

VOLTAIRE’S LEGACY: SEARCHING FOR TRUTH

Nick Brune, Ontario

INTENDED GRADE/SUBJECT AREA

Senior History

CONCEPTS

- Historiography; Uses & Abuses of History; Versions of Truth & Reality; Facts and History; Historical Perspective; Bias

INSTRUCTIONAL OUTCOMES

Students will:

- identify the reasons and motivations behind the “Discovery of America” by Christopher Columbus;
- examine the legacy of Columbus in America – hero or villain?;
- identify the reasons and motivations behind Louis Riel’s 1870 and 1885 Rebellions;
- examine the legacy of Louis Riel within Canadian history;
- identify the reasons and motivations behind the Allied bombing of German cities during the Second World War;
- examine the legacy of “Bomber” Harris;
- examine some of the theories behind the November 22, 1963 assassination of John F. Kennedy;
- identify the reasons and motivations behind the Smithsonian Museum’s decision to cancel the 1995 exhibit for the 50th anniversary of the Enola Gay;
- examine the way in which truth and history are linked and yet at times separated.

RECOMMENDED TIME FRAME

This assignment should ideally be completed over about four to five classroom periods (approximately eighty minutes each).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The lesson is entitled “Voltaire’s Legacy” and is prefaced with a class examination of Voltaire’s aphorism that “history is the trick we play upon the dead.” As a class we begin to explore the ways in which history can and has provided enlightenment. At the same time, we begin to explore the darker side and attempt to examine specific examples when history has been misused and abused. The students are then told that the class will be divided into quarters with each group being responsible for a specific historical example.

ACTIVITIES

Each group’s tasks include the following:

- view the provided video related to their assigned time period;
- read the appropriate text material related to their assigned time period;
- provide evidence of substantial outside research related to their assigned time period;
- analyse the ways in which “history” has been used, misused, and/or abused in their assigned time period;
- decide on a creative way in which they can present their time period and its significance as it relates to “truth and history” (suggestions include: a trial, a skit, an interview, a play, a eulogy, debate, Power Point, a game, etc.);
- after each group has given its presentation (15-20 minutes), the final aspect of the lesson is to conduct a summary discussion that brings the concept of “truth and history” to some degree of resolution and/or closure;
- provide a one-page abstract of the major findings of their group which they must photocopy for the class.

Time Periods:

1. Christopher Columbus and “The Discovery of America”
2. Louis Riel – 1870 and 1885
3. World War Two: 1941–1944
4. Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb—Traditionalists and Revisionists
5. The Assassination of John F. Kennedy
6. Fact and Fiction

EVALUATION

The evaluation is broken into several areas and the individual teacher can decide what best meets the needs of his/her students. Some may wish to stress the presentation portion (looking for such things as research, delivery, organization, interest, accuracy, and creativity). The teacher may also wish to include a peer as well as a self-assessment. Other teachers may wish to emphasize other assessment tools.

A second portion of the evaluation is a brief contest test/quiz on the specific material covered in the four different time periods. A third portion of the evaluation is a two-page (minimum) position paper that the students write at the conclusion of the lessons. The title of the paper is “History and Truth...” The students must provide their own subtitle that conveys their perception of the relationship between the two entities. They must then write an analytical paper that draws on examples from the class presentations as well as other historical occurrences and provides supporting evidence.

MATERIALS/RESOURCES

All four eras have video sources supporting them. Aside from numerous outside videos, students also have access to directly relevant CBC-TV News in Review videos that I worked on.

1. Columbus: Hero or Villain? (November 1992)
2. Louis Riel: Changing Perceptions (April 1992)
3. The Valor and the Horror (December 1992)
4. JFK: What's Fact, What's Not (March 1992)
5. Re-Examining History: Searching for Truth (April 1995)

About the Educator

As one colleague observed about Nick Brune, “First and foremost is his obvious passion and commitment to his craft. Secondly, his evident knowledge and background in history allow him to have students begin to share his perspective of its utility. Thirdly, Nick has been invaluable in integrating history with other programs in the school. He is both a gifted pedagogue as well as historian.” For the past seven years, Nick has been “the teacher” on the award-winning CBC-TV educational video project called News in Review. This program is viewed by over two million students and has covered over two hundred stories, set within a historical context. Nick is also the co-author of a history textbook.