

Who Was Christopher Columbus?

Overview

In this lesson, students will explore the motives of Christopher Columbus’s 1492 exploration, the controversy surrounding the changes Columbus’ voyages initiated, and the impact of the Columbian Exchange on Native American cultures. Students will participate in two simulation activities and a class discussion of these topics.

Grades

6-7

Essential Questions

- What was the “Age of Exploration,” and what were the motives of the participating countries and explorers?
- How did European imperialism and capitalism develop in the Age of Exploration?
- Who was Christopher Columbus and what effect did he have on the Age of Exploration?
- What were the causes and effects of Christopher Columbus’ 1492 expedition?
- What was the Columbian Exchange and how did it affect the continents involved?
- What was the experience and response of Natives who encountered Spanish conquistadors?
- In what ways did Columbus’ exploration lead to the development of a Native American and African slave trade?
- In what ways did disease impact Native populations in the New World?

Materials

- “Who Was Christopher Columbus” accompanying Power Point, available in the Database of K-12 Resources (in PDF format), here: <https://k12database.unc.edu/files/2012/05/WhoWasColumbusPPT.pdf>
 - To view this PDF as a projectable presentation, save the file, click “View” in the top menu bar of the file, and select “Full Screen Mode”
 - To request an editable PPT version of this presentation, send a request to CarolinaK12@unc.edu

Duration

Two 60-minute periods

Procedure

Day 1

Exploring the Concept of Power

1. As a warm-up, write the word POWER on the board and encourage students to brainstorm the word for around 3 minutes. Prompt their thinking by asking:
 - What comes to mind when you hear this word? What words, images, sounds, situations, people, symbols, colors, etc. do you think of?
2. Tell students you want to expand this conversation about power into a physical representation. Place several objects where the entire class can observe them, such as six chairs, a table, and a bottle. Ask students to volunteer one at a time to arrange the objects in a way that makes one of the chairs the most powerful object in relation to the other items. Let students know that they can arrange the objects in any fashion they choose, but all objects must be part of the arrangement. Allow several students to experiment and see if the class can come to an agreement on which arrangement represents the greatest amount of power. (For example, a student might line 5 chairs up, one behind the other facing the table,

with the 6th chair behind the table facing the other chairs. The bottle may be placed in the 6th chair. Students may also begin to place chairs on top of the table as they expand their thinking.)

Once a suitable arrangement has been agreed upon by most, ask a student to enter the arrangement and to place their own body so that they assume the most powerful position, without moving any of the objects. Again, allow students to experiment. Once one person is in place, you may open up the invitation to another member of the class to enter the space and try to place themselves in an even more powerful position than the first person, thus taking power away. (Source: This activity is based on an activity in Augusto Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*.) Debrief the activity by discussing:

- Why did you make the choices you made when arranging the objects? (You may want to refer back to particular arrangements that were most striking.)
- What did it take on our part for an object to take on "power"?
- Were there particular relationships or situations you had in your mind when you were arranging the objects? Explain.
- How did the dynamic of the objects change once people began to enter the space to assume power?
- How did it feel if you were in the space and someone came to "take your power"? How did it feel if you were the one "taking the power" from someone else?
- What situations in history can you think of where power has been used by one group or person over another group or person?

Christopher Columbus and the Age of Exploration

3. Explain to students that over the next two days, they will be learning about **Christopher Columbus** and the different views surrounding his exploration of the Americas, which began in 1492 and opened the door to the **Age of Exploration**. Ask students:
 - What does Age of Exploration refer to?
 - Discuss with students that the Age of Exploration generally refers to "A period from the early 15th century continuing into the early 17th century when European countries sought power by sending explorers to travel around the world in search of new trading routes and partners to feed burgeoning **capitalism** in Europe. They also were in search of finding and trading goods like gold and silver. In the process, Europeans encountered unknown cultures and peoples and mapped lands previously unknown to them."
 - How do you think power might play a part during the Age of Exploration?
 - What is a **conquistador**?
 - Facilitate an answer such as: A Spanish soldier, explorer, and/or adventurer in search of profit and glory. The word means "conqueror" in Spanish.
 - In what ways do you think conquistadors represented and used power?
 - During the 15th century, Spain had a growing sense of **imperialism**, which led them to fund a voyage by a man named Christopher Columbus. What is imperialism?
 - Explain that imperialism is "...a policy of extending control or authority over foreign entities as a means of acquisition and/or maintenance of empires.")
 - What part does power play within imperialism?
4. Open the power point "Who Was Christopher Columbus," available in the Database of K-12 Resources or by e-mailing a request to CarolinaK12@unc.edu Leaving it on the first slide, discuss:
 - What do you already know about the man called **Christopher Columbus**?
5. As you begin the power point presentation, you may wish to have students take notes in the Cornell Note format, or another preferred method. However, it is important that the power point be used as a catalyst for class discussion and not lecture. As you go through the slides and discuss, note the following talking points:

