



Smithsonian
National Museum of Natural History

TEACHERS CORNER: USING PRIMARY SOURCES

by *Anb-Thu Cunnion*

[Editor's Note: This lesson plan for high school students was adapted from the author's *Teacher's Guide* created for the *Lakota Winter Count* website and authored by Cunnion. Winter counts are pictorial calendars or records used by the Plains Indians. Additional educational material is available for download on the Learning Resources page, <http://wintercounts.si.edu>]

Primary sources expose students to multiple perspectives on events and issues of the past and present. Incorporating winter counts into the classroom can encourage students to develop visual literacy skills, greater analytical abilities, and a deeper understanding about the Lakota people and their culture. By dealing directly with archival records, students engage in asking questions, thinking critically, and developing reasoned explanations and interpretations of events, issues, and peoples of the past and the present.

For this lesson, students will become “investigative historians” whose task is to use the winter counts to learn as much as they can about the Lakota people’s history during the nineteenth century. Once divided into eight groups, students will be assigned one of the eight pictographic winter counts to use as their primary resource (do not use the “text only” winter counts for this exercise). Using the searchable database of winter count entries, students will look for general information about the community whose history is documented in the winter count. Students will report back to the class as a whole with their findings, citing individual entries as evidence and correlating the events mentioned in the winter count with events studied in their textbooks.

Curriculum Standards

Because each state has its own social studies curriculum standards, the National Council for the Social Studies’ 1994 publication, *Expectation of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*, was used as a guideline for this lesson plan. In accordance with this set of standards, the lesson focuses on themes of Time, Continuity, and Change. At this level, students engage in “more sophisticated analysis and reconstruction of the past, examining its relationship to the present and extrapolating into the future.” Through the study of both primary and secondary resources, students integrate individual stories about people, events, and situations to form a more holistic conception, in which continuity and change are linked in time and across cultures. These skill objectives, or variations of them, are also found in several states’ curriculum standards for high school students. The ability to use technology for research is also a skill required of many states’ high school students.

Performance Objectives

By completing the lesson, students will be better able to:

- Identify, seek out and evaluate multiple perspectives of past events.
- Obtain historical data from alternative sources of historical documentation.
- Question issues of voice when evaluating historical sources.

Materials

- Computer Lab with at least eight computers equipped with high-speed internet.
- Image of a winter count, either for overhead projection or general distribution. Digital images of the winter counts can be downloaded off the Smithsonian's *Lakota Winter Count* online resource <<http://wintercounts.si.edu>>. (Images are located in the "Learning Resources" section, under the Teachers' Guide in "Downloadable Images.")
- Writing material.

Procedure

1. Divide the students into eight equal groups and assign each group a different pictographic winter count (Lone Dog, Long Soldier, American Horse, Battiste Good, Cloud Shield, Flame, Rosebud, Swan). If the majority of groups have more than three students, create more groups and overlap assigned winter counts. Each group should have its own computer to use for research.
2. Discuss the difference between primary sources and secondary sources. Ask the students to identify examples of primary sources and secondary sources that they have encountered during their studies. The definitions used by the Smithsonian Archives are as follows:
 - a. **Primary sources** are documents or objects created as part of daily life—birth certificates, photographs, diaries, letters, etc.—or reports from people directly involved in the subject.
 - b. **Secondary sources** are documents that interpret, analyze, or synthesize information, usually produced by someone not directly involved in the subject. Examples include textbooks and obituaries.
3. Provide background information on the Lakota. Locate the region of the United States that the Lakota people lived, from prior to the eighteenth century to the present (South Dakota, North Dakota).
4. Introduce the winter counts. Show images of the winter counts, preferably a variety of them so that students can compare and contrast each winter count keeper's style and medium (students should not think that winter counts were only produced on buffalo skin or hide).
5. Explain how the Lakota used winter counts as mnemonic devices (memory aids) to recall their community's history.
 - a. Each pictograph represents a memorable event occurring during each year of the community's past.
 - b. One person, the keeper, was responsible for not only maintaining the winter count, but also for remembering the entire history recorded within it.
 - c. The oral history tradition survived the U.S. government's campaign to outlaw the expression of both American Indian culture and language.
 - d. Winter counts are among the few primary sources that remain that document American Indian history during the nineteenth century from a non-White perspective.
6. Next class (in the Computer Lab). Describe to the students how the winter counts are accessible through the searchable database on the Lakota Winter Count online exhibit (<http://wintercounts.si.edu>). As practice, ask them to zoom in, zoom out and rotate the pictures of the whole winter count; view individual entries; scroll across the database; access collector's notes for individual counts; and "collect" entries.

7. Inform the students that they will be doing historical investigation using their assigned winter count, in order to discover ideas about how the people represented in their count lived and what happened to them during the nineteenth century.

8. Instruct students to answer the following research questions using their assigned winter count as a reference and citing individual entries as evidence. Students may not be able to find evidence to complete some questions, but they should do their best to extrapolate as much information as they can. In this case, it is best for them to “make an educated guess” rather than to leave a section blank. However, students should be instructed that if they are unsure of an answer, they should make note of it (as any good scholar should). Students should work together but be asked to record their own answers.

Research Questions

1. Where did the Lakota live? Describe geographical landmarks (rivers, streams, hills, etc) as well as environs (wildlife, plants and animals).
2. How did the Lakota live? What did they eat? How did they get food?
3. What health issues did the Lakota face?
4. What other groups of people did the Lakota interact with? How did they interact? Were they friends or enemies? Did that relationship change over time?
5. When did the Lakota first meet White explorers and settlers? What types of interactions occurred between the two cultures?
6. What astronomical or meteorological phenomena are mentioned in the winter counts (star activity, extraordinary weather patterns)?

9. Next class (in the classroom). Ask students to name primary and secondary sources from their own lives. Then review winter counts with the class by asking students to explain why winter counts are considered primary sources. Have groups present their answers to the research questions to the class. Once all the groups have presented, work with the class as a whole to identify similarities and difference among the counts. Students should be taking notes on their classmates’ findings as well as the class discussion. Issues that should be addressed are:

- a. What would account for the differences among the counts? The similarities?
- b. What events documented in the popular version of U.S. history are also documented in the winter counts?
- c. Why don’t the winter counts seem as comprehensive as the textbook version of history? (Winter counts are not the definitive history of the Lakota community, but rather mnemonic devices used to support an oral history, which was more elaborate and detailed, containing not only the most memorable event, but other important events that are associated with the year. Unfortunately, the oral history tradition suffered greatly from the U.S. government’s campaign to suppress American Indian culture during the nineteenth and early twentieth century.)

10. Discuss winter counts as primary sources.

- a. Whose perspective is represented in the winter counts? Who is the author?
- b. What traditional sources could the students consult for additional information about the Lakota? Who is the author or authors?
- c. What other types of primary sources could the students reference for information on nineteenth century U.S. history? Whose perspective do these sources represent?
- d. Whose version of events is true? Can history be recounted through only one perspective?

Homework Assignment

Have students write an essay outlining (1) the history of the Lakota based on what they learned from the winter counts; (2) the history of the Lakota based on what they learned from their textbooks and other secondary sources; and (3) an evaluation of how the two histories relate and where the student would go to research the topic further.

Teacher Notes

Refer to historical and cultural content on Lakota Winter Count Web site (<http://wintercounts.si.edu>).

Evaluation Tools

Students will be evaluated on:

1. Data collection methods (the research questions).
2. Class participation and group discussion.
3. Assigned essay's ability to reflect the student's understanding of historical research.

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