

Collin Libassi

Socratic Seminar

Classes: 10th grade honors and average World History, Woodside High School

Length: 90 minutes

Topic: Cortez the Killer

Context

This Socratic seminar is designed for either an honors or average 10th grade World History class at Woodside High School. A Socratic seminar is a lesson in which a class discusses a text in an open forum. In order to allow students to grapple with the text themselves and to learn to increase their discussion skills amongst each other, the teacher ideally takes a minimal role in the discussion. Acting as a facilitator, the teacher will ask the students a guiding question to open the discussion, and students are free to enter into discussion of the text based first on that guiding question. What makes this form of discussion “Socratic” in nature is that the teacher’s role is not to debate with the students. Rather, the instructor merely asks them questions to guide their thinking, much in the way Socrates did before he was charged with corrupting the Athenian youth.

Socratic seminar is as much a lesson in discussion skills as it is a lesson on the chosen text. While one of the goals is certainly to have students delve deeply into a text in order to increase their understanding of a particular topic, perhaps equally important is the goal of helping the students become better at the process of academic dialogue. Much of classroom activity often centers on low order thinking skills like recitation. Being able to openly discuss a text, however, can lead to more lasting learning. Furthermore, as students enter the adult world they will increasingly find that it is a verbalized world in which they will need to be able to express themselves. Socratic seminars can also help prepare them for this world because just as in the world outside of school, in Socratic seminars there is no hand raising. Students will sit in a circle so that everyone can see each other, and they must enter into the discussion when they feel appropriate without raising their hands and without interrupting their peers. Hopefully in this manner students will learn to be assertive – though not rude – discussants.

For this particular lesson, the “text” will be the song *Cortez the Killer*, written by Neil Young, performed in this version by the Dave Matthews Band and Warren Haynes. The song, which Young first recorded this song on his 1975 album *Zuma*, is basically a protest against what Young sees as a Spanish slaughter of the Aztec peoples in the 16th century, led by Hernan Cortes. The lyrics present the Aztecs as a civilization in which “hate was just a legend” and “war was never known.” Though one should not downplay the disastrous effects of Cortes’s explorations on natives, Neil Young’s portrayal of this civilization before the arrival of Cortes is inaccurate and idealized. The Aztecs ruled over an empire that they consolidated through war, and the Spanish were even able to ally with subjugated groups that resented Aztec overlordship. There are also several other parts of Young’s lyrics that show a very biased and questionable interpretation of history. Nonetheless, using his song as the basis of a discussion would also be a good way to draw attention to the disaster many of the Spanish leaders brought to New World populations.

While this lesson fits into World History SOLs for both the Aztecs and New World exploration, the two objectives are actually spaced oddly far apart considering their chronology and close thematic relation. If done with an average section, which only covers history up through the Renaissance, the SOL that relates to exploration would not apply. If done with the

honors class, which covers all of history in one year, this lesson would hit on topics that are separated by over 200 pages in their textbook. If the text, SOLs, and Newport News pacing guides are followed strictly, the students would cover the Aztecs 6 weeks before returning to the topic to see their relation to the conquistadors. However, these two topics really should be viewed in concert, and having a seminar that addresses Cortez the Killer may give the class a better feel for context.

Objectives:

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

Explain aspects of Aztec civilization including human sacrifice, warfare, architecture,
Analyze Neil Young's portrayal of the Spanish, Aztec encounter in his song, *Cortez the Killer*
Engage in discussion to analyze *Cortez the Killer*

SOL Objectives

WHI.11 The student will be able to demonstrate knowledge of major civilizations of the Western Hemisphere, including the Mayan, Aztec, and Incan

WHII.4 The student will be able to 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 Objectives

Strand 1: Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity.

Strand 2: Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of people, places, and environments.

Strand 3: Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions.

Assessment

Students will earn a completion grade for filling out a seminar ticket, and they may earn further participation points for each time they thoughtfully participate in the discussion. Beyond this, the assessment for this lesson will be informal. For some of these students, this may be the first time they have had to engage in a discussion of this type, and I do not want to tie the discussion to a formal grade too much. Throughout the discussion I will be gauging the extent to which students are grasping the material and the discussion format through their responses. At the end of the discussion, the 'debriefing' will allow me to further assess informally what each student got out of it.

Content and Instructional Strategies

Preparation:

1. It is unlikely that most students in these classes will complete a ticket for this seminar as a homework assignment. Furthermore, they will have little, if any, background knowledge of Cortes and the downfall of Aztec civilization before they begin this lesson. Consequently, this Socratic seminar may work better if students learn about these events before they encounter the song, *Cortez the Killer*. The day before the seminar then, they will be assigned a section of

reading from the textbook. They will read 159-162 and 386-387 [The Conquistadors through Fall of Tenochtitlan] from their book, *World History: Connections to Today*.

