DOCUMENT RESUME

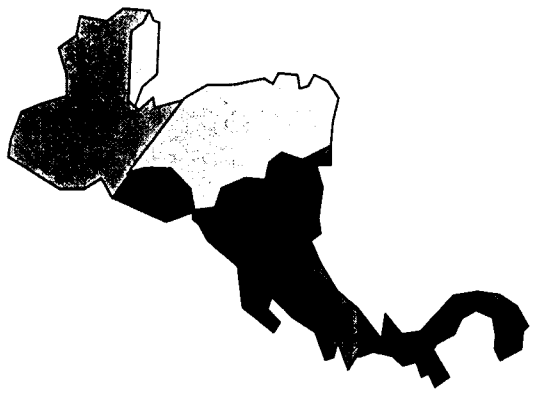
ED 439 062 SO 031 443

TITLE	Latin America in a Contemporary Context. Grade Level: 9-12.
INSTITUTION	American Forum for Global Education, New York, NY.
PUB DATE	1998-00-00
NOTE	22p.; "This text originally appeared in 'Issues in Global Education,' (NY: The American Forum for Global Education, Issue #145, 1998)."
AVAILABLE FROM	The American Forum for Global Education, 120 Wall Street, Suite 2600, New York, NY 10005; web site: (http://www.globaled.org/curriculum/taf-area.html)
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Area Studies; *Developing Nations; Foreign Countries; *Futures (of Society); High Schools; *Latin Americans; *Political Issues; *Social Problems; Social Studies
IDENTIFIERS	Central America; *Latin America; Mexico; South America

ABSTRACT

Latin America's rapid change in recent years has prompted the American Forum for Global Education to take a closer look at this important and dynamic region. This booklet summarizes how Latin America should be viewed in today's global world and highlights strategies for teaching these ideas. The booklet consists of the following four sections. The first section, "Latin America at Century's End: From Grassroots to Globalization" (Christopher Mitchell), is an overview of the political and social realities of the South American continent. The second section, "Teaching Latin America's Past: Maya Culture, The Art of Storytelling" (John Beirhos, Ed.), offers stories and fables from the Mayan culture. The next section, "Teaching Latin America's Present Using Personal Narratives", presents personal narratives translated from Spanish and Portuguese. Both these sections provide lesson plans and student activities. The final section, "Teaching Latin America's Future", considers Mexico's future and presents values and opinions on how Mexico should proceed into the 21st century. For an assignment, students are asked to create a "Future" that reflects their own beliefs and opinions. (BT)

Latin America in a Contemporary Context



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The American Forum for Global Education
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New York, NY 10005

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1998

Latin America's rapid change in recent years prompted The American Forum to take a closer look at this important and dynamic region. A conference was organized that asked the question: What should educators teach students about Latin America? The conference was hosted by the New York University Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies and the Columbia University/NYU National Resource Center on Latin American Studies.

Although many answers were suggested, most agreed that to understand today's Latin America, we must first have a firm understanding of Latin America's past. Here we have tried to summarize how Latin America should be viewed in today's global world, and to highlight some strategies for teaching these ideas.

This text originally appeared in Issues in Global Education (NY: The American Forum for Global Education, Issue #145, 1998).

1. Introductory Essay

2. Teaching Latin America's Past

3. Teaching Latin America's Present Using Personal Narratives

4. Teaching Latin America's Future

Latin America at Century's End: From Grassroots to Globalization

by Christopher Mitchell, professor of Politics and Director of the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at New York University. Dr. Mitchell's current research focuses on Latin American migration to the United States and on politics in Caribbean nations.

As the twentieth century concludes, Latin America has changed in fundamental ways that could hardly have been foreseen when modern studies of the region began in the 1960's. In this essay, we'll review four of these far-reaching alterations.

These new directions coexist, we will also note, with some all-too-familiar and stubborn realities that tend to undercut them. This varied and (in part) conflicting picture underscores how important it is that we examine the region searchingly and without preconceptions.

I begin with a vignette -- a thought-provoking image from the Latin American grassroots -- that may help us relate extensive social changes to the individual experiences of people in Latin America. The image I have in mind is almost a parable, and like other such illustrative stories, it is vivid, enduring, and a bit ambiguous. One can keep returning to it for new insights, turning it over to perceive new facets, so to speak, in the light of evolving social experience.

A Thought-Provoking Image

Some years ago when I was a graduate student, I embarked on a steamship across Lake Titicaca, crane then lifted and swung across the dock, above the narrow gap of water, over the ship's deck and then down into the hold where stevedores stood ready to unload it. Each loading cycle took about ten minutes.

