

Historical Inaccuracy in Movies – the Pocahontas Myth

Fast Facts

Curriculum Area: Social Studies
Grade Level: Grades 7-8
Suggested Duration: Two-Three 50-Minute Periods

Stage 1 Desired Results

Established Goals

Social Studies Standard 1, Benchmark 8.2 Students will assess the quality of information (e.g., primary or secondary sources, point of view and embedded values of the author) (SS1:8.2).

Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12 - Craft and Structure. Identify aspects of a text, including those by and about American Indians, that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts). (RH.6-8.6)

Understandings

- History is a story most often related through the subjective experience of the teller. With the inclusion of more and varied voices, histories are being rediscovered and revised (EU 6).
- Gain insight into how films such as Disney's Pocahontas lead to the perpetuation of myths and misinformation regarding American Indians.

Essential Questions

- What do you know about the story of Pocahontas and John Smith? What happened - when, where, and why?
- How could we find information from various sources about the Pocahontas story?
- What is a film producer's responsibility to historical facts when making movies for young children that are based upon actual historical events/people?

Students will be able to...

- develop a better understanding of the story of Pocahontas that goes beyond myth and relies on reported facts.
- develop an awareness of how movies can perpetuate inaccurate or distorted views of history.

Students will know...

- key factual information about the life of Pocahontas.
- how to distinguish fact from myth in image and story in films.



Stage 2 Assessment Evidence

Performance Tasks

1. Students will be asked to relate what they currently know about Pocahontas and analyze different perspectives regarding how movies have portrayed her and events surrounding early interactions with European colonists and American Indians. Students will gather evidence and present their findings in the form of a brief essay.

Stage 3 Learning Plan

Learning Activities

Start off the lesson by asking the students to raise their hand if they have seen the Disney version of Pocahontas. Have students retell the story portrayed in the movie.

Ask students if they are aware of any historical inaccuracy or issues of bias in the film.

Play an excerpt from the film – it is suggested to only play a five to ten-minute clip – the critical reviews linked to in the resource section should also give you some insight into which segment would be the most relevant to show.

Lead a class discussion regarding the scene watched. Have students identify any issues that may not be historically accurate.

Tell students they will now have an opportunity to learn a more accurate version of the Pocahontas story. First, have them make a list of the historical inaccuracies contained within the current movie

For purposes of time, it is suggested you have a handout prepared for distribution in class.

For ideas on what to include in a handout check out the links in the resource section as they provide excellent summaries of the inaccuracies contained in the movie.

Allow time in class for students to research historically accurate information about Pocahontas. Ask them to debunk at least five historically inaccurate facts from the movie. It is suggested to have students make a chart with two columns; on one side list out Pocahontas Myths, on the other side list out "The Real Story."

Allow students to work in small groups to complete this activity. The use of cooperative learning groups would help ensure class participation in the activity.

Students will be asked to share their newly found facts with the rest of the class.

Have students utilize the American Indian reference books distributed by OPI as a place for them to get accurate information.

The following excerpt is from the Office of Public Instruction document, *Connecting Cultures and Classrooms*.

The Pocahontas Myth

In an Associated Press news release, Karenne Wood, a tribeswoman and chair of the Virginia Council on Indians discussed the movie “The New World” and expressed her disappointment with it. The Pocahontas story has been more of a myth than probably any other story involving Indians in American history. Wood said that the Pocahontas myth is a result of history written by white settlers who wanted to use her as an example of a “good Indian” who became like the Europeans.

Wood said, “In real life, Pocahontas was not yet a teenager when she first encountered John Smith. While the two became friends, there was no romantic relationship between them. Pocahontas married an Indian as a teen but was later abducted by English settlers and held for ransom. During her captivity, she met John Rolfe, an English businessman credited with the introduction of tobacco farming in Virginia. She converted to Christianity, married Rolfe, had a son, and died at age 22 during an official visit to England.” The authors of ***Through Indian Eyes: The Native Experience in Books for Children***, Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale, say this about the Pocahontas myth:

The facts of the matter are these: Powhatan was the name of a town on The James River. “Powhatan’s” (Pocahontas’ father) name was Wahunsonacock, and he did not rule over 30 tribes. He was the founder of the Algonquian Confederacy of nations that the invaders, not knowing any better, also called Powhatan, after what they thought was the name of its chief.

The story about John Smith is not true. Historians believe Smith was the one who made it up; he was known to be a great liar. The “myth” does not say that Pocahontas never returned home because she contracted what was probably smallpox and died.

Native women were not drudges and beasts of burden as they are portrayed in the myth. Native people were neither more naive nor more cruel than the white invaders.

Resources

Obtain a copy of Disney's Pocahontas either from a student who has one or rent one from a local video store. Teachers and/or students may construct a list of facts from the following resources, and the teacher should preview the entire *Pocahontas* video prior to this lesson.

It is highly recommended the following two articles be read prior to teaching this lesson.

Pewewardy, Cornel. ["The Pocahontas Paradox: A Cautionary Tale for Educators."](#) *Journal of Navajo Education* Fall/Winter 1996/97.

Egerton, Gary. ["Redesigning Pocahontas: Disney, the "White Man's Indian," and the Marketing of Dreams"](#)

Ferguson, Laura. [Evaluating American Indian Materials and Resources for the Classroom](#). Helena, MT: Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2015.

Brant, Beth. **"Grandmothers of a New World." *Through Indian Eyes***. Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1992. 102-110

This is the best one if you want something easy to read that probably represents an accurate source. "Beth Brant discusses the "legend" about John Smith and Pocahontas as related in accounts based on John Smith's story. Then she counters Smith's account with another Pocahontas story which is based on Brant's understanding of Pamunkey practices and on her belief in the traditional strength and influence of Native women. Brant suggests "John Smith's so-called rescue was, in fact, a mock-execution--a traditional ritual often held after capture of enemies." (Susag 63)

Fox, Sandra J. Ed.D. [Connecting Cultures and Classrooms: Indian Education K-12 Curriculum Guide: Language Arts, Science, Social Studies](#). Helena, MT: Montana Office of Public Instruction and National Indian School Board Association, Polson, MT, Spring 2006.

Green, Rayna. **"The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture."** *The Massachusetts Review*. 698-714. 16 (Summer 1975)

Jennings, Francis. ***The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest***. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1976.

Pocahontas. 1996. Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Home Video. Distributed by Buena Vista Home Video. Videocassette.

Susag, Dorothea M. **"World View, Myth, and Bias in America's Ethnic and Cultural Roots."** *Roots and Branches: A Resource of Native American Themes, Lessons, and Bibliographies*. Urbana, IL: The National Council of Teachers of English, 1998. (60-66)

The [Montana PBS Nova Teachers](#) Web site has some useful information regarding the topic of Pocahontas and misrepresentation in the movies.