

The African Influence on the Arts and Culture of Latin America

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Contents of Curriculum Unit

Narrative

Unit Objectives

Bibliography

If we envisioned a Hispanic person, how would we describe that person? Can we name some famous Hispanics? These are some questions I ask my students at the beginning of every year. Most students envision a “traditional Hispanic.” They name people like Gloria Estefan, Jon Secada, Jennifer Lopez, and Rosie Perez. I then ask the students if they know who Carlton (Alfonso Ribiero) is. Most students know he is an actor/dancer. I inform my students that he is also Hispanic. We then discuss other famous Afro-Hispanics. The fact that there are Afro-Hispanics is very surprising to my students; therefore it is an issue that I feel I must address in class.

In the Pittsburgh Public Schools there is only one content standard for language programs. The standard is that all students converse at a level of “Intermediate Low.” This is based on the oral proficiency guidelines developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. Therefore the focus in the classroom is on oral proficiency. However it is important to understand the culture to become proficient. Culture is a very important component of learning a language, and it is necessary to teach it in the class.

This means that when a student is at an Intermediate Low level of proficiency, they can create with the language. Thus they are not merely memorizing phrases, but they are able to relate with the language. The students can communicate in various situations. They can talk about various themes, and expound on that theme.

Our district has also incorporated technology into the curriculum, and we are urged to use technology in the classroom. So in my unit I have incorporated some inter net research. This can be developed even more. The students can develop pen pals of different ethnicities in other countries and maintain a writing workshop with these pen pals. This also helps the students to develop an Intermediate Low level of proficiency or even higher.

My school, Rogers CAPA (Creative and Performing Arts), is a School for students with artistic abilities. Therefore the students love to perform. There are several interesting lessons that can come out of this unit. I will teach this unit during Black History Month. I will start with literature. We will both read and write. The students could then read their work in an assembly. We could have a poetry reading. The students could write a play based on what they have read and act it out for the other students. The literature component has the possibility of becoming a multidisciplinary unit. In our school, the students are encouraged to read 25 books a year; the books from the student’s bibliography could become part of this reading list. Some of these books could also be read in the language arts class.

About 40% of my students are African American, and several of them are unaware that people of African descent are evident throughout the Hispanic world. They take a great interest in studying about African heritage even in Spanish class. As a Spanish teacher, I must introduce my students to the African component evident in the Spanish speaking world.

In this unit my students and I will study the African Culture in the Spanish-Speaking World. I will first introduce the African component of Latin Culture to my class. I have chosen to first look at Afro-Latina literature. We will read poetry and prose from several latino authors. The next component of this unit will be music. We will listen to music comparing the Afro-Caribbean beat to other types of Latin and African music. Dance and music go together hand in hand, so I will discuss dance next. We will look at videos of Latin dances like Salsa, Meringue, and others. I will then teach the students these dances. Finally we will look at movies pertaining to the presence of Hispanics of African descent.

When most people think about Mexico they never think about Africa, or natives of African descent. However there are areas in Mexico that have a large black population. We will read The Mexican Dark Secret by Barbara Gonzalez. In this article Barbara discusses the slave trade and the African influence in Mexico. We will also read Senemayá by the poet Nicolas Guillen of Cuba.

The next component of this unit will be music and dance. Throughout the Caribbean, the African influence is present in the music. We find the Batá drums, which originated in Africa, in several Caribbean songs. Most important is the rhythm or beat. The Caribbean beat is often referred to as the Afro-Caribbean beat. The students can play some of the instruments, and create their own song. Along with music comes dance. Salsa music has its own dance. They can observe this dance and research its origins in a paper. They can then learn the steps to the dance themselves. Once they have learned the dances and listened to the music, they can do several creative things. The students could have a Latin dance. They could create a band and have a concert for the whole school. They could also create their own music video.

This unit can become multidisciplinary. The teacher can work with the Social Studies teacher and the Language Arts teacher. These teachers at our school already discuss Latin America and Latin Literature. Therefore, it would be easy to incorporate the African component into their lessons. There is also the reading club where Latin Literature can be used. It is also possible to work collaboratively with the Vocal and Instrumental teachers in creating a band.

Nicolas Guillen was born in Cuba. He's ancestry is mixed with African and Spanish blood. He is also a communist. After being established in Paris, he returned to Cuba to support the revolutionary cause of Fidel Castro. Nicolas is one of the most lucid representatives of Antillian poetry (poetry in which love and the traditional lyrics of Spain and folkloric elements of Africa coexist.) His poetic work is divided into three categories. The first pertains to the Reasons for being (1930). This work is founded in castillian romance and the picturesque folklore of the black race. This work is notable for its imitation of dialectical speech of the poor neighborhoods of Havana, captured through the appropriate onomatopoeia of the black language, and the sensual and musical rhythm of a typical Cuban dance. The second category, introduces the reasons for poetic compromise: social, racial, and human preoccupations. Most importantly is the protest against the socio-economical exploitation of blacks and mixed people through the imperialist *yanqui*. The third

category synthesizes his art. It is influenced by the poetry of his friend Federico Garcia Lorea and by his travels through Latin America, and communist countries. His mixed race intensifies his militant lyrics, universalizing his theme.

Pablo Neruda born in Parral Chile in 1904, moved with his family to Temuco when he was very young. He was raised in log cabins, surrounded by wilderness. His life in the wilderness influenced his work throughout his life. Neruda is regarded as the greatest Latin American poet of the 20th century, as well as a controversial political figure. His breadth of vision and wide range of themes are extraordinary, and his work continues to inspire new generations of writers.