As I stood on the deck, I began to notice activity on the dock. A Bolivian indigenous woman, perhaps fifty-five years old, was working there with a broom. She wore the distinctive women's garb of the Aymara-speaking people (about 2-million strong) who live in northern Bolivia and southern Peru: flat slipper-shoes, a capacious felt skirt buoyed by numerous petticoats, a colorful shawl, and a bowler hat set at a rakish angle.

Each time the loaded pallet swung overhead, the dock-sweeper would dart forward and sweep carefully beneath its path, gathering her sweepings into a sack with a dust-pan. The Aymara woman was carefully "rescuing" -- to use a term that is common in Bolivia -- a fine coating of tin ore that filtered down to the dock planks, through the gaps in burlap sacking and the open-work pallet.

In hours of painstaking labor, she gleaned a few dollars' worth of metallic powder to help support her family, as the bulk of the nation's mineral wealth was shipped abroad.

I had never seen a clearer illustration of what social scientists and social critics have termed

Latin America's "dependency" -- the exploitative influence of outside forces over the region's economic wealth and productivity. Like her native country, like her entire region in the world, the dock-sweeper could only retain a modest fraction of the extraordinary natural wealth with which Latin America was endowed.

Her predicament sums up much of Latin America's history, and much of the region's present circumstances too. What is not yet clear is whether she will represent the future of Latin America as well.

Four new social, political and economic conditions have appeared during the past ten years in Latin America, altering some of the region's most fundamental characteristics.

Democratic Regimes the Norm

First, democratic regimes have become the norm rather than the exception in the nations south of the Rio Grande. Latin America's past propensity for authoritarian and especially military rule is justly famous, and as recently as 1979 there were only two elected democratic governments on the South American continent.

Today, in the Western Hemisphere, only the Cuban government cannot trace its origin to formalized popular choice (though the pedigrees of some national elections in the region are rather questionable). Even more striking, the Latin American military has been systematically marginalized from the political arena in many nations. As two political scientists have recently observed, "Since 1976, outside of Suriname, Haiti and Peru, all attempts to overthrow a constitutional government chosen through general fraud-free elections have failed."[1]

In vivid illustration of this trend, some officers in the once-powerful Argentine army now drive taxis at night to supplement their meager salaries, and Argentine army bases are occasionally rented out as backdrops for fashion photography and TV commercials.

Economic Openness

A second trend is towards economic openness and burgeoning trade among Latin American nations. In South America, for example, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay have created a free trade area known as "Mercosur," and Chile has become an associate member.

Mercosur members conduct fully 30 percent of their international trade with one another, a dramatic increase from the 10 percent level that was traditional for many decades. In part recognizing the potential for from Bolivia to Peru. Titicaca is the world's highest navigable lake, located more than 12,400 feet above sea level. As the S.S. Inca, a vessel launched in 1903, prepared for departure from the windswept, cold and battered little port town of Guaqui, Bolivia, I stood on deck to watch the ship take on cargo.

In addition to a few dozen passengers, the Inca carried mainly concentrated tin ore from Bolivia's mines 300 miles south. Packed in large burlap sacks, the tin ore was a dull gray powder, resembling Portland cement. It would be off-loaded in Peru and shipped 6,000 miles away to

Great Britain, to be smelted into metallic tin.

An ancient steam crane was used to load this ore into the ship. Workers packed twenty-five or thirty bags onto a wooden pallet made of slats, which the economic growth in Latin America, foreign direct investment has also begun to flourish. Outside capitalists invested $38.5 billion in the region in 1996, up from $15.4 billion only five years earlier.

Latin America also enjoys growing prestige among international investors for its relatively prudent economic management, contrasting with the recent financial debacles in East Asia. To be sure, Latin America continues to suffer from widespread official corruption, an issue tackled only minimally by most nations.

Democratization and economic openness may well be mutually reinforcing. Critics often focus on the harsh effects of neo-liberal development models on employment, poverty, and income distribution. While many of those criticisms are justified, there may also be links between participating in globalized trade and bolstering the region's democratic political legitimacy.

New exporters in nations ranging from Argentina to the Dominican Republic now recognize that the global marketplace views a relatively stable civilian government as a pre-requisite for inclusion in the new world of trade and investment.

The Organization of American States has even revised its charter, creating a process through which any new military governments, created by coups d'état, will automatically be threatened with expulsion from that hemispheric body.

Technology and Development

A third trend has to do with technology, especially in the fields of communications and data-processing. There are certain limited but clear advantages of being a "late-comer" to economic development among world regions.

