Staging the Past: Theatre as Historical Evidence with Héctor Elizondo

A Joy2Learn Middle School Social Studies Lesson Plan

Connection to Joy2Learn Professional Development

This lesson applies the inquiry routine introduced in the Joy2Learn professional development mini-workshop, *Expressions of the Past: Using the Arts as Historical Evidence in Middle School Social Studies*:

OBSERVE → QUESTION → INVESTIGATE → EXPLAIN

Students examine two contemporary performances by Héctor Elizondo as cultural sources, but they do not treat the performances as transparent evidence of Renaissance Venice or seventeenth-century France. During INVESTIGATE, students contextualize each dramatic work and corroborate performance-based observations with primary and secondary historical sources. The lesson therefore asks a central disciplinary question: What can a later artistic representation help us investigate about the past, and what must we verify with other evidence?

Grade Level

Grades 6-8

Time

Two 50-60 minute class periods, or one extended 90-minute block. A one-period option is included in Teacher Notes.

Social Studies Focus

- Renaissance and Early Modern Europe
- Venice, the Mediterranean, and military service
- Seventeenth-century France
- Identity, reputation, honor, and social status
- Historical sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration

- How later cultural representations shape historical memory

Learning Objectives

- OBSERVE specific details in dramatic performances without immediately treating them as historical facts.
- QUESTION what the performances suggest and what additional evidence is needed.
- INVESTIGATE by contextualizing and corroborating the performances with primary and secondary sources.
- EXPLAIN a historically defensible conclusion using evidence from multiple sources.
- Distinguish among the historical period represented, the period in which a play was written, and a modern performance of that play.

Standards Alignment

Primary alignment: C3 Framework for Social Studies, especially:

- D1.5.6-8 (questions and source selection)
- D2.His.13.6-8 (source relevance and utility)
- D3.1.6-8 and D3.3.6-8 (multiple sources, context, corroboration, and evidence), and
- D4.1.6-8 (claims and evidence).
- Supporting literacy connections include RH.6-8.1, RH.6-8.7, RH.6-8.9, WHST.6-8.1, and SL.6-8.1.

Materials

- Joy2Learn video clips:

    - Hector Elizondo | Othello - Hector's Performance: https://youtu.be/iNWG71KMNGE?si=0GuN3_JK-yVyMec1
    - Hector Elizondo | Cyrano de Bergerac - Hector's Performance: https://youtu.be/7kO4OQ5cFc8?si=75hxZMEW-HhhyQ-9

- William Shakespeare, The Tragedy of Othello, the Moore of Venice, first quarto (1622), Folger Shakespeare Library: https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/othello/read/
- Giraldi Cinthio, 'The Moor of Venice' from Gli Hecatommithi (1565): https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Moor_of_Venice/Introduction
- Adapted passage from Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac, Oeuvres diverses (1654), Bibliothèque nationale de France/Gallica:
    - **Cyrano de Bergerac, "Against a Coward," teacher-adapted from the French**

      Yesterday someone called me a fool and even struck me. Some people say that honor demands that I fight him: either I must take revenge or be disgraced. But why should I risk the greatest misfortune—death—only to prove my courage?

      If I kill him, people will find a reason to criticize me. If he kills me, he can insult my courage when I am no longer here to answer. And if neither of us wins, what have we proved?

      No. I will not draw my sword. Wanting to escape an enemy through death is another kind of fear. I am not afraid to remain in the same world with him.
- A brief excerpt from Act I or Act IV of Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897): https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1254
- Folger Shakespeare Library, *Othello overview and teaching resources*: https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/othello/
- Folger Shakespeare Library, *An Introduction to This Text: Othello*: https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/othello/an-introduction-to-this-text/
- Bibliothèque nationale de France, *Cyrano de Bergerac author and works records* / Salle Ovale resources: https://catalogue.bnf.fr/rechercher.do?index=AUT3&numNotice=11898355&typeNotice=p

- Project Gutenberg bibliographic record for Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*: https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1254

Source-Use Guardrail

Do not ask students to prove that Elizondo, Shakespeare, or Rostand accurately depicts an earlier society. Instead ask:

- What does this source represent?
- When and by whom was it created?
- What might it help us investigate?
- What other evidence is needed before we make a historical claim?

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1. OBSERVE - Othello as a Cultural Source (10 minutes)

- Play Elizondo's Othello performance clip without first giving students a historical explanation of Venice.
    - Hector Elizondo | Othello - Hector's Performance: https://youtu.be/iNWG71KMNGE?si=0GuN3_JK-yVyMec1
- Ask students to record only details they can see or hear.
    - What do you notice about voice, pacing, gesture, posture, and facial expression?
    - What words or ideas seem to carry special weight?
    - What do you notice about authority, status, conflict, identity, or reputation?
    - Which observations are directly supported by the clip, and which are already interpretations?
- Teacher language: "We are beginning with what this source gives us. A performance can prompt historical questions, but it cannot answer all of them by itself."

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2. QUESTION - What Does Othello Make Us Wonder? (8 minutes)

- Ask students:
    - What does this performance make you wonder about military leadership in Venice?
    - What does it make you wonder about who could hold authority or status?
    - How might identity and reputation affect a leader?
    - Which claims would be unsafe to make from this performance alone?
    - What other sources would we need?
- Record 2-3 student questions that can be investigated with evidence.

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3. INVESTIGATE - Othello Source Set (20 minutes)

- Students work with the Elizondo clip plus two or three additional sources. Contextualization and corroboration occur inside INVESTIGATE.
    - Folger Othello Act 1, scene 3 excerpt: What does the text represent about Othello's military authority, reputation, and relationship to the Venetian state?
    - Cinthio 1565 excerpt: What does this earlier Italian version add, confirm, or complicate?
    - Folger secondary context: What does it help us understand about when Shakespeare wrote the play and the difference between Shakespeare's England and the Venetian setting?
- Students complete a source comparison organizer with four columns: SOURCE / WHAT IT SAYS OR SHOWS / CONTEXT & LIMITS / WHAT IT ADDS OR COMPLICATES.