The Mexican Dark Secret

In this essay Barbara Renaud Gonzalez talks about Mexicans of color. She says black heritage in Mexico is not only isolated to Veracruz and Costa Chica. In the 1500 Spaniards brought Africans into Mexico because the Indians were dying. By the mid-1600, there were more than 150,00 blacks and mulattos in Mexico. She goes on to say that the races in Mexico mixed, thus making Mexico a nation of mestizos (mixed peoples).

Relationship to the Harlem Renaissance

Langston Hughes had the Pleasure of meeting Nicolas Guillen in Cuba. When they met, they found they had much in common: music had inspired both of their poetry. Langston was inspired by jazz and the blues, and Nicolas was inspired by Afro-Cuban music. After meeting Langston, Nicolas' poetry underwent a change.

The Harlem Renaissance was a movement in the United States during the 1920's and 1930's. It was a movement of art, literature, and music. During this movement blacks were creatively exploring the arts, literature and music.

Unit Objectives:

1. Students will read literature by Afro-Hispanic authors.
2. Students will discuss the meanings of African tribal words found in the literature.
3. Students will write poems in Spanish.
4. Students will compare Afro-Caribbean music to other Latin music.
5. Students will compare Afro-Caribbean music to some African tribal music.
6. Students will discuss instruments using in Afro-Caribbean bands.
7. Students will play Batá drums.
8. Students will discuss Afro-Latin dancing.
9. Students will dance in a cultural context.
10. Students will watch Latin MTV.
11. Students will create music video.
12. Students will dramatize what they have learned.
13. Students will read poetry.
14. Students will read literature by Hispanic authors.
15. Students will compare and contrast literature by Hispanic and Afro-Hispanic authors.

16. Students will translate poems from Spanish to English.
17. Students will use inter net to research information on Afro-Latinos.
18. Students will appreciate cultural differences.

Lesson I

Objective:

- The students will read Afro-Hispanic poetry.
- The students will compare Afro-Hispanic poetry to African-American and Hispanic poetry.
- Students will write poems in Spanish
Resources: Sensemayá by Nicolas Guillen, Poems by Langston Hughes, and Poems by Pablo Neruda

Activities:

1. Read poems
 - a. Have students read poems silently.
 - b. Read poems out loud to the whole class.
 - c. Translate poems.
2. Discuss meaning of poems along with tone and rhyme
 - a. Discuss literal meaning.
 - b. Discuss rhyme. (if any)
 - c. Discuss line breaks. (why poet decided to end line where he did)
 - d. Discuss poetic meanings.
3. Search for words of African descent and discuss meaning.
 - a. What is a Sensemayá?
 - b. What does Mayombe mean?
 - c. What does Bombe mean?
4. Write poems
 - a. Have students write poems
 - b. Give prompts. La flor es como, Adios, Hola(person) ¡Que magnifico! ¡Que bueno! ¡Que lastima!
5. Poetry reading and publication
 - a. After students have written poetry, have a poetry reading (either for the whole school or for your entire Spanish class)
 - b. Students can read their poetry or have someone else read their poetry.
 - c. After poetry reading and revisions, publish student's work in a binder. Give each student a copy of their work.

Lesson 2

Objective:

The students will read about the African influence in Mexico

Resources: The Mexican Dark Secret.

Activities:

1. Read The Mexican Dark Secret.
2. Answer questions.
 - a. Where are the majority of Mexicans of African descent located in Mexico?
 - b. When did blacks first arrive in Mexico?
 - c. Why did blacks first arrive in Mexico?
 - d. How many blacks were in Mexico by 1650?
 - e. Mexico is a nation of what?
3. Group discussion
 - a. Discuss how people of African descent have influenced Mexico.
 - b. This can be done using a Socratic seminar format.

Lesson 3

Objective:

The students will research the African influence in Mexico via internet.

Students should already be proficient in using the internet, but if they are not, be sure to give at least two lessons on internet use. How to search for information, and key words to use in searching.

Activities:

1. Using the computer lab, have students do research to find information on the African influence in Mexico.
2. Have students write a short essay about what they have found.

Lesson 4

Objective:

The students will read a cultural history of music in the Caribbean.

The students will listen to Latin music of African inspiration

The students will discuss musical instruments and their origins

Resources: Brief Cultural History (a history of Caribbean music), music from DLG (dark Latin groove), Gloria Estefan, Proyecto Uno (a Latin rap group) Ricki Martin, and other artists.

Activities:

1. Read Brief Cultural History and answer questions.
 - a. How many blacks were brought to Cuba during 1835-1864?
 - b. What are the two important reasons for density and variety of African cultural elements in Cuba?
 - c. What was the major tribe of Africans brought to Cuba during 1820-1840?
 - d. What are Batá drums?
 - e. Who are Arará?
 - f. Who is the íreme?
 - g. What is Rumba?
 - h. What is Carnival?
2. Introduce Latin music. Discuss some famous Latin singers
3. Show music videos of various artists who have music with an African influence?
 - a. Discuss instruments seen in videos.
 - b. Research origins of instruments.

Lesson 5

Objective:

- The students will discuss the African influence in Latin dance.
- The students will practice steps to dances.
- The students will create a music video.

Resources: Videos of Latin dances.

Activities:

1. Discuss Latin dances.
2. Give students a style of dance to research its origin.
3. Model Latin dances.
4. Have a Latin dance.
5. Create a music video.

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