For example, cellular telephone service is expanding rapidly, and some of the "most backward" nations are benefitting differentially precisely because they could not afford older wired phone systems. As a "late-comer," La Paz, Bolivia now has one of the hemisphere's most sophisticated cellular phone systems. Unlimited Internet access now costs an average of only $39 per month in Latin America -- relatively close to this service's cost in the "first world" at present.

The tendency of computer technology to diffuse rapidly around the globe also provides a "fairer deal" than Latin America received in the past, when new global scientific knowledge was being applied in fields such as heavy industry. In automobile technology, for example, Latin America continues to lag other world regions.

Until recently, Mexico was the only nation in the world where the original Volkswagen "beetle" -- a basic design fully sixty years old! -- was still produced, and Ford made and sold its Falcon model in Argentina, more than thirty years after that auto was introduced in the United States.

By contrast, new versions of Windows software arrive in Latin America, well-translated into Spanish and Portuguese, very quickly after they are developed for the U.S. and European markets. Latin America is starting to take full advantage of this new technical opportunity: on average, consumers in each Latin American nation now spend $327 million annually on computer software.

Demographic Expansion Slowing

Fourth, Latin America's demographic expansion -- so headlong in the 1960's that social scientists marveled and had to re-calculate their statistical models -- is now clearly slowing down. Latin America's annual rate of population growth fell from 2.4 percent in the 1970's to 2.1 percent in the 1980's and to 1.9 percent in the first half of the 1990's.

Certainly this change represents no panacea for the region's urgent development needs, but it heartens economic planners who earlier felt they were on a hopeless demographic treadmill. Latin American nations now have the relative luxury of worrying about how relatively fewer workers in the mid-21st century will support the future pensioners who are now in grade school.

Stubborn Problems Persist

Three stubborn problems deeply rooted in Latin America's past, however, are at best only partly addressed by the new developments we've examined.

First, Latin America continues to display one of the worst income-distribution patterns of any world region. The World Bank and the International Labor Organization have found that the poorest one-fifth of the population in Latin America tends to receive only 3.1 percent of total national income, as against 6.5 percent received by the poorest one-fifth in a sample of nations from other regions (both industrialized and developing).

In Brazil, the region's largest nation, the least-affluent 50 percent of the population receives only 12.6 percent of yearly national income. Moreover, the situation is getting worse. Of thirteen Latin American nations studied by the World Bank, nine had worse inequality in 1989 than they had in 1980 -- and inequality increased from 1990 to 1994 in seven of twelve nations studied by the United Nations.2

In addition to the human misery it inflicts, this condition limits the size of Latin American markets, and places strain on new democratic governments. Inequality tends to be worsened by neo-liberal economic reforms. Maldistribution might be alleviated somewhat by regional economic growth, but most Latin American economies have expanded only anemically during the 1990's. About the only really positive sign on the horizon for reducing poverty and inequality is the prospect that a slowdown in population growth may force employers to pay higher wages over the long run.

Land Tenure

Second, land-tenure conflicts continue to simmer in many nations of Latin America. Since

colonial times, the region has been marked by large plantations coexisting with numerous tiny parcels. As health conditions improve and more young people survive to adulthood, pressure on the land tends to increase but obstinacy among major landlords usually persists.

Latin American nations where this form of property inequality especially roils politics include Colombia and Brazil. When I was recently in Colombia, a leading social scientist there observed to me that rural insurgency affects fully 40 percent of the nation's townships. "The persistence of that rebelliousness for more than forty years," he remarked, "is based on real injustices, not just on habits of banditry."

Educational Crisis

Third, Latin America and the Caribbean are in the midst of an educational crisis. Although illiteracy in the region does not appear very high when one lumps entire nations together, when one studies the poorest people the inadequacy of available education becomes much clearer. Only 9 percent of all Peruvians are reportedly unable to read and write, but 26 percent of the poorest rural people in that nation are illiterate. More than 35 percent of the poorest Brazilians also fall into that category, even in cities where basic education is usually far more available than it is in the countryside.

Teacher salaries are also deplorably low, and they have dropped in recent years. In Argentina, the average teacher receives only 45 percent of the salary prevalent in the 1980's, while in Mexico the equivalent fraction is only 40 percent. These deep-set problems have a haunting familiarity: they existed 35 years ago, and were noted then by authors including Frank Tannenbaum, Robert Alexander, Victor Urquidi, and many others. They are all the more troubling because they have the potential to slow or even reverse some of Latin America's promising positive trends. An educated workforce is needed by modern economies -- but almost all Latin American nations are short of public goods such as education. Persistence of a situation where the poorest 20 percent receives 3 percent of national income clearly threatens social peace so necessary for attracting foreign investment -- and in fact this is already a critical problem in Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Brazil, Colombia and other nations.

