

## **Introduction to Mesoamerica**

### **Lesson Plan**

#### **Introduction**

This lesson is an introduction to Mesoamerica and its cultures. We will take a brief look at four of the great civilizations of ancient Mexico and examine many of the cultural characteristics, products and practices that were common throughout Mesoamerica, and that changed the rest of the world in ways unimaginable before the Spanish ships brought them to the attention of the rest of the world

The information in this lesson provides a context for the second unit, “Juego de pelota,” which is a more in-depth look at one of the Mesoamerican practices that perhaps has had as much or more influence on our lives today than any of the others – the ball game.

#### **Learning Objectives**

Students will become familiar with:

- Mesoamerican cultures: who they were, where they lived, how they lived, how they were alike, and how they were different from one another
- Mesoamerican writing systems and what we can learn from them
- Mesoamerican products and practices that changed the world when Spanish ships brought them from New Spain.

#### **Guiding Questions**

What were the ancient Mesoamerican cultures like?

How is the world different today as a result of the products and practices of Mesoamerica?

#### **Preparing to Teach this Lesson**

Read John Pohl’s [“Introduction: Mesoamerica?”](#) from which much of the information in this lesson is adapted. I deliberately left this link out of the suggested links for the students because it gives very concise answers to some of the questions that I would prefer to have the students discover for themselves from their research and class presentations. For further background information I also recommend looking over the links recommended for the students’ research.

Students will be assigned to research one of four cultures – Aztec, Mixtec, Olmec or Maya. They will find information on geography and climate, languages, writing systems, calendars, architecture, agriculture and foods, and the structure and practices of the society. They will prepare a visual display of this information in the classroom.

Materials contained in this lesson:

- PowerPoint presentation “El calendario”
- PowerPoint presentation “Los códigos”
- PowerPoint presentation “La agricultura”
- Student notebook “Cuaderno: Mesoamérica” (one per student)
- Map and timeline (one per group) for wall display

- Selected pages of the Codex Selden with questions (print and laminate one set to pass around in groups)

Use the PowerPoint presentations to give further information on the writing systems, calendar, and foods. The follow-on lesson provides detailed information on the ball game.

The pages of the Codex Selden with identification exercises are for Activity 3. Print one set and laminate them if desired. They will be passed around from student to student, and laminating them will help them last longer.

You will need to have four good-sized sections of bulletin board where students can pin up the images they will find. Once completed, each display will provide a visual summary of some of the characteristics and products of each of the cultures studied. If you do not have enough bulletin board or wall space to accommodate the displays, you could have them make posters of their images as an alternative.

## **Suggested Activities**

### **Activity 1 What is Mesoamerica?**

- Divide students into 4 groups. Assign each group one of the following Mesoamerican cultures. Each group will research the assigned culture to find out when and where they lived and what their culture was like, and will prepare an exhibit of images that represent their assigned culture.
  - La mexicana of central Mexico: the Aztecs
  - Tropical lowlands of the east coast: the Olmecs
  - Tropical highlands of Oaxaca: the Mixtecs
  - Chiapas, Yucatán and Guatemala: the Mayas
- Students will need copies of the student notebook “Cuaderno: Mesoamérica.” Students will record information in their notebooks as the unit progresses. Each group will also need one copy each of the map and timeline, which they will complete and include in their display.
- Each group will need separate bulletin board space for their exhibit (see Preparing to Teach this Lesson).
- Prior to doing the research, students will meet in their groups to talk over the questions on page 1 of the notebook, speculate on the answers, and assign responsibility among the group members for finding the images.
- Students will research the assigned culture according to questions provided in their notebooks. Suggested websites for research are listed on page 2 of the notebook. They will assemble the images, along with short captions, that visually represent the answers to the questions. They should also record their findings in their notebooks.
- The group will meet again to discuss their findings, share their images, write captions for the images, and assemble their exhibit. If you are teaching the lesson to multiple classes, as I do, you can assign the same research to each class, but divide the responsibility for assembling the images among the classes. Each exhibit will then be the creation of more than one class.

- Each group will present their exhibit and explain their culture to the class, with each group member doing an equal part of the presentation. Students should present information related to all the images, including those assembled by other classes.
- Give time in class for students to travel to the other cultures, looking at the images and captions, discussing them, asking questions, and recording information in their notebooks about each culture on pages 2-3.

### **Activity 2 What's my name and what day is it?**

- Show the PowerPoint presentation “El calendario” on the Mesoamerican calendar. Explain that the Mesoamerican calendar system, which used a 260-day calendar in conjunction with the 365-day solar calendar, was very exact, probably as much or more so than the Gregorian calendar we use today. The use of this calendar system was common throughout Mesoamerica. Day names consisted of one of twenty day signs paired with a number from 1 to 13. Years were named with one of four year signs paired with a number from 1 to 13. It is thought that the 260 days of the calendar represented the period of human gestation.
- When this 260-day calendar is applied to the 365-day solar calendar (see chart on PowerPoint), students can see how the images and numbers rotate so that each day and year in a cycle of 52 solar years will have a unique name and year, at which point the cycle starts over.
- Explain that throughout Mesoamerica, names were given to people based on what day the person was born. Students should add information to their notebooks as required.
- Students should download and print John Pohl's website pages on [day names](#) and [year bearers](#). They will examine these codex pages to see if they can find the following information:
  - year 4 House, day 1 Rain on page 7 of the [Codex Nuttall](#)
  - year 7 Reed, day 1 House, and year 5 Flint, day 11 Eagle on page 13 of the [Codex Selden](#).
- Students should find their own calendar names (Tonalli day sign) on the [Aztec Calendar-Calculator](#) website and record it in their notebooks on page 4.
- Optional: At this point you could begin to write the Mesoamerican date on the board each day.

