

Explorations in Archeology and History

Lesson Video: Grades 6-8

Overview

Teacher: Gwen Larsen
Grade: 6
School: The Harbor Middle School
Location: Dorchester, Massachusetts

NCSS Standards-Based Themes: Culture; Time, Continuity, and Change

Content Standards: History

Video Summary

How can ancient history and archeology be brought to life in the classroom? To launch her lesson on world civilizations, Gwen Larsen begins by looking at each student's personal history. By taking on the roles of archeologists and presenting their own heirlooms, students learn how to decipher artifacts and make connections to the past.

Students create "identity cubes" to illustrate elements of their personal histories. Then, the class works together to define history and archeology and to learn archeology terms and methods. Presented with artifacts and representations of fossils, students begin the process of questioning, classifying, drawing, and describing.

On day two of the lesson, students bring in heirlooms—family artifacts, for example—they might want to pass on. Then, students draw and describe the meanings of their heirlooms and present them to the class.

Standards

Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies defines what students should know and be able to do in social studies at each educational level. This lesson correlates to the following standards for middle school students:

I. Culture

Explain and give examples of how language, literature, the arts, architecture, other artifacts, traditions, beliefs, values, and behaviors contribute to the development and transmission of culture.

II. Time, Continuity, and Change

Demonstrate an understanding that different scholars may describe the same event or situation in different ways but must provide reasons of evidence for their views; identify and use processes important to reconstructing and reinterpreting the past, such as using a variety of sources, providing, validating, and weighing evidence for claims, checking credibility of sources, and searching for causality.

Content Standards: History

About the Class

Classroom Profile

Year at a Glance

"I asked my class to imagine the world hundreds of years from now, when archeologists dig through our cities and our trash heaps to see what our civilization was like. [I tell my students] 'Your artifacts will no longer be heirlooms to these people. You are going to become part of the human family tree, part of history.'" —Gwen Larsen

Year at a Glance
Early Hominids
Archeology
Neolithic Age
Mesopotamia
Ancient Civilizations

Gwen Larsen teaches sixth-grade social studies at the Harbor Middle School in Dorchester, Massachusetts. An urban community adjacent to Boston, Dorchester is home to an ethnically and socio-economically diverse population. Many of the residents are recent immigrants. The Harbor Middle School is a pilot school within the Boston public school system that uses its own curriculum based on the expeditionary model, integrating community activities and thematic learning. The classes are small and teachers often stay with the same students for several years. Nearly all of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch and many come from single-parent households.

Throughout the year, Ms. Larsen's students studied early hominids, basics of archeology, the Neolithic Age, Mesopotamia, and ancient cultures of Egypt, China, and Greece. The lesson shown in the video "Explorations in Archeology and History" fell within the unit on archeology; Ms. Larsen used the study of archeological methods as a foundation for a year-long study of civilizations and cultures. Ms. Larsen often used hands-on activities to extend students' understanding. For example, after studying Greek culture, the class put on a Greek festival of plays. Students also wrote screenplays for major historical events, listened to ethnic music, and examined cultural artifacts.

Through her interdisciplinary approach to social studies, Ms. Larsen taught vocabulary and creative writing, as well as history content and skills for individual and group research. In the introductory archeology lesson, students identified parallels between the microcosm of their own heirlooms and oral histories and the macrocosm of the development of world civilizations. By the end of the school year, Ms. Larsen's students had explored diverse components of human cultures across history and had linked their own experiences to those of past and future generations.

Lesson Background

Read this information to better understand the lesson shown in the video.

Content: Archeology and History

Archeology, a branch of anthropology, is devoted to the study of objects from the past. These objects may be human or other organism remains (fossils), or manmade materials (artifacts). Archeologists record their findings through measurements, drawings, and descriptions. Based on their data, they make inferences about daily life, such as diets and diseases; and about cultural beliefs and practices, such as functions of tools and meanings of objects in sacred places. Archeologists further support their conclusions with corroborating evidence from other objects at the same and other sites, and from the work of other archeologists. Archeology supplements written history by providing critical clues about life in the past.

About the Class, cont'd.

The study of history makes use of both primary sources, such as an artifact, and secondary sources, such as a historian's written analysis. Primary sources provide firsthand accounts through both objects and writings, such as photographs, letters, documents, and diaries. In their subjectivity, these sources can vividly recall personal experiences. Secondary sources are interpretations of life and events in the past. In their objectivity, these sources can synthesize information from numerous sources and provide the perspective of hindsight. Both primary and secondary sources can be engaging and accurate, as well as unconsciously or deliberately biased. Therefore, every source must be examined and compared to others for similarities, contradictions, and supporting evidence. Further, multiple primary and secondary sources can illuminate the cause-and-effect relationships that explain much of history.

Teaching Strategy: Simulating Archeological Discovery

By examining and explaining objects in their own lives, students can learn to decipher artifacts, gain a greater appreciation for the past, and discover connections between the past and present. By examining objects from other civilizations, students can access more personal meanings through oral history. Working in small groups, students can collaborate to first examine, describe, and draw objects, and then hypothesize about each object's identity and use, and the lives of the people who used them. Using historians' methods, students then connect evidence and form conclusions about different civilizations in history.

Watching the Video

As you reflect on these questions, write down your responses or discuss them as a group.

Before You Watch

Respond to the following questions:

- How do you define *archeology*? How would you engage students in a study of the ancient past?
- How do visual representations of content and processes help students learn and remember them?
- How can hands-on learning be used effectively with students in the middle-grade years?
- What are some teaching strategies to help students see the relevance of archeology to their own lives?

Watch the Video

As you watch "Explorations in Archeology and History," take notes on Ms. Larsen's instructional strategies, particularly the way she helps students understand how archeologists and historians study the past. Write down what you find interesting, surprising, or especially important about the teaching and learning in this lesson.