At a Crossroads

Latin American nations will have to combine skilled leadership, economic entrepreneurship, and more than a little good luck to begin tackling these challenges. What if anything can social science contribute?

In addition to discovering new social data and placing it in context, I believe we should learn from our analytic mistakes in the 1960's. Then, Latin America's future possibilities were defined as "reform or revolution" -- omitting many other possible scenarios, including political stagnation, harsh right-wing dictatorships, gradual or precipitate decline -- all of which came about, to different degrees in different nations.

In the new century, we need to keep our consciousness wide open to perceive new dangers.

These hazards include a grasping personalism in politics backed by the techniques of public-relations manipulation; Presidents Alberto Fujimori of Peru and Carlos Menem of Argentina typify this anti-democratic trend.

Human Rights Abuse

A second danger lies in rampant human rights abuses by the military, under the guise of counter-guerrilla or counter-narcotics efforts; today Colombia suffers greatly from this scourge.

Finally, some Latin Americans are ready, perhaps even eager, to minimize social injustice. Economist Hernando de Soto's notable tract The Other Path, which highlights the enterprise and grip of Peru's poor, was welcome by member of the polo-playing set in Latin American as though de Soto were ignoring the gross inequality that affects millions in Latin American nations.[3]

Let us seek some perspective. Will Latin American's positive recent developments maintain their momentum into the new millennium? Or does the dock-sweeper in Bolivia stand as a portent of Latin America's future as well as a symbol of the region's past?

Hope fully her descendants can move will beyond her role of gleaning a meager income from the leavings of dependent development. Resilient, often far-sighted and reflective people at the region's grassroots will play an important role in setting Latin America's course over the coming years. But it is disturbing to reflect how easy it would be to re-interpret the Aymara woman's methodical but sparse gathering by the lakeside.

I can well conjecture how a contemporary image-merchant might "re-package" her as a vigorous, entrepreneurial representative of an indigenous culture, taking advantage of opportunities offered by her nation's insertion in global markets. We must be sure that new social realities, and new life-chances for Latin Americans, stand behind the new terms we use.

Notes

[1]. Jorge I. Domínguez and Jeanne Kinney Giraldo, "Conclusion: Parties, Institutions and Market Reforms in Constructing Democracies," in Jorge I. Domínguez and Abraham F. Lowenthal, eds., Constructing Democratic Governance: Latin America and the Caribbean in the 1990's - Themes and Issues (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 4-5.

[2]. George Psacharopoulos et al., "Poverty and Income Distribution in Latin America: The Story of the 1980s" (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, Technical Paper No. 351, 1997).

[3]. Hernando de Soto, The Other Path: The Invisible Revolution in the Third World (New York: Harper and Row, 1989).

Teaching Latin America's Past

Maya Culture -- The Art of Storytelling

The Monkey's Haircut and Other Stories Told by the Maya edited by John Beirhos, published by William Morrow and Company, 1986. Awaiting Permission.

Most Maya storytellers make a distinction between myths and other kinds of stories. Myths take place in an ancient time before the world was as it is today. They explain such things as how the moon came to be and how the woodpecker got its red crest. As defined by a Cakchiquel storyteller, a tale of this kind is called an ejemplo, a tale that explains things. The term is also used in Yucatan, but with a broader meaning. The Yucatec ejemplo may be an origin myth, a story about Christ, or any tale with a moral. An ordinary folktale or fairy tale, on the other hand, is called a cuento.

Story categories are not rigid, and it is often impossible to say whether a tale is an ejemplo or cuento. In fact, the definition may vary from storyteller to storyteller.

Probably the most usual occasions for telling stories are men's gatherings, especially work breaks when men are away from home. But Margaret Redfield, wife of anthropologist Robert Redfield, was able to obtain many Yucatec stories from women and found that tales had been handed down from mother to daughter. One woman recalled that when she was a girl, she and her mother would get into their hammocks at night. Then, after reciting a prayer, the mother would tell cuentos.

In all, roughly a thousand Maya tales have been recorded since 1900. Of the stories most widely reported, How Christ Was Chased ranks first in popularity, followed closely by the linked incidents in Rabbit and Coyote and Rabbit and Puma. The Corn in the Rock comes next, followed by Lord Sun's Bride, and finally, Blue Sun.

How Christ was Chased

When Jesus Christ was a prisoner, they thought he was smoking in jail. They thought they saw the end of his lighted cigar.But it was not he, it was the firefly, and Jesus Christ had already fled.