### **Activity 3: What, When, Where?**

- Introduce the codices with the PowerPoint presentation “Los códices”, emphasizing the ways in which the pictographic writing systems of all the Mesoamerican cultures are similar. The codices were generally painted on animal hide or amate (bark) paper.
- Divide students into small groups. Each group will examine and discuss the laminated pages of the Codex Selden. (See Preparing to Teach this Lesson) Provide each group with a copy of John Pohl's page on [place signs](#). Point out that the codices are read from right to left, or from bottom to top in the case of the Codex Selden, and that the artists have drawn lines on the pages to show the path of the story. Each of the laminated pages has a list of several pictographs the students are to identify. Each group should examine one page, exchanging with other groups as time permits.

- Project: Each student will design, draw and color a pictographic representation of an event that has happened in his or her life. This should be done in the form of a screen-fold codex and appropriately colored with paints or markers. (Students will be able to add to this codex with the follow-on lesson on the ball game.)

#### **Activity 4: What's for Dinner?**

- Students will make a list of their favorite foods on page 4 of their notebooks. They will complete the second column after the discussion and PowerPoint presentation.
- Talk about the many foods the rest of the world takes for granted that are native to the Americas, and that were unknown in the rest of the world until after the Spanish came in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Because the various cultures had different climatic and geographical conditions, they adapted their agricultural methods to their unique situations. For example, the Mixtecs in the mountains of Oaxaca used terracing to make a larger area of land productive; the Aztecs used chinampas, or floating islands to grow many of their crops. The one thing they all had in common was the cultivation of the “three sisters:” maize, beans and squash. Companion planting, with a bean plant at the base of each corn plant and squash in between to keep down the weeds was a common planting method, with each plant providing nutrients that the others needed.
- Show the PowerPoint presentation “La agricultura” on these foods. Students should jot down each of the sixteen foods shown in the squares on page 5 of the notebook. Afterward, students will draw a glyph representing each food in the square. Optional: encourage them to place the items randomly in the squares rather than in the order presented. It could then be used later as a basis for a lotería game.
- After viewing the PowerPoint and related discussion, students should check off which of their favorite foods contain foods native to Mesoamerica. Discuss how much Mesoamerican foods have influenced culinary history throughout the world.

#### **Activity 5: The questions.**

- In small groups, students will discuss final 4 questions and write their observations on page 6 of their notebooks.
  - How are the cultures of Mesoamerica different from one another?
  - How are they similar to one another?
  - In what ways is the world different today as a result of the contributions of the Mesoamerican cultures?
  - Why is the study of these cultures relevant to our lives?

#### **Assessment**

Students can either write or present their answers, with examples, to the questions in Activity 5.

#### **Extending the Lesson**

Students can research any of the following topics in more depth:

The cultures of ancient Mexico – photos from the National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City

<http://mesoweb.com/features/jpl/index.html>

Writing systems and the codices

[http://mesolore.net/classroom/tutorials/19#jqTOC\\_link5](http://mesolore.net/classroom/tutorials/19#jqTOC_link5)

Decoding the hidden meanings in the codices interactive website

<http://mesolore.net/archive/manuscripts/1/decode>

<http://mesolore.net/archive/manuscripts/2/decode>

Introduction to Mixteca, by Aurora Perez

<http://mesolore.net/classroom/lectures/16>

Introduction to Mesoamerica, by David Carrasoc

<http://mesolore.net/classroom/lectures/15>

[Life and Death in Ancient Mexico](#) - by Joel Skidmore

## **Standards Alignment**

ACTFL 1.1 Students engage in conversation , provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions: Activities 1, 2, 3, 5

ACTFL 1.2 Students understand and interpret written language on a variety of topics: Activities 1, 2, 3, 5

ACTFL 1.3 Students understand and interpret spoken language on a variety of topics: Activities 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

ACTFL 1.4 Students convey information, concepts and ideas to listeners for a variety of purposes: Activities 1, 2, 3, 5

ACTFL 1.5 Students convey information, concepts, and ideas to readers for a variety of purposes: Activities 1, 2, 3, 5

ACTFL 2.1 Students recognize that different languages use different patterns to communicate and can apply this knowledge to their own language: Activities 2, 3, 5

ACTFL 2.2 Students recognize that cultures use different patterns of interaction and can apply this knowledge to their own culture: Activities 2, 3, 5

ACTFL 3.2 Students understand the relationship between the perspectives (meanings, values, ideas) and products/contributions (books, tools, food, art, laws, music, games) of the cultures studied: Activities 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

ACTFL 4.2 Students acquire information and perspectives through authentic materials in the foreign languages and within the cultures: Activities 1, 2, 3

## **References**

“John Pohl’s Mesoamerica”

<http://www.famsi.org/research/pohl/index.html>

“Aztec Calendar”

<http://www.azteccalendar.com/>

Mesolore

<http://mesolore.net/>

Mesoweb

<http://mesoweb.com/>

Ancient Scripts

[http://www.ancientscripts.com/ma\\_ws.html](http://www.ancientscripts.com/ma_ws.html)