

Collin Libassi
SAC Lesson

Context:

10th grade world history 1&2 – honors and average

Length: ~ 45 minutes

Topic: Christopher Columbus, Structured Academic Controversy

This lesson is a structured academic controversy (SAC). A SAC is intended to introduce students into the practice of addressing a controversial issue in class. There are myriad controversial issues in social studies, some which are historical in nature and others that are currently hot debate topics in society. Involving students in these debates is a way of preparing them for life in a democratic society where governmental power is supposed to reflect the will of the citizens. Government officials' authority comes from popular mandate, or a voting public that chooses who chooses leaders by democratic elections. Because students will eventually be part of this voting public, it is imperative that they be able to form and articulate opinions on the pressing matters of the day. If students never learn to debate and to consider alternate points of view, then we will soon find ourselves in a broken democracy. For a democracy filled with uninformed citizens loses its ability to effectively govern itself through the will of the people.

For this lesson, students will tackle the issue of whether or not Christopher Columbus should be honored with a holiday. Starting in the late 18th century Americans have celebrated Columbus's 1492 voyage to the Americas, though it is a minor holiday that has come under fire in the past few decades. European migration to the New World was devastating to native populations, and it is largely for this reason that many groups have begun to protest a holiday honoring a man whose discovery opened the door for such devastation. Groups of Caribbean natives suffered near extinction in the wake of Columbus's first trips to the western hemisphere, and the United States eventually forced American Indians off their land into reservations after the destructive Indian Wars. Yet many people, and historical scholars especially, believe that Columbus is unfairly blamed for many of the ills that occurred under different leaders and at later times. In this SAC, students will view some of the major assertions on both sides of this argument and then debate the issue themselves.

Objectives:

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

Identify the key arguments for and against honoring Christopher Columbus

Present compelling arguments for and against honoring Columbus through the use of evidence provided in the SAC

Articulate their own opinion on the above issue, using evidence to support their conclusions

SOL Objectives:

WHII.4 The student will demonstrate knowledge of the impact of the European Age of Discovery and expansion into the Americas, Africa, and Asia by

a) explaining the roles of explorers and conquistadors

NCSS Standards:

Strand 3: Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of people, places, and environments

Strand 5: the study of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions

Core Issue:

Exploration, colonization, and conquest of occupied lands.

Resources:

Pro and Con handouts on the Columbus controversy

Content and Instructional Strategies:

I. Hook

Read the poem “1492” to the students. Afterwards, encourage the class to say what they know about Christopher Columbus.

II. Introduction to SAC

Tell students that today they will be doing a structured academic controversy, and explain what this means and why it is important to engage in such debates as students and citizens of a democracy. The students will also have to know a few rules of the SAC before they begin. First, they are not to attack each other personally. Second, in the clarifying questions section, explained below, they are not to refute the other side’s argument; they may only pose questions in order to get the other group to clear up or elaborate on the issues they have presented. Students should also be basing their arguments on those given to them for the pro and con sides; they should not be articulating personal opinion or coming up with arguments that do not relate to those already listed. Then pose the following question that they will debate: Is it appropriate that Americans honor Christopher Columbus with a holiday?

III. Break students into groups of 4. Within those groups, the students will break into two pairs of partners. Direct each pair to turn their desks so that they are directly facing the other pair. In each group, give one pair the handout with the pro Columbus arguments, and the other group the con arguments. Each pair of students will look over the arguments and decide what they think are the three strongest. Then, the con side will have two minutes to express these arguments while the other side listens; each student must present at least one argument, so that both members participate. They may elaborate on the arguments to explain them as they wish, but they may only draw from the arguments listed on the handout.

IV. After the 2 minutes is up, give the second group 30 seconds to ask clarifying questions. A clarifying question is a *question*, not a rebuttal. This means that the listening group may ask the first group to explain themselves further. If there are any unclear parts of their arguments, they may be asked to elaborate or clear up any confusion. However, clarifying questions are not a necessity; a group should only ask clarifying questions when they think clarification is genuinely needed.

V. Now the pro Columbus group will put forth the arguments in support of Columbus that they feel are most compelling for 2 minutes, again with each member contributing at least one point.

VI. The con group gets 30 seconds to ask clarifying questions.

VII. The pro and con groups will switch sides. Hand each group a new argument sheet, this time giving each group the opposite sheet from what they had the last time. Repeat steps IV-VI.

VIII. The groups will now discuss the issue for 5 minutes, attempting to come to a general consensus about the issue. Though the group may not all come to the same conclusion, now is the time when they can talk together about which arguments they felt were convincing or unconvincing. Their conclusions should not be based solely on personal opinion. While opinions will always factor into controversial issues, they should back up their opinions by analyzing the arguments presented, using evidence to reach their conclusions. If the group cannot come to a consensus, then each member should at least explain their own conclusion based on the arguments presented.

*note: Students may ask about the validity of the death tolls cited. The teacher should make sure students know that part of dealing with controversial issues is scrutinizing the evidence cited by each side. The numbers for the pre-Columbian population and post-Columbian deaths vary according to the source.

Assessment

At the end of the lesson, students will write a paragraph explaining their own views on the academic controversy. They have looked at arguments for both sides, stating what they feel are that side's best arguments; now they will show what they believe about the issue and why. They may take one of the two clear viewpoints or they may find a way to articulate a more middle ground approach. As well as discussing their own belief, in this paragraph they must state why they rejected other points of view. Their arguments must be based on the evidence presented in the SAC rather than personal opinion.

Differentiation: Given the particular classes dealt with in this lesson, there is little opportunity or necessity to differentiate the lesson. There is very little reading to be done in this SAC, and reading comprehension is one of the few areas that are even listed on some of these students' IEPs. However, some students may have more trouble paying attention than others, so they may be paired with more focused partners to help guide them through the activity.