He came to a river and crossed over. But as he was crossing the river, he stepped on fresh water snails. When the ones who were chasing him reached the river's edge and could not see which

way they had gone, they questioned the snails. The snails replied, "Don't you see that he has trampled on us and turned us over?"

The pursuers went on and passed some birds. They were white-fronted doves. The birds cried, "No way through here, no way through here," and because they had tried to help him, Jesus decreed that, from then on, the white-fronted doves would be able to enter grottoes and water holes and drink whenever they were thirsty.

But the pursuers went ahead and opened a path with their machetes. Then the white-winged dove cried, "There he is among the trees, there he is among the trees." Jesus Christ had already gone, but because the white-winged dove had tried to betray him, he decreed that, from then on, it would not be able to enter grottoes and water holes.

Jesus hid under some banana trees. "That's him, he's near now," said the ones who were chasing him. The magpie-jay was there. He was a human once. "Is it Our Lord you're looking for? He's here," said the magpie-jay. "Seize him! He's here now." Then they captured Our Lord. They made him carry a cross.

Rabbit and Coyote

There was a man. There was a watermelon patch that this man had. And when the watermelons were getting ripe, the man went to take a look at them, and when he saw that the insides had been scraped out, he said, "Who's been eating my watermelons?"

Then he thought of a trick to catch the thief. He made a little man out of wax and put it on top of one of the watermelons. When the thief came along -- and it was Rabbit -- he saw the little man sitting on the watermelon and he said, "Get off of there! If you don't get off, I'll slap you off with my hand!" But when he slapped at it, his hand stuck fast in the wax.

"Let go of my hand," he said, "or I'll kick you in with my foot." But when he kicked, his foot got stuck, and he rolled off onto the ground, still trying to get loose.

When the man came back, there was Rabbit. And there was the little wax man that had tricked him. The owner of the watermelon patch picked up Rabbit and threw him into a cage and said, "Rabbit, I'm going to shame your face. Wait till I get back here with something nice and hot."

The man went home and said to his boys, "Here! Take this poker and put it in the fire. We're going to get Rabbit in the rear end."

While Rabbit was waiting, Coyote came by. "So! What's happening to you?" he says.

"Oh, shut up!" says Rabbit. "I'm just waiting for a cup of hot chocolate this man's making for me. But why don't you take my place? My stomach's so small and he's making so much, I'd never finish it. You with your big stomach could drink the whole thing."

Just then the man called out, "Sorry to keep you waiting, Rabbit. It isn't hot enough yet, but don't worry, it will be just right in a few minutes."

"You see?" said Rabbit. "He wants it to be perfect. So why don't you just open this door and take my place?" Coyote unbarred the door and got inside the cage.

While Rabbit was running away, the man sent his boys to the watermelon patch with the hot poker. Ya! This rabbit's a big one!" they said when they got to the cage. Then they gave it to him in the rear end, and Coyote felt the fire.

"Now I've had it!" said Coyote, and he ran off looking for Rabbit. Pretty soon he found him, settled down at the edge of a sapodilla grove.

"Ya! What are you doing just sitting there?" says Coyote. "I'm ready to finish you off right now!"

"Oh, shut up," says Rabbit. "Come on, let's eat these sapodillas. Look, here's a ripe one all for you, just about to fall right into your mouth. Open up wide."

"All right," said Coyote. He opened his mouth as wide as he could, and Rabbit threw in a green sapodilla and broke all his teeth.

Rabbit ran off fast. When Coyote found him again, he was drinking at a well. "Now I've got you," he says.

"Oh, shut up, Uncle Coyote! Burnt Bottom! Gums!" says Rabbit. "Look, there's a cheese down in this well. But it's so deep, I can't drink up enough water to get to it. My stomach's too small. But you with your big stomach could hold it all.

"All right," said Coyote, and he started to drink. He drank, but the well never went dry. He drank until his stomach exploded. And where was the cheese? What was it but the moon's reflection shining in the water? Well, that was the end of the poor Coyote.

Maya Fables

The Bird Who Cleans the World and Other Mayan Fables by Victor Montejo
Used with permission. Cornerstone Press, Willimantic, CT 1991

How the Serpent Was Born

The care and devotion of a mother for her growing children is enormous. She denies herself and she pours forth the treasure of love from her heart in caring for her child. A mother is an angel. A

mother is a treasure. A mother is a special being whom we ought to love every moment of our lives. But many of us do not have hearts big enough to repay her for all that we make her suffer.

There are some who insult and reject their mothers and make them suffer even when they are very old, even though the children ought to bless these women with love and care for all the great pleasures they have given.

