

Understanding the Columbian Exchange

BY PAULINE S. JOHNSON

This lesson will help students think about the effects of the Columbian Exchange, particularly the exchange of disease as it affected the psychology of the Europeans and Native populations in the early settlement of the Americas. This lesson, in the form of a facilitated class discussion, should be done after students have read “The Columbian Exchange¹” and before they read “Disease and Catastrophe².”

Learning outcomes

- Students will analyze the effects of the Columbian Exchange.
- Students will use higher order thinking to imagine the psychological effects of disease on both native cultures and the Europeans.
- Students will participate in an interactive discussion.

Teacher planning

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Computer with internet access for each group of students OR one computer with an LCD projector so students can read “The Columbian Exchange.”

TIME REQUIRED FOR LESSON

15 to 20 minutes

Procedure

1. Before conducting this discussion, students should have read “The Columbian Exchange³,” but should **not** have read “Disease and Catastrophe⁴.”
2. Review with the students the meaning of the Columbian Exchange (*an exchange of crops, animals, and disease between the Americas and Europe and Africa*).
3. Ask the students about the impact of disease on the Native Americans. (*Diseases devastated the Native cultures — perhaps 90% of the indigenous population died in the years after the arrival of Europeans and Africans to the Americas.*) This could involve a deeper discussion.
4. Explain that during this period in human history people did not know the causes of diseases. Ask the students to put themselves in the place of people living in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. What do they think might have caused diseases? (*Answers will vary. You may want to lead the discussion so students understand that many believed illness was a curse from an evil person or a punishment from God.*)
5. Next ask the students to consider how disease was actually transmitted to the native populations during the decades after 1492. (*Disease was brought very early on by the sailors and early explorers. It would have been transmitted from them to the Indians during trade or other contact. The natives would have unwittingly brought the disease to their own peoples who had not been in contact with the Europeans.*)
6. Read the following excerpt from “Disease and Catastrophe⁵”:

Hit by wave after wave of multiple diseases to which they had utterly no resistance, they [the indigenous peoples] died by the millions. Disease spread from the paths of explorers and the sites of colonization like a stain from a drop of ink on a paper towel.

In fact, in North America, disease spread faster than European colonization. When Hernando de Soto explored the Mississippi Valley in the early 1500s he found large, thriving cities connected by networks of trade. By the time Rene-Robert de La Salle followed de Soto’s footsteps in the 1680s, those cities had evaporated.

7. Ask the students to again place themselves in the place of people from the time of exploration. First, have them imagine what the native cultures might have believed about the devastation. Allow the students to share some of their thoughts. (*Answers will vary.*)
8. Have the students then imagine what the Europeans might have thought as they went into new areas only to find empty native villages and cities. (*Answers will vary. However, you should lead the students to compare what they have already discussed about the causes and transmission of disease in the period when thinking about the interpretation that the Europeans may have taken — that God had removed the Indians so that the Europeans could spread throughout the New World.*)
9. Ask the students how this belief might have encouraged even more expansion and settlement by Europeans.
10. You might want to finish this short lesson by reading a quotation from the *Atlantic Monthly* article “1491⁶” (from the sidebar link on the “Disease and Catastrophe⁷” page.) The “Bradford” mentioned in the article is William Bradford, the second governor of the Plymouth Colony. It sums up what many of the colonists believed about their divine duty to populate the New World:

“The good hand of God favored our beginnings,” Bradford mused, by “sweeping away great multitudes of the natives ... that he might make room for us.”

Assessment

This activity is, in itself, an assessment of the progress of students in higher order thinking skills. Assess by participation in the discussion.

North Carolina Curriculum Alignment

SOCIAL STUDIES (2003)

Grade 8

- **Goal 1:** The learner will analyze important geographic, political, economic, and social aspects of life in the region prior to the Revolutionary Period.
 - **Objective 1.04:** Evaluate the impact of the Columbian Exchange on the cultures of American Indians, Europeans, and Africans.

On the web

The Columbian Exchange

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/5.1>

When Christopher Columbus and his crew arrived in the New World, two biologically distinct worlds were brought into contact. The animal, plant, and bacterial life of these two worlds began to mix in a process called the Columbian Exchange. The results of this exchange recast the biology of both regions and altered the history of the world.

More from LEARN NC

Visit us on the web at www.learnnc.org to learn more about topics related to this article, including American Indians, Columbian Exchange, Europe, diseases, epidemics, epidemiology, and history.

Notes

1. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/5.1>.
2. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/5.3>.
3. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/5.1>.
4. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/5.3>.
5. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/5.3>.
6. See <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200203/mann>.
7. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/5.3>.

About the author

PAULINE S. JOHNSON

I am currently the Director of a Teaching American History Grant for Buncombe County Schools, Asheville City Schools, and Madison County Schools. I have taught history and English in the seventh and eighth grades for over twenty-six years at Reynolds Middle School in Asheville, North Carolina. I am currently doing adjunct work for Mars Hill College and Western Carolina University. I have a Masters Degree from Western Carolina University and am Nationally Board Certified in Early Adolescence/Social Studies-History. I am certified to teach K-12 and I also have Academically-Intellectually Gifted certification.