Watching the Video, cont'd.

Reflecting on the Video

Review your notes, then respond to the following questions:

- What struck you about the lesson in terms of classroom climate, background, preparation, strategies, and materials used in this lesson?
- How did Ms. Larsen link students' prior knowledge to new learning?
- Which of her strategies most effectively met the goals of this lesson?
- How did Ms. Larsen stimulate and maintain students' interest?
- Consider the ways in which this class is different from yours. How would you introduce your students to past civilizations?

Looking Closer

Here's an opportunity to take a closer look at interesting aspects of Ms. Larsen's lesson.



Relating Personal History to History of Civilizations: Video Segment

Go to this segment in the video by matching the image (to the left) on your TV screen. You'll find this segment approximately four minutes into the video. Watch for about six minutes.

Ms. Larsen refers to the recent "identity cube" project, which helped her students recognize parallels between their own family histories and the history of past civilizations. In a class discussion, Ms. Larsen incorporates vocabulary on a "word wall," and rolls back strips of paper posted on the bulletin board to reveal artifacts.

- How does the word wall help students learn?
- What content and skills do students learn that can support their study of world civilizations throughout the year?
- How does Ms. Larsen ensure that all students can succeed in this lesson?

Watching the Video, cont'd.



Sharing Artifacts of Special Importance: Video Segment

Go to this segment in the video by matching the image (to the left) on your TV screen. You'll find this segment approximately 19 minutes into the video. Watch for about six minutes.

Each student brought in an heirloom, an artifact or object to pass on to future generations. Students share their heirlooms, along with the descriptions and personal value of the heirlooms.

- Why was it important for Ms. Larsen to offer students options in terms of what they can bring for the assignment?
- What evidence do you see that students are engaged in the lesson?
- How does this part of the lesson deepen students' understanding of the content?

Connecting to Your Teaching

Reflecting on Your Practice

As you reflect on these questions, write down your responses or discuss them as a group.

- What struck you about the classroom climate, background, preparation, strategies, and materials used in this lesson?
- How do you determine which concepts and processes you will teach so students will learn meaningful connections to specific academic disciplines?
- When faced with an especially difficult concept, how have you used modeling to promote your students' learning?
- Have you found visual representations for abstract concepts and processes? What are they and how do they support your students' learning?
- What other strategies could you use to link your curriculum to oral history?
- How would you advise a teacher to develop an assignment that links content to students' lives outside of class?

Connecting to Your Teaching, cont'd.

Taking It Back to Your Classroom

- Choose a time period in your subject area or curriculum and ask student students to gather artifacts and history from it, using Web or print resources or by visiting local museums. Have students present what they learned about that period in time to the rest of the class.
- Give students coins or stamps and ask them to use archeology skills to make inferences about different cultures. Then have students research these coins or stamps and compare the knowledge they gained from their own hypotheses.
- Have students collaborate to develop a questionnaire that probes people's beliefs about a theme in your curriculum. For example, a question on leadership could ask, "List the three most important people in U.S. history;" or a question on economics could ask, "Name the most important invention in the 20th century." Have students use the questionnaire to gather oral history from a guest you invite to the classroom or from a person they know.

Resources

Print Resources for Students

Avi-Yonah, Michael. *Dig This! How Archaeologists Uncover Our Past. Buried Worlds.* Minneapolis, Minn.: Runestone Press, 1993.

Cork, Barbara, and Struan Reid. *The Usborne Young Scientist Archaeology.* Tulsa, Okla.: EDC Publishing, 1986.

McIntosh, Jane R. *Eyewitness: Archeology.* Eyewitness. New York: DK Publishing, 2000.

Millard, Anne. *A Street Through Time: A 12,000-Year Walk Through History.* New York: DK Publishing, 1998.

Print Resources for Teachers

Dunaway, David K. and Willa K. Baum, eds. *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology.* 2d ed. Aaslh Book Series. Lanham, Md.: Altamira Press, 1996.

Morris, Ronald Vaughn. "Using Artifacts as a Springboard to Literacy." *Social Studies and the Young Learner, 2001.* Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies.

Wolf, Dennie Palmer, Dana Balick, and Julie Craven, eds. *Digging Deep: Teaching Social Studies Through the Study of Archaeology.* Moving Middle Schools. Westport, Conn.: Heinemann, 1997.

Resources, cont'd.

Web Resources for Students

The Dig: Adventures in Archaeology: http://www.thinkquest.org/library/lib/site_sum_outside.html?tname=J001645&url=J001645/main.shtml

This site answers important questions about archaeology, such as how digs are executed and what archeologists can learn from them.

Virtual Archeology: <http://library.thinkquest.org/18261>

On this site, the Rebuilding the Past section uses photographs and computer arts to take students and teachers on virtual tours of real archaeological dig sites.

Web Resources for Teachers

Archaeology and Storytelling: <http://school.discovery.com/lessonplans/programs/islandsofmystery>

Discovery.com has discussion questions, lesson plans, and multimedia materials about archaeology for middle school teachers and their students.

The History Channel: <http://www.historychannel.com/classroom>

The History Channel site offers teacher manuals and lesson plans on historical topics, such as the process to research a family tree and the archaeological dig at Jamestown.

History, Classics, and Archeology: <http://www.lgu.ac.uk/deliberations/Subjects/history>

This site offers a basic guide to helpful resource links about archaeology; for all ages.

National Register of Historic Places: <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/twhp/archo.HTM>

On the site Teaching with Historic Places, the NRHP provides complete lesson plans on archaeology.

Reading About Heritage: <http://www.teachingheritage.nsw.edu.au/3readings/oral.html>

This site focuses on teaching history through oral histories, and provides resources for further study.