2. On the day of the seminar, the teacher will give the students a reading quiz [provided below]. The classes are used to having reading quizzes frequently, so they should be getting to the point where they know they will have to actually do the reading in order to do well on the quiz. This quiz should last no more than 10 minutes, and students will be allowed to use any notes they may have taken on the reading, though they may not use their book.
3. After the students have been given 10 minutes, they will trade papers with someone nearby, and grade the quiz using a colored pencil to mark the wrong answers. The teacher will review the answers with the class, asking students to state all they know about each question, and filling in gaps in knowledge where necessary.
4. The teacher will now have students rearrange the desks in the room so that they are in one large circle with everyone able to see each other. The students will be introduced to the idea of a Socratic seminar, and the ground rules will be set here. To the extent possible, the teacher will model the proper tone and discussion practices the students must use. The rules are as follows:
 - Everyone must have a name tag visible on their desk
 - During discussion, students will not raise their hands. Rather, when they wish to speak, they will simply begin speaking, though without interrupting the previous speaker
 - Students must speak at an audible tone, making eye contact with their peers
 - Students must have their textbooks on their desks. As much as possible, they must cite specific parts of the song and textbook when making their points. The point of this seminar is not personal opinion but discussion based on the text and song.
5. Distribute the Cortes 'ticket' and lyrics sheet. As students listen to the song, they must answer the brief questions that are listed on the ticket. They will not be graded on their participation in the discussion, but in order to get the class work grade for that day, they *must* fill out the ticket.
6. Using an iPod with speakers attached, the teacher will play *Cortez the Killer*, starting at 2:00 minutes into the track and ending at 6:15. After the song is over, give the students an extra 5 minutes to complete any part of the ticket they may have left and to continue pondering the song in relation to the history of the Aztecs and the Spanish.

Seminar

1. Students should now be ready to engage in the seminar discussion. The teacher will begin the discussion with the following opening question:
What is Neil Young's message in this song?

[Though usually a Socratic seminar requires students to come to class already having prepared for discussion, with these classes it makes sense to do things differently. Students must have background knowledge before hearing the song. By completing a reading quiz, listening to the song, filling out the ticket, and discussing all in one 90 minute class, the students' knowledge may be far fresher in their minds, leading to better discussion.]

2. The discussion should proceed from here, with the teacher staying out of the discussion as much as possible. The teacher might, however, periodically reinforce the desire to have students specifically cite text as much as possible.

Additionally, if discussion begins to wane or begins to move into tangents, the teacher may ask a few of these follow up questions:

Why do you think Neil Young chose to write a song about this event?

What is Young's view of the event?

How accurate is Young's portrayal?

How do you think we should view Cortes's encounter with the Aztecs?

How do you think the song reflects the time in which it was written? [1975]

After Seminar:

Following the seminar, the students will go around the circle, one by one stating their views of the seminar. Did they enjoy the seminar? Did they feel that they got anything out of it? Do they have any suggestions for how to make it better?

Resources

Ipod or other music player with the song *Cortez the Killer*

Speakers compatible with music player

Textbook

Handouts for lyrics, seminar ticket

Differentiation

The only differentiation I may have to do in this lesson is to play with the number of times that students should/must speak. Though my preference is to place no restrictions on either the minimum or maximum amount of participation, I think this depends on how the discussion is going. With high school students, you often get extremes of participation, so I may put a 6 point cap on the amount of times students can speak as well as a 1 point minimum on how many times students must speak. This may help to ensure that ensure that most students will at least speak once, but that more assertive students will not completely dominate the seminar.

Adaptations

There are no significant modification issues with these classes that would necessitate adaptations beyond the differentiation listed above. None of the students have serious issues with IEPs or 504 plans that would require an adaptation for this lesson.

Seminar Ticket

Who are the main characters in this song?

What is this song about?

How does the songwriter describe the Aztecs?

Reading Quiz

pg. 159 – 162, 386-7 [The Conquistadors – Fall of Tenochtitlan]

The capital city of the Aztecs was:

- A) Tenochtitlan
- B) Chinampas
- C) Pizarro
- D) Tikal

In which century did Hernan Cortes come reach Aztec civilization?

In order to keep their gods satisfied, the Aztecs offered what as a tribute?

Who was the Aztec ruler who was defeated and killed by Cortes's forces?

Cortez the Killer, by Neil Young [1975]

Performed by Dave Matthews Band and Warren Haynes
lyrics

1. He came dancing across the water
2. With his galleons and guns
3. Looking for the new world
4. In that palace in the sun.

5. On the shore lay montezuma
6. With his coca leaves and pearls
7. In his halls he often wondered
8. With the secrets of the worlds.

9. And his subjects gathered round him
10. Like the leaves around a tree
11. In their clothes of many colors
12. For the angry gods to see.

13. And the women all were beautiful
14. And the men stood straight and strong
15. They offered life in sacrifice
16. So that others could go on.

17. Hate was just a legend
18. And war was never known
19. The people worked together
20. And they lifted many stones.

21. They carried them to the flatlands
22. And they died along the way
23. But they built up with their bare hands
24. What we still cant do today.

25. And I know shes living there
26. And she loves me to this day
27. I still cant remember when
28. Or how I lost my way.

29. He came dancing across the water
30. Cortez, cortez
31. What a killer.