

America's Spanish Heritage and the Literature Classroom

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When I attend seminars sponsored by the Center for Reflective Citizenship, fellow teachers often ask me why I, an English teacher, am there. The answer is simple. I see myself as a humanities teacher rather than just an English teacher. Yes, I teach grammar and writing, but I also teach literature and nonfiction. When you teach these topics, you must be able to discuss history, economics, sociology, philosophy, etc. These seminars give me great insight into what history and social studies teachers are doing so I can bring these ideas into my classroom. Thus, when we are discussing a novel from the early 1800's or an essay that discusses modern immigration policy or 2nd Amendment rights, I have a better frame of reference to lead that discussion or guide essay topics. These seminars also give insight into teaching itself. It is always good to meet and talk with other professionals to see how they manage classrooms and coordinate lessons and materials.

For this particular conference, the most intriguing session, and one that can apply directly to my classroom, was "How Imperial Spain Influenced the U.S. Before 1800" presented by Dr. Luis Cortest. His presentation was full of humor, energy, and a deep knowledge about his subject (any teacher of any subject could learn a lot from such a positive example). It is always great to learn from someone so passionate. We could all learn from his example, but his topic also related to content I teach in my English classroom. When I teach American literature, early

explorers are responsible for some of the earliest written accounts of the New World. Most explorers mentioned in the typical high school American literature book are English or perhaps French. However, I was reminded that some of these journals and accounts come from early Spanish explorers, who were mentioned in Dr. Cortest's presentation. I learned so much more than I had known about the Spanish influence on early America. Yes, there are Spanish place names all over the southwest and California, but I had not known about the important role the Spanish played in the American Revolution and in what would become the states of Louisiana and Florida. I was especially intrigued by the discussion of Bernardo de Galvez. I had no idea about his importance in the Revolutionary War and his activities from Texas to the Florida coast. I want to read about and learn of his extraordinary life. There are several short articles about his life and contribution to America like this one: <http://www.historynet.com/americas-spanish-savior-bernardo-de-galvez.htm>. Such short readings could easily be incorporated into a study of early American literature or history.

All of this information, whether presented in an English or history class, can lead to great discussions about the importance of Spanish speaking peoples in North America. Using this information could help students see that English speakers were not the only colonizers. The Spanish were here first, a fact that is often glossed over in most discussions of early American literature and history. Spanish was spoken in parts of what is now the U.S. before English colonists even arrived. In attempting to better understand contemporary debates about immigration and the respective roles of the English and Spanish languages in the U.S., students should learn that before 1800 and continually after that time, portions of what is now the U.S. have always contained populations influenced by Spanish culture and language.

At my school I also work closely with our Spanish/history teacher. We often discuss how literature relates to her history topics. We also discuss the Hispanic culture and language that show up in the literature I teach. Authors like Sandra Cisneros, who depict and discuss Mexican-American life, often end up on my syllabus. Dr. Cortest's lecture and sources only further his connection between modern day America and its Spanish-speaking heritage. After my attendance at this institute, I hope that we can have more productive discussions about how we can work together. I also know that she will be glad to integrate this information about the early Spanish presence in America and the accompanying timeline into her history and language classes.

Another topic I find fascinating is the early Spanish explorers who may have passed through the Chattanooga area. Just south of Chattanooga on the southern end of Lookout Mountain, there is a place called DeSoto falls near Mentone, Alabama. According to a local legend, DeSoto and his men passed through that area and camped near the falls. There is even the story that a piece of 16th century Spanish armor was found near the falls. Not to be outdone, there is also a place called DeSoto Falls in the mountains of northeast Georgia. Again, as the story goes, pieces of Spanish armor were found in the area in the 1800's. Is this factual or just local legend to increase tourism? These are very important questions that teachers of history need to consider. Also, there have been actual 16th century Spanish trade artifacts like glass beads found in the Chattanooga area. So, the question is, did the Spanish come through this area or did these small artifacts merely get traded into the area from tribes further south? This could become a great joint project between a history classroom and an English classroom. History students could explore the historical documents and other evidence that shows the routes of DeSoto and other Spanish explorers, like Tristan de Luna. In English classes, a research paper could be assigned to try and find the truth. Where do the legends of found artifacts come from? Can they

be verified? This assignment could lead to discussions about what is fact and what is legend. How do legends become repeated often enough that they are considered historical facts?

There are endless possibilities for this topic in the history or literature classroom. It is also an important topic because our country and our schools are becoming more diverse and more Hispanic. Students enjoy topics that include their background and culture. It is particularly important in today's intensely emotional national debate about immigration for students to learn unbiased and rich historical content about Hispanic culture's long-time involvement in North America and the U.S. A stronger historical background helps to create more reflective and informed citizens, especially since our schools, work places, and nation will most probably include even more Hispanics in the years to come.

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