Mesoamerican Codices

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Latin American History, grades 9-12

Introduction:

Many groups in Mesoamerica created and used pictographic writing systems to communicate. These codices, as the manuscripts are called, were painted on deer skin, amate paper, or cloth and centered on the themes of religion, history, and the economy. The codices give historians a window through which to know about the perspective of the Mixtec, Aztec, and Tlalxcaltecans, among other Mesoamerican cultures. Drawing on the work of archaeologists Dr. Ron Spores and Dr. John Pohl, this unit plan will allow students to identify different elements in Mixtec codices, interpret the general message of the Codex Nuttall, and create a personal codex in the Mixtec style.

Essential Questions:

* How and why do humans communicate?
* Why is it important to consider the perspective of the indigenous groups of Mesoamerica?
* In what ways do symbols communicate more effectively than the written word? How do humans (and corporations) use symbols in today’s world?
* Why did the Mixtecs (and other Mesoamerican cultures) develop writing systems that were pictographic instead of phonetic?

Learning Objectives:

Students will:

* + Identify elements of Mixtec codices (i.e. house, marriage, temple, man, woman, speech scroll, priest, mountain, etc.).
  + Use the elements of Mixtec codices to interpret the Codex Nuttall.
  + Explain why the Mixtecs developed a pictographic rather than a phonetic writing system.
  + Create a personal codex in the Mixtec style.

Activities:

Day 1: Lecture / discussion

1. Introduce Mesoamerican codex elements with the PowerPoint presentation. This presentation begins by showing students how much they can already interpret by simply looking at the images and “reading” them.
2. The presentation also introduces the students to the work of Dr. Ron Spores and Dr. John Pohl to allow the teacher and students to discuss why primary sources are important and why it is important to take into account the perspective of “conquered” peoples.
3. The images from *México, genio que perdura* were taken from a PowerPoint presentation made by Dr. Stephanie Wood. These images do a great job of showing that the contents of the Mesoamerican codices are still part of the Mexican human landscape today. These images allow for a discussion about the nature of the Spanish “Conquest” and how much of indigenous customs have survived during almost 500 years of contact between Europeans and Amerindians.
4. The presentation also gives the teacher and students the opportunity to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using a pictographic rather than a phonetic writing system.
5. The end of the presentation shows how humans (and corporations) use symbols to communicate information today across different languages and cultures. There are corporate logos as well as an example of protest art from Oaxaca.
6. Assign homework:
   1. A worksheet on interpreting Mixtec Codex elements
   2. Read pp. 6-32 of The Legend of Lord Eight Deer: An Epic of Ancient Mexico by John M. D. Pohl
   3. Look up Mesoamerican birthday (and meaning) on Aztec Calendar Converter: <http://www.azteccalendar.com/calendar-calculator.html>

Day 2: Review/Discussion/Computer Lab

1. Review the Mixtec Codex Elements worksheet to ensure that students understood the different elements. Review elements that were possibly not discussed in class the previous day (i.e. priests have faces painted black, women are generally seated, sacred bundles in temples, military victory, war bands, etc.).
2. Review the reading of The Legend of Lord Eight Deer: An Epic of Ancient Mexico. Ask students if they had any questions about the reading.
3. Have students look at the website <http://www.mesolore.net/archive/manuscripts/2/view> in order to see the Codex Nuttall. Have students identify at least 3 parts of the codex that appeared in the reading from the previous night. To the best of their ability, students should sketch these 3 scenes in their notebooks in order to get an idea for the style of the codex. Remind the students that Mixtec codices are read from right to left and snake along. This in-class time will allow the teacher to circulate, answer individual questions, and ensure that all the students understand how to interpret a codex.
4. Assign the personal codex assignment. Read it over with students and make sure they know what is expected of them
5. Assign homework:
   1. Read pp. 36-55 of The Legend of Lord Eight Deer: An Epic of Ancient Mexico
   2. Make a sketch of your personal codex.
   3. Look up Mesoamerican birthday (and meaning) on Aztec Calendar Converter: <http://www.azteccalendar.com/calendar-calculator.html>

Day 3: Art Day!

1. Discuss the end of The Legend of Lord Eight Deer: An Epic of Ancient Mexico
2. Give students time to work on their codices in class. This gives students time to compare their work and share ideas with each other. It also gives the teacher an opportunity to help students who need it.
3. Homework: Complete personal codex and do a written response to The Legend of Lord Eight Deer: An Epic of Ancient Mexico

Assessment:

1. Personal codices of students (see Codex Assignment)
2. Written response to The Legend of Lord Eight Deer: An Epic of Ancient Mexico. This can be flexible, but may answer the following questions:
   1. Why do you think John Pohl chose to write about the Codex Nuttall in this format instead of in a more traditional way?
   2. What did you learn about the world view of the ancient Mixtec people? What does the story of Lord Eight Deer teach the reader?
   3. How do you use symbols in your daily life? Why did you choose the symbols you used in your personal codex?

Extensions:

Now that your students are well-versed in reading Mesoamerican codices, have them use the Florentine Codex and Lienzo de Tlaxcala to interpret the Aztec and Tlaxcaltecan perspectives of the Spanish Conquest using John Pohl’s “The Meeting” on <http://www.famsi.org/research/pohl/pohl_meeting.html>.