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4. EXPLAIN - Provisional Othello Conclusion (10 minutes)

- Ask students: What can these sources reasonably help us conclude about the relationship among military service, reputation, identity, and authority in the world represented by Othello? What remains uncertain?
- Require evidence from at least two sources and one sentence acknowledging a source limitation.

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5. OBSERVE - Cyrano de Bergerac as a Cultural Source (10 minutes)

- Play Elizondo's Cyrano de Bergerac performance clip. Again, withhold the historical explanation at first.
    - Hector Elizondo | Cyrano de Bergerac - Hector's Performance: https://youtu.be/7kO4OQ5cFc8?si=75hxZMEW-HhhyQ-9
- Ask students:
    - What do you notice about the character's speech, posture, gesture, and interactions?
    - What seems important to the character: appearance, language, courage, reputation, loyalty, independence, honor?
    - What details are observations? Which statements would be interpretations?

6. QUESTION - What Does Cyrano Make Us Wonder? (8 minutes)

- Ask students:
    - Was the Cyrano represented in the play a real person?
    - Which parts of this character might reflect seventeenth-century France, and which might reflect Rostand's 1897 imagination?

- What did honor, reputation, military service, or independence mean in the worlds represented by these sources?
- What evidence could help us distinguish historical person, literary character, and modern performance?

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7. INVESTIGATE - Cyrano Source Set (20 minutes)

- Guide students to investigate additional sources:
  - Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac, Oeuvres diverses (1654): What does the historical Cyrano's own writing reveal that the performance cannot?
  - Rostand, Cyrano de Bergerac (1897): Which features of the character come from Rostand's later dramatic construction?
  - BnF secondary context: What can we verify about the historical Cyrano and his seventeenth-century writings?
- Compare back to Elizondo: Which choices belong to a modern actor interpreting Rostand's character?
- Teacher emphasis: Students are now working across three time layers - the seventeenth-century historical person/world, Rostand's 1897 play, and Elizondo's modern performance. These layers should not be collapsed into one another.

8. CORROBORATE WITHIN INVESTIGATE - Put Othello and Cyrano Source Sets in Conversation (10 minutes)

- Ask students to compare the two investigations, not to claim that Venice and France were the same.
  - What ideas about honor, reputation, identity, or leadership appear in both source sets?
  - Which similarities are supported by historical sources rather than only by the performances?
  - Where do the source sets differ?

- How did adding context change your first interpretation of each performance?

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9. EXPLAIN - Final Historical Explanation (15 minutes)

- Choose one prompt:
  - How can later dramatic performances help historians investigate ideas about identity, honor, and leadership in earlier societies? Use Othello and Cyrano as examples, and explain the limits of using performance as evidence.
  - What do the Othello and Cyrano source sets suggest about the importance of reputation and honor in the societies and cultural memories they represent? Use evidence from at least one performance source, one primary/period source, and one secondary source.
- Suggested structure: CLAIM → EVIDENCE FROM MULTIPLE SOURCES → REASONING → LIMITATION / UNCERTAINTY.

Assessment

Formative

- Accurate observations before interpretation
- Historically productive questions
- Attention to source creator, date, purpose, and historical layer
- Contextualization and corroboration across sources
- Willingness to revise an initial interpretation when new evidence is introduced

Summative

Final evidence-based historical explanation plus completed source comparison organizer.

Rubric

Criterion	Advanced	Proficient	Developing
OBSERVE	Identifies precise, relevant details and clearly separates observation from inference.	Identifies relevant details with mostly clear separation from inference.	Observations are general or mixed with unsupported interpretation.
QUESTION	Generates focused historical questions that clearly require additional evidence.	Generates an investigable historical question.	Questions are primarily factual, vague, or not tied to evidence.
INVESTIGATE	Accurately contextualizes sources, corroborates across source types, and explains important source limitations.	Uses context and multiple sources to deepen or revise understanding.	Uses sources separately or relies heavily on one source.
EXPLAIN	Constructs a nuanced conclusion using multiple sources, clear reasoning, and explicit uncertainty/limitations.	Constructs a supported conclusion using relevant evidence and reasoning.	Conclusion is weakly supported or exceeds the available evidence.

Reflection and Transfer

- How did your thinking change after you added historical context and other sources?
- Which source was most useful for answering your question? Why?
- What could the Elizondo performances help you notice or question that a textbook might not?
- What could the performances not establish without corroboration?

- Where else could you use OBSERVE -> QUESTION -> INVESTIGATE -> EXPLAIN in social studies?

Teacher Notes

- Keep the historical layers visible. Othello is an early seventeenth-century English play set in Venice and Cyprus. Rostand's Cyrano is an 1897 French play set in the seventeenth century. Elizondo's performances are modern interpretations. Each can be historically useful, but for different questions.
- Use "source" and "evidence" precisely. The performance, play text, historical writing, and secondary account are sources. Students select information from those sources as evidence for a particular claim.
- Avoid the claim that a performance "reveals what Renaissance Venice was like" or "shows seventeenth-century French values." A stronger formulation is: the performance represents those worlds and generates questions that students investigate using other evidence.
- For grades 6-7, shorten and adapt primary-source excerpts while preserving source attribution and meaning. For grade 8, students can work with slightly longer excerpts and more explicit source evaluation.
- One-period option: Divide the class in half. One group investigates Othello and the other Cyrano using the same four-move routine. Pair groups to teach one another their source sets, then complete the final EXPLAIN prompt together.