So it was that once a certain mother wanted to visit her son's house and rest on the shade of his roof. Since he was her son, he might even give her some tortillas to quiet the raging hunger in her stomach. But it was not to be so. When the son saw his mother approaching the house, he cursed her and ordered his wife to hide the bubbling pot full of chicken soup that she had cooked for dinner that day. The old lady sat on the doorstep and the son said, "Old woman, why do you come to my house?"

His mother answered, "Son, I only come to rest in the shade of your roof."

"Well, I don't believe I have anything to give you, and besides these visits bore me."

The son and his wife had to work hard to fight the appetites that made them want to devour the succulent chicken soup right in front of the old woman who would then want a share. The old woman grew tired of sitting on the doorstep with not a kind word from her son. She turned back toward her little house, saddened by the ingratitude and indifference of that self-centered and ungrateful son.

"Now the old woman has gone away," the son said to his mate. "Let's eat chicken soup." The wife brought out the pot that had been hidden from the old woman's eyes. She put it on the table and lifted off the lid. "Huuuuuuyyy, oh Jesus! " she exclaimed.

"What? What's happening?" her husband asked.

The moment she had lifted the lid, instead of the chicken soup she saw a poisonous serpent, ready to strike. They wanted to kill it, but the snake, shaking its rattles, slithered out to hide.

It is said that the serpent was born this way, the beginning of bad things that lie waiting for us. It was born out of the heart of a son who did not want to know the courage of a mother's saintly love.

The First Monkeys

The first grandmother was walking with her granddaughter and grandson through the forest when they saw a beehive in the hollow of a tree. The grandmother was in a hurry to go home, but the two grandchildren, without asking, climbed the tree and happily began to eat the bees' honey. The grandmother sat at the foot of the tree to wait for her mischievous grandchildren while they played above, forgetting all about her. The grandmother waited for a long time and when the children did not come down, she shouted to them, "Behave yourselves. Come down from that

tree right now. I am in a hurry."

"We are eating, grandmother, and our stomachs are still hungry," they answered.

The grandmother continued to wait while the children ate honey and played in the tree. Once again she insisted that the children come down. "Come down, or I will leave you in the tree forever!"

"We are eating, grandmother, and our stomachs are still hungry," they said again.

The children made faces and laughed at their grandmother. By this time they were afraid to come down out of the tree because they had been so disobedient.

The grandmother grew angry and spoke a curse upon them, "My grandchildren, if you do not want to come down from the tree, I will leave you here in the woods forever. Let the honey and the fruits of the trees be your food from now on. Let your faces be changed so that I will not know you."

Saying this, the grandmother took her cane and beat it against the trunk of the tree. She hit the tree trunk four times on each side and in that instant the tree grew so tall and thick that the children, now transformed into monkeys, could not climb down. So they remained there playing among the branches.

Later they hung upside down, watched their grandmother below and laughed, "Hee, hee, heeuuuy!" The grandmother continued on her way, leaving the monkeys in the tree.

From that time on it is said the curses of a grandmother or a mother can come true at times when children are disobedient.

Lesson Plan

Student Objectives

- to explain the role of stories in helping us explain a culture.
- to analyze the Mayan culture based on their stories.
- to draw conclusions about the changes that occur when an oral story becomes a written story.

Development

Have students think of a popular story they remember from their childhood. More than likely, students will remember similar stories e.g., Little Red Riding Hood. Compare/contrast the

versions of the stories. To what extent do stories change over time?

Complete this chart:

Stories/Fables	Character	Themes

In what ways are the stories similar/different? Decide which themes seem to be repeated throughout these stories. In your opinion, why are these themes significant? What conclusions can we make about Mayan culture based on the revival of these stories?

Writing Activity

Imagine you are a Mayan teenager. Based on our discussion of themes in Mayan stories, invent a modern-day story using one of the stories we have read as a model.

Teaching Latin America's Present Using Personal Narratives

A growing body of personal narratives translated from Spanish and Portuguese into English exists for the study of Latin America. The following is a narrative in the the voice of Rigoberta Menchú.

> "What I treasure most in life is being able to dream. During my most difficult moments and complex situations I have been able to dream of a more beautiful future." -- Rigoberta Menchú

Background

How to protect indigenous peoples' rights to freely practice their own cultural traditions, to use their own native languages, rights to own their land, and to promote their own history, has been a dilemma for many world leaders. To understand the struggles of the indigenous peoples of Latin America, a good place to start is the case of Rigoberta Menchú. Rigoberta Menchú is an indigenous woman who grew up in Chimel, Guatemala, a community continuing the millennium-old Maya-Quiché culture.

