

Coaching and Co-Planning with Social Justice in Mind (cont.)

During our pre-observation meeting, we discussed Gen's plans to launch an upcoming unit with her Upper II students (5th/6th grade) investigating U.S. History from Columbus' voyage through the American Revolution. She expressed a need to depart from the traditional approach to learning about Colonial America that is common not only at our school, but at the other schools we have taught at as well. Typically, the class will read a novel such as *My Brother Sam is Dead*, learn some important dates and facts as they investigate some aspects of the people and events surrounding the American Revolution, and culminate with projects displayed or with oral reports where the students dress up as their favorite Revolutionary figure. While students and teachers alike look forward to those kinds of activities, Gen felt that there are often some missed opportunities that could be explored if this period of U.S. History were viewed through a social justice lens.

Already my perceptions of being the coach expanded from being a consultant and observer to being a collaborator and a co-planner. From the start, we recognized the potential to construct a unit around the four big ideas that our team chose to emphasize throughout our teaching, or what our team began to recognize as Social Justice Pillars—Equity, Power, Authority, and Access. In the unit planning process used at the Lab School, the over-arching questions come after identifying the big ideas. Looking at U.S. History through a social justice lens, it is important for students to realize that history is not just a series of dates and events. It is a series of stories told. So Gen anchored her unit with these questions:

“Whose story is being told?”

“From what perspective is the story being told?”

“Who decides which events are important?”

“Why is this so?”

“Whose story is not being told and why is this so?”

We then brainstormed a list of resources like *Rethinking Columbus*, primary source materials from the National Archives, and interviews with experts like a parent who was a historian. Talking it through in this way lead Gen to develop a unit that which emphasized taking a historical perspectives approach that included creating a timeline of U.S. history and introducing the idea of multiple perspective taking.





What Do We Think We Know about U.S. History?

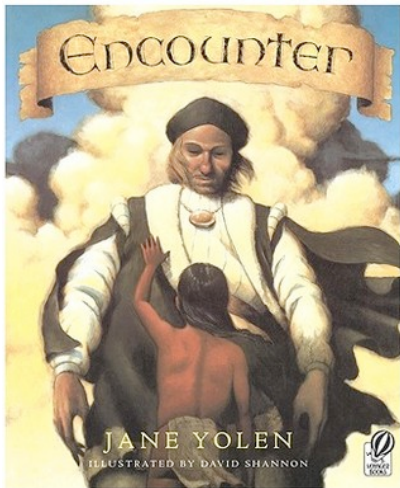
I was able to observe the launch lesson and a follow-up lesson a week or two later. For the launch lesson, Gen began with an elegantly designed KWL when she posed the question, “What do we think we know about how the United States came to be a country?” She then invited the students to take 2 or 3 post-it notes and write a significant event in U.S. History (from as far back as they could think of to the present) on each one. As the students completed the task, she directed them to place the post-it notes along a horizontal line drawn on a long piece of butcher paper, overlapping post-its if they named the same event as another student. When they all got to the rug around the butcher paper, Gen asked the students to arrange the events in sequential order. This initiated some interesting conversations among the students, like the order of certain wars—a student wanted to place World War I before the Revolutionary War—and a question as to when slavery started. They really had difficulty placing the Civil Rights Movement so far away from the end of the Civil War. Throughout all of the discussion, Gen was in the background, not providing information or settling debates, but asking provocative questions like, “Why is it that so many of us know of the same events?” and “Who are the key players or famous people we know associated with these events?” With that last question, she listed the names of the people the children volunteered on the board and then asked the students if they noticed anything that the people had in common. “They are powerful,” “Some are good and some are bad,” “They are famous,” were some of the students’ comments. Then it was time for recess and to close the lesson,

Gen commented on the lively discussion and that they were going to continue to question, discuss, and debate as they fill in the gaps in knowledge on their timeline.

In the debrief, what was evident was that, for a group of 10-12 year olds, they could name quite a few historical events that they considered significant, beginning mostly from the American Revolution to the introduction of the iPhone and Barack Obama's presidency. She had probed their background knowledge and created a timeline as an artifact to organize their study of U.S. History. However, when looking at the timeline and their list of historical figures, although Betsy Ross and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. made it onto the list, it was overwhelmingly white and male. It was clear that the students lacked information about pre-colonial America as well as the roles of women and people of color in establishing the U.S. as a country. Gen's next steps were to invite the students to revisit the list and discover who was missing and therefore whose stories might not be getting told. Then ask the students to generate new questions based on what they would like to learn about U.S. History, now that they have started the timeline.

Power and Equity in the Americas—Who Gets to Tell the History?

The next lesson I was able to observe took place a few lessons after the launch, so the students had already gathered information about pre-Columbian peoples in the Americas. Gen had planned to introduce the idea of multiple perspectives with the arrival of Columbus in the Americas, so she opened the lesson with the question,



“What do you know about Christopher Columbus?” It was a fairly straightforward question but when the first student to respond said, “He didn’t discover it first...it makes me think of the people who were already here,” the debate was on. The next student said, “I disagree. They [the Native Americans] weren’t in charge,” and another student piggy-backed by saying, “They were just here.” Gen asked a clarifying question here, “How did the Native Americans get here and who remembers why [they came]?” Several students were able to recall that the first peoples on the continent were in search of food and following the animals they hunted.

Then Gen probed, “Is it legitimate to say discover? Who decides who has discovered what?” In response a student said, “It was already inhabited when Columbus came,” which generated agreement from a few other students. That was until another student commented, “In my opinion, without Christopher Columbus, we wouldn’t be here. The Indians didn’t claim the land. They didn’t think it was special.” Another student concurred, “The Native Americans weren’t connected like the Europeans all over the world. The Native Americans were not connected, not in communication with anyone.” The conversation continued a little more and then Gen recapped the

discussion thus far, restated the various positions the students had taken, and recorded their statements on the board.

Once she was done writing their statements, Gen showed the students the book, *Encounter*, by Jane Yolen. *Encounter* is a strikingly illustrated book told from the point of view of a older Taino man who is recalling how he perceived Christopher Columbus' arrival to his island home as a young boy. Gen asked the students to, "Think about all the things you've said so far as I read." During the reading, Gen provided opportunities for students to process new information by turning and talking to one another briefly. After reading, Gen prompted the students to connect what they had just heard with their discussions so far. Some of the students volunteered, "There were good guys and bad guys in the story. The Taino had a way of life." "There were miscommunications, they had a different language." "They [the Taino] were giving gifts, but Christopher Columbus wanted more." Once again, it was time to wrap up the lesson.

In our debrief, I told Gen it was clear that they had spent some time as a class addressing some of the over-arching questions we posed at the our initial pre-observation meeting. The students were obviously more comfortable taking a stance and providing a rationale for their position. Gen saw her next steps to be to return some of the themes in *Encounter* and challenge the students to question why the more popular version of this story is so different than the one Jane Yolen tells and the impact that has on the way we learn history.

In reflecting on what I was able to observe in Gen's classroom, I hope what is most evident here is that students can learn to look at history with a critical eye. They can question the dominant narratives by considering multiple perspectives and uncovering history through the voices of those whose stories have been missing in those popular stories. History is more engaging when students are able to discuss, debate, and question. The students in Gen's class demonstrated skill as social scientists as they thoughtfully agreed and disagreed with each other during their discussions. History is more meaningful when students can grapple with difficult concepts and draw conclusions on their own. Gen's skill in facilitating discussion and letting the students' comments guide the direction of the conversation—probing with follow-up questions, clarifying or redirecting, or just listening when needed—gave the students the opportunity to construct meaning for themselves.