- Before going over the information on slide 2, ask students if anyone knows who gave Columbus his power. Who or what enabled him to make the voyage that landed him a place in our history books? After student thoughts have waned, move on to share the information on slide 2.
 - After reviewing slides 3 & 4 regarding Columbus' motives for exploration, ask students:
 - In your opinion, what is the reason Columbus made this voyage in 1492?
 - After slide 6, discuss:
 - In your opinion, is it fair to judge Columbus for not knowing where he was in 1492? Explain. (Encourage students to think with historical perspective. Ask them to consider the fact that navigation was very different in the 1400s, and the technology that we have today did not exist. Also facilitate discussion of the fact that maps and globes did not yet contain every landform as they do today.)
 - After slide 7, encourage students to respond with their own opinion regarding whether or not Columbus deserves credit for "discovering" America. Then discuss the two perspectives on slides 8 & 9.
 - After slides 10-11, which offer some alternatives for who officially discovered America, ask students to discuss:
 - Who do you believe deserves credit for discovering America and why?
6. End class by projecting slide 12 and have students discuss:
- What do you see here? (Encourage to first just point out details such as people, clothing, colors, symbols, landscape, etc.)
 - Who do you think these people are, and what is happening in this moment? What evidence in the picture makes you think this?
 - Who in this picture has power and what evidence makes you think this?
7. Let students know that the title of the image is "Columbus Landing." Tell students you want them to consider what happened after Columbus and his men landed. For homework, tell students to complete one of the following options:
- Imagine that this is the "before" image. Draw the "after" image, in which you depict what happens next.
 - Write a brief narrative (one page or less) of what happens next. You can assume the persona of Columbus, one of his men, or a native person, or you can write from a narrator's perspective.

Day 2

What Happened After Columbus Landed?

8. Allow students to share their art or writing in small groups at the start of class then continue with the Power Point discussion, which offers details regarding post-contact.
9. In discussing the Columbian Exchange, you may wish to give your students a blank Columbian exchange chart and allow them to search the internet for the items exchanged between the Old World and New World before sharing slide 17.

The Columbian Exchange: Simulation of Spreading Small Pox

- Stop at slide 18 and explain to students that they will be playing a game called "Meet and Greet." Have two prearranged piles of paper, each pile a different color. Assume one pile is white and one pile is red, but any colors will suffice. There should be less of one color than the other, with a ratio of approximately 1:4. The color of which there is less will represent Native Americans (in this example, white); the other color will represent the Spanish (red.)
10. Hand each student a piece of paper and explain that if they receive a piece of white paper, they are representing a Native American living in 1492. If they receive a piece of red paper, they are representing a Spanish conquistador arriving in the New World in 1492. Instruct students to travel around the room and "meet and greet" each other as these characters. All they have to do is shake hands, say hello, and most

importantly, share paper with one another by tearing a small piece off their paper and giving it to everyone they encounter. Tell students the goal is to meet as many people as possible (both those with the same color of paper and the opposite color) and to get as many torn parts of paper as they can. Let students know they don't just have to tear pieces of their original paper to share; they can also tear pieces of paper that has been given to them to share.

11. Once students understand how to play the game, review your expectations for large group activities and allow them to begin "meeting and greeting." Make sure they are tearing pieces of their paper and sharing them with one another as they travel around the room. Allow around 3 minutes for this, depending on your class size.
12. Upon stopping the "Meet and Greet," instruct students to return to their desks and pile all of their paper pieces on their desk. Tell everyone who started with red paper (the Spanish) to stand up. Once these students stand, explain to them that you are sorry to inform them that they were carriers of the deadly virus **small pox**. As students respond, reassure them by explaining that being a carrier does not mean that you are currently ill, since many Europeans' immune systems were accustomed to the germs. As they sit down in relief, instruct anyone who did not start with a piece of red paper but now has some red paper in their pile to stand. Explain to these "Native Americans" standing that you have very bad news for them. They have been infected with the small pox virus based on their contact with the Spanish carriers, and that more than likely, the disease will be deadly for them!
13. Go through slides 19 & 20 and tell the standing students that you are going to explain what is going to happen to them. After sharing the gruesome symptoms, discuss:
 - In what ways was the disease transmitted in our simulation? (simple contact)
 - How does this compare to the way Small Pox was transmitted to North and South America?
 - Why did Small Pox spread so rampantly among Natives? (Discuss that since their bodies were not used to such germs, Natives had no means of fighting it off, unlike Europeans who typically lead a less sanitary life style in comparison and were used to the virus. Thus, many did not get sick or die.)
 - Let's assume you live in a Native American village and several people start to die from small pox. What might your response be? (Discuss how many Natives would abandon their village, not realizing they were carrying (thus spreading) the disease elsewhere.)
 - What preventions or treatments did Natives have? (barely any!)
 - How did the spreading of disease in the Columbian Exchange affect Native populations, culture, values, life, etc.?
14. Finish the power point presentation by sharing the quotes on slide 21.
15. As a culminating assignment, instruct students to create a poster, "The Two Sides of Christopher Columbus," representing the controversy over whether he was a "hero" or "villain."