At twenty years of age, Ms. Menchú had already lost her father, her mother and a brother as a result of the indiscriminate violence exercised by the armed forces of Guatemala in their attempts to control and suppress the indigenous people.

After growing up amid this violence and repression, Ms. Menchú decided to learn Spanish, using the language of her oppressors to fight for the rights of her people. Since then, words have been her weapon in her untiring defense of the human rights of all indigenous peoples.

Ms. Menchú states that, "We have seen repeated occupations of our land, long lines of colonists have arrived, and they remain today.. In the case of my country, 65 percent of the inhabitants are indigenous. The constitution speaks of protection for the indigenous. Who authorized a minority to protect an immense majority?"

Ms. Menchú also states, "Racism in our countries is a fact in that the Indian is not allowed to be a politician or aspire to being head of state. It has reached the point that 99 percent of the indigenous women have not gone to school. The indigenous are condemned to live in a situation designed to exterminate them. They receive a pittance of a salary, they neither speak nor write the language, politics dictates their situation. Is this slavery? I don't know what it's called. It is not the same as before because we are in modern times."

In 1992, at the age of 33, Ms. Menchú won the Nobel Peace Prize, becoming the youngest , as well as the first indigenous person to ever win the prize.

Lesson Plan

Development

1. What is an indigenous person? Brainstorm some characteristics you would use to define an indigenous person. Which indigenous groups do you know?

2. What recurring issues appear between indigenous and non-indigenous groups? What can we infer from these issues?

3. Many people assume indigenous people in Latin America were always victims, that they did not form social movements to protect their rights. How does the case of Ms. Menchú help to dispel this myth?

4. Rigoberta Menchú learned Spanish to fight her oppressors. What conclusions can you draw on the connections between language and oppression?

5. In what ways has language become a political issue in the U.S. today?

Activities

1. Pretend you belong to an indigenous group. Your people are the majority and have lived on the same land for many generations. Eventually, the minority, a people of another race, come to your city and take over all government, make all the rules and laws, and prevent you from defending your rights because you do not understand the language of the people in power. Ask the class to discuss how this would make them feel? What would they do? Present this dilemma: "If you did not understand the language of your oppressors, how could you oppose them and claim your rights?"

2. Write a dialogue. In the dialogue you should include Ms. Menchú and at least one other person. The other person could be an ancient Mayan god, a current-day Guatemalan bureaucrat, a Guatemalan farmer, a Guatemalan businessman, an uneducated indigenous woman. In the dialogue have these people discuss the importance of language, land, or culture.

Teaching Latin America's Future

The following material was excerpted with permission from "Caught Between Two Worlds: Mexico at the Crossroads" a publication developed by the staff of Choices for the 21st Century Education Project, a program of The Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies at Brown University.

Mexico's Free-Market Revolution

The "technocrats," as they were known, were the vanguard of Mexico's free market revolution in the 1980s. Miguel de la Madrid, Minister of Programing and Budget during the Portillo presidency, hired hundreds of these young specialists to manage the Mexican economy.

What was unique about these young reformers was that they were educated at top universities in the United States and entered Mexican government as advisers and analysts. Unlike Mexican officials of an earlier era, the technocrats did not advance through the ranks of the PRI. Being less constrained by PRI loyalties allowed them the freedom to promote the free-market economic system and open trade that they felt was crucial to solving Mexico's problems.

Mexico's new economic policy kept the peso's exchange rate low, promoting exports and discouraging imports, cut government spending, raised interest rates to control inflation, and held down wages.

In 1986, Mexico took a major step toward opening its economy by joining the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Membership in GATT required Mexico to lower its trade barriers and reinforced the country's commitment to free-market economic principles.

When President Carlos Salinas came to power in 1988, he accelerated the pace of the technocrats economic reform. With a doctorate in economics from Harvard University and experience as the minister of programming and budget under de la Madrid, Salinas led Mexico into the global marketplace.

Salinas vigorously pursued goals of privatization and free trade. He sold off many of the most prominent state-owned firms, including the country's telephone company, airlines, and a large steel mill. The number of companies under government control dropped from 1,555 in 1982 to 217 in 1992. More than $20 billion was raised in the privatization program helping Salinas to eliminate Mexico's budget deficit.

Mexico's import tariffs, once among the world's highest, continued to fall under Salinas. From 1985 to 1992, the average tariff on Mexican consumer goods fell from 60 percent to less than 20 percent. Salinas' most dramatic move was to open negotiations with the US in 1990 on forming a regional trade bloc.

