culture overall. Students generally agreed that these observations contrasted sharply with the justifications offered by many Europeans who took land and resources unfairly.

Comparing Social Achievements

Only one student chose the Inca as the most civilized society. He cited their technology in road building, civic design, and swinging bridges for his high opinion of Inca civilization. The students who chose European society emphasized advancements in science and medicine. The architecture, they argued, was unsurpassed in the grand castles and cathedrals still found throughout Europe.

The few students who chose the Aztec and Maya were members of the study group that researched these South and Central American cultures. These students chose to emphasize the excellent number system and large well-maintained cities (and de-emphasize the human sacrifices) that were part of these societies.

Doing their own research gave the students insights that their textbooks had omitted. In this inquiry, for example, they saw how labeling Native Americans of the 1500s as "savages" was neither respectful nor accurate.¹⁰ I hope that, through this project, students began to outgrow some of the

Eurocentric thinking that was all-too-often promoted in social studies curriculum in past decades.¹¹

By giving students more control of their own learning, they were motivated and engaged in the learning process. I witnessed students more enthusiastic about studying world cultures than I had observed before. Allowing children to follow their natural tendency to investigate, encouraging their desires to talk about their learning, and helping them to recognize what they value in civilizations, motivated my students to learn in a whole new way. 🌍

Notes

1. John Dewey, *How We Think: A Restatement of the Revelation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process* (New York: Heath, 1933).
2. Linda Levstik and Keith Barton, *Doing History: Investigating with Children in Elementary and Middle Schools* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005).
3. Levstik and Barton, 31.
4. Ann Nolan Clark, *Secret of the Andes* (Mahwah, NJ: Troll Associates, 1987).
5. Sidney Landau, *Webster's Concise Dictionary of the English Language* (Naples, FL: Trident Press International, 1997).
6. Loren McIntyre, *The Incredible Incas* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 1986).
7. Elizabeth Baquedano, *Aztec, Inca, and Maya* (London: Dorling Kindersly, 1993).
8. David Hurst Thomas, Jay Miller, Richard White, Peter Nabokov, and Philip J. Deloria, *The Native Americans: An Illustrated History* (Kansas City: MO: Turner, 1995); James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 111.
9. John A. Wagner, *Historical Dictionary of the Elizabethan World* (New York: Oryx Press, 2002).
10. Loewen.
11. Loewen.

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