

The People vs. Columbus et al. Trial in the Elementary Classroom (Some Tips)

BY BOB PETERSON

I've had great success with the Columbus role play in my 5th-grade classroom, adapting it in the following manner:

Background Preparation

1. I do it as the culmination of our Columbus/Native American/colonialism unit so that the children have sufficient background knowledge. I explain the main components of the trial and show portions of a videotape from a previous year to give students a sense of what it will be like. (Depending on the sophistication of the particular class, I omit "The System of Empire" group, or I simplify it to become "Bad Ideas" —how the love of gold and property, and disrespect for native peoples, were responsible for the crimes against the Taínos.

2. We talk about the concept of evidence and I provide "evidence sheets"—each one numbered—for the kids to keep in their folders for future reference. Examples of such evidence sheets are a modified version of articles in *Rethinking Columbus*: Timeline on p. 99; examples of Taínos resistance, p. 111; Columbus's journal p. 96; the writings of Bartolome de las Casas, p. 103; and background on the Taínos, p. 106. As a whole class, we read each evidence sheet and brainstorm how the different groups might use it.

3. We study "courtroom" vocabulary such as witness, evidence, jury, etc.

4. I model and students practice statements such as, "I will present evidence to show..." or "How do you explain your statement ... given ...?"

5. I model how to take notes when someone is speaking and then develop arguments and counterarguments to their statements.

6. After the above preparation, I have students choose in order of priority which group they'd like to be in. I carefully divide the group so that there is a good mix in each group of strong readers and self-confident speakers.

Preparing for the Trial

1. I post the list of students and groups early in the day. When the students break into the groups they first read the "indictment" sheet for their group and then brainstorm ideas of how to respond to the charges using a brainstorming sheet I provide.

2. Next they decide who will be lawyers and witnesses. I set a maximum of two lawyers per group.

3. Each student gets their own special sheet—witness sheet for those preparing testimony and a question sheet for lawyers. The sheet provides a structure for students: "Hello, my name is ... [the students think up an appropriate fictitious name]; I am ... [students describe their fictitious self and family]; I think ... [students write out their argument that they will present]. The lawyers write out questions they'll ask each group.

4. Students finish their speeches and/or list of questions for homework.

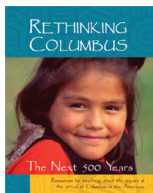
5. The groups meet the following day(s) to practice and collectively revise their parts. Lawyers imagine answers they'll get and think up follow-up questions. Witnesses practice their testimony and anticipate questions.

The Trial

1. I have a few students videotape the role-play. This lends an air of importance to the trial.

2. I play the role of the prosecutor. I have another adult—a student teacher, parent, or volunteer—be the judge. Between the two of us, we can usually keep order. I have the judge explain the idea of shared guilt, and use a percentage pie chart to give examples of what a jury might decide in terms of responsibility.

3. When the jury is deliberating, I have each student fill out a role-play reflection sheet, in which they reflect on what they learned preparing for and participating in the role-play. In the reflection sheet, they also write down who they think is guilty.



Bob Peterson (bob.e.peterson@gmail.com) taught 5th grade at La Escuela Fratney for 20 years and is a co-founder of *Rethinking Schools* magazine. Originally published in *Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years*.

This article is offered for use in educational settings as part of the Zinn Education Project, a collaboration of Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change, publishers and distributors of social justice educational materials. Contact Rethinking Schools (office@rethinkingschools.org) directly for permission to reprint this material in course packets, newsletters, books, or other publications. For more information:

Rethinking Schools
www.rethinkingschools.org

Teaching for Change
www.teachingforchange.org