Years of Mexican talks eventually produced the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which took effect in 1994. By linking Mexico to the US and Canada, NAFTA created the world's largest consumer market.

Mexico's economy seemed to be heating up when disaster struck after Zedillo's inauguration. Mexico's foreign reserves dropped severely. Meanwhile Mexico ran up a huge, debt to finance the shortfall. After devaluing the peso and much belt-tightening, Mexico recovered. By 1996 economists reported solid growth, however, Mexican workers suffered greatly during this crisis. Millions lost jobs and most of their incomes were lower than what they had earned in 1980.

FUTURES IN BRIEF

The three viewpoints or futures in the next section are written from a Mexican perspective. Each proposes different values and opinions on how Mexico should proceed into the 21st century. Read each carefully and draw your own conclusions on what you think are the most appropriate policies for Mexico.

Future 1 -- Justice for the People

The will of the Mexican people is being denied in the name of international capitalism and free markets. NAFTA has opened our country to a new form of exploitation by the United States. Mexico has been shoved, weak and defenseless, into the global marketplace. The results have been devastating. Mexico must heed the cry for justice from its people. We must rekindle the promise of the Mexican Revolution for those who have known only poverty and oppression. Fairness and equality must serve as the foundation for a new society. The enormous imbalance between rich and poor must be corrected. With commitment and struggle, all Mexicans can at last have an opportunity to share in the wealth of our country.

Future 2 -- Restore Order and Stability

After decades of steady advancement, our country's era of stability and development has been sidetracked. In its place, we have crime, corruption, and disorder. The technocrats responsible for the mess call our present turmoil the price of progress. In reality, Mexico is sliding backward. We are drifting toward a repetition of the violence and destruction of the revolution. Mexico must take strong measures to restore order and turn back the forces of disintegration. The unrestrained capitalism of the United States cannot be transplanted to Mexican soil. Nor can our carefully crafted political system be overturned in the span of a few years. Rather, we must follow a course that fits Mexico. Let us join together in restoring the system that has served our country well.

Future 3 -- Embrace the Future

At long last, Mexico is in a position to realize its potential. Our country stands ready to make the leap from poverty to prosperity, from the rule of force to the rule of law. Since the early 1980s, Mexico has undergone a painful yet necessary transformation. We have prodded Mexico to the doorstep of the democratic, free-market world. Mexico must not retreat from our country's march of progress. We should step up our efforts to guide our country into the 21st century. Through renewed emphasis on improving the efficiency of the Mexican economy, we can expand exports and generate millions of new jobs. At the same time, economic reforms go hand-in-hand with the transformation of our political system. We have come much too far to turn back now.

Focusing Your Thoughts

You have had an opportunity to consider three Futures for Mexico. Now it is your turn to look at each of the Futures from your own perspective. Try each one on for size. Think about how the Futures address your concerns and hopes. You will find that each has its own risks and trade-offs, advantages an disadvantages. After you complete this worksheet, you will be asked to develop your own Future for Mexico.

Ranking the Futures

Which of the Futures below do you prefer? Rank the Futures, with "1" being the best Future for Mexico to follow:

Future 1: Justice for the People	Future 2: Restore Order and Stability	Future 3: Embrace the Future

Beliefs

Rate each of the statements according to your personal beliefs:

1 = Strongly Support;
2 = Support;
3 = Oppose;
4 = Strongly Oppose;
5 = Undecided.

___ To move forward, Mexico must first overcome its history of injustice and exploitation.

___ Mexico has an opportunity to eventually join the ranks of the developed nations if our

country holds steady to the course of reform.

___ Closing the gap between the rich and the poor in Mexico is more important than achieving high rates of economic growth.

___ Rapid change threatens to plunge Mexico into chaos and violence.

___ Linking our country closely to the United States is the surest route to prosperity for Mexico.

___ Democracy is a worthy goal only to the extent that it puts power in the hands of the common people.

___ The United States seeks only to take advantage of Mexico's weaknesses.

___ The free-market economic system and democracy are the only realistic options available to poor countries seeking to advance.

___ A strong, central government is Mexico's best bet for promoting stability and prosperity.

Creating Your Own Future

Your next assignment is to create a Future that reflects your own beliefs and opinions. You may borrow heavily from one Future, or you may combine ideas from two or three Futures. Or you may take a new approach altogether. There are, of course, no perfect solutions. And there is no right or wrong answer. Rather, you should strive to craft a Future that is logical and persuasive. Be careful of contradictions. For example, you should not propose raising trade barriers to protect Mexican industries if you believe that NAFTA is crucial to Mexico's development.

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