Adaptations: None of the students in these classes require adaptations other than testing and quizzing in the special education room if desired, additional time for completing assignments, and clarified explanation of assignments. For this lesson then, the only adaptation that may be necessary is additional clarification. The teacher may pair any students who need this clarification with a student who is adept at following and clarifying instructions. The teacher will also need to keep an eye on such students to make sure that instructions are clear.

IN 1492

In fourteen hundred ninety-two
Columbus sailed the ocean blue.

He had three ships and left from Spain;
He sailed through sunshine, wind and rain.

He sailed by night; he sailed by day;
He used the stars to find his way.

A compass also helped him know
How to find the way to go.

Ninety sailors were on board;
Some men worked while others snored.

Then the workers went to sleep;
And others watched the ocean deep.

Day after day they looked for land;
They dreamed of trees and rocks and sand.

October 12 their dream came true,
You never saw a happier crew!

"Indians! Indians!" Columbus cried;
His heart was filled with joyful pride.

But "India" the land was not;
It was the Bahamas, and it was hot.

The Arakawa natives were very nice;
They gave the sailors food and spice.

Columbus sailed on to find some gold
To bring back home, as he'd been told.

He made the trip again and again,
Trading gold to bring to Spain.

The first American? No, not quite.
But Columbus was brave, and he was bright.

Against Columbus

“The ‘Western civilization’ that Columbus brought with him resulted in the deaths of about 100-million Native Americans out of the 125-million that demographers estimate lived in the Americas and the Caribbean in 1492. It enslaved millions of Africans and was responsible for the deaths of an estimated 75-million African slaves en route to the Americas.”ⁱ The legacy of Columbus is genocide.

Christopher did not discover America. The American Indians discovered it when they came across the Bering Strait from Asia. Furthermore, Columbus is not even the first European to discover the continent. The first Europeans to settle in North America were the Norse, who settled in Newfoundland around 1000. According to Viking sagas, the true discoverer is either the Bjarni Herjolfsson or Leif Eiriksson.

Columbus himself wrote of the "Indians" in his journal: "They are very simple and honest and exceedingly liberal with all they have. They would make fine servants. With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want."ⁱⁱ

The Northeast Indian Quarterly published an outstanding collection of essays on the quincentenary from a Native American Indian perspective. “When surveyed on the multiple item question, ‘In what way would you characterize the Quincentenary?’ seventy percent of those responding described it either as ‘500 years of Native People’s resistance to colonization,’ or as an ‘anniversary of a holocaust.’ⁱⁱⁱ

Christopher Columbus was a cruel leader. His typical punishment for stealing was to cut the offender’s nose and ears cut off. He used this punishment both against natives and Spaniards, and sometimes even sold the offender into slavery.^{iv}

For Columbus

Columbus was a brave man whose actions made a major contribution to the formation of the modern world. To reject Columbus is in effect to reject the modern world.^v

Columbus was part of a process that was inevitable, of Europe coming into contact with the wider world.^{vi}

Columbus did not commit genocide, nor did he ever intend to. The vast majority of the natives died of disease, not by murder or battle. Genocide is "the systematic, planned annihilation of a racial, political, or cultural group." "The Spaniards were brutal in suppressing revolts, but genocide was not part of the plan; slavery and conversion were. What sense would it make to kill your labor supply?"^{vii}

"There is evidence to suggest that other visitors to this continent had preceded Columbus. But obviously, none of them had shown great interest in their find. Columbus, on the other hand, was the first to market his discovery to the restive Europeans, having given them the courage and impetus to follow in his wake."^{viii}

It is unfair for modern audiences to condemn Columbus on the basis of current moral codes. "...applying a moral code that wasn't then in place doesn't help explain Columbus or put his actions in any sort of context. 'Every generation rethinks its historical past through a prism that reflects its own concerns.'^{ix}

While Columbus did kidnap natives and taken to Spain, he returned them afterwards if they desired. Moreover, the brutal suppressions of native rebellions occurred under the direction of Nicolas de Oviedo, Columbus's enemy. Columbus himself was never involved in these actions.^x

ⁱ Shreeram, K. and Rebecca Johns. "Don't honor Columbus' legacy of savagery." *St. Petersburg Times*. 16 October 1998. p 23A.

ⁱⁱ Sheeram, 23A.

ⁱⁱⁱ Vizenor, Gerald. "Christopher Columbus: Lost Havens in the Ruins of Representation." *American Indian Quarterly*. Vol. 16, no. 4. 524.

^{iv} Tremlett, Giles. "Lost document reveals Columbus as tyrant of the Caribbean." *The Guardian*. 7 August 2006. International, p. 15.

^v Lunenfeld, Marvin. "What Shall We Tell the Children? The Press Encounters Columbus." *The History Teacher*, vol. 25, no. 2 (February 1992), p. 139.

^{vi} Carrll, Rory et. al. "Columbus toppled as indigenous people rise up after five centuries: Explorer's reputation is victim of region's pink tide of leftwing governments." *The Guardian*. 12 October 2007. International, p. 27.

^{vii} Layer, W.J. “Those who trash Columbus don’t know much about history.” *The Washington Times*. 26 October 1992. Sec. E, Commentary. p. E2.

^{viii} Rotella, Richard C. “Americans owe debt of gratitude to Columbus.” *St. Petersburg Times*. 27 September 1991. Editorial section, p. 15A.

^{ix} Lewis, Shawn D. “Columbus, Stay Home.” *Newsweek*. 24 June 1991. Society Section. P. 54.

^x Layer, 27.