

Discovering Columbus

Re-reading the Past

By **BILL BIGELOW**

MOST OF MY STUDENTS HAVE TROUBLE with the idea that a book—especially a textbook—can lie. That’s why I start my U.S. history class by stealing a student’s purse.

As the year opens, my students may not know when the Civil War was fought or what James Madison or Frederick Douglass did; but they know that a brave fellow named Christopher Columbus discovered America. Indeed, this bit of historical lore may be the only knowledge class members share in common.

What students don’t know is that their textbooks have, by omission or otherwise, lied to them.

Finders, Keepers

So I begin class by stealing a student’s purse. I announce that the purse is mine, obviously, because look who has it. Most students are fair-minded. They saw me take the purse off the desk so they protest: “That’s not yours, it’s Nikki’s. You took it. We saw you.” I brush these objections aside and reiterate that it is, too, mine and to prove it, I’ll show all the things I have inside.

I unzip the bag and remove a brush or a comb, maybe a pair of dark glasses. A tube of lipstick works best: “This is my lipstick,” I say. “There, that proves it is my purse.” They don’t buy it and, in fact, are mildly outraged that I would pry into someone’s possessions with such utter disregard for her privacy. (I’ve alerted the student to the demonstration before the class, but no one else knows that.)

“OK, if it’s Nikki’s purse, how do you know? Why are you all so positive it’s not my purse?”

Different answers: “We saw you take it; that’s her lipstick, we know you don’t wear lipstick; there is stuff in there with her name on it.” To get the point across, I even offer to help in their effort to prove Nikki’s possession: “If we had a test on the contents of the purse, who would do better, Nikki or I?” “Whose labor earned the money that bought the things in the purse, mine or Nikki’s?” Obvious questions, obvious answers.

I make one last try to keep Nikki’s purse: “What if I said I *discovered* this purse, then would it be mine?” A little laughter is my reward, but I don’t get any takers; they still think the purse is rightfully Nikki’s.

“So,” I ask, “Why do we say that Columbus discovered America?”

Was It Discovery?

Now they begin to see what I’ve been leading up to. I ask a series of questions that implicitly link Nikki’s purse and the Indians’ land: Were there people on the land before Columbus arrived? Who had been on the land longer, Columbus or the Indians? Who knew the land better? The students see where I’m going—it would be hard not to. “And yet,” I continue, “what is the first thing that Columbus did when he arrived in the New World?” Right: he took possession of it. After all, he had discovered the place.

We talk about phrases other than “discovery” that textbooks could use to describe what Columbus did. Students start with phrases they used to describe what I did to Nikki’s purse: He stole it; he took it; he ripped it off. And others: He invaded it; he conquered it.



16th-century engraving of the cruelties to the Tainos, by Theodore de Bry.

I want students to see that the word “discovery” is loaded. The word itself carries a perspective, a bias. “Discovery” represents the point of view of the supposed discoverers. It’s the invaders masking their theft. And when the word gets repeated in textbooks, those textbooks become, in the phrase of one historian, “the propaganda of the winners.”

To prepare students to examine textbooks critically, we begin with alternative, and rather unsentimental, explorations of Columbus’ “enterprise,” as he called it. The Admiral-to-be was not sailing for mere adventure and to prove the world was round, as I learned in 4th grade, but to secure the tremendous profits that were to be made by reaching the Indies.

Mostly I want the class to think about the human beings Columbus was to “discover”—and then destroy. I read from a letter Columbus wrote to Lord Raphael Sanchez, treasurer of Aragón and one of his patrons, dated March 14, 1493, following his return from the first voyage.

He reports being enormously impressed by the indigenous people:

As soon ... as they see that they are safe and have laid aside all fear, they are very simple and honest and exceedingly liberal with all they have; none of them refusing anything he may possess when he is asked for it, but, on the contrary, inviting us to ask them. They exhibit great love toward all others in preference to themselves. They also give objects of great value for trifles, and content themselves with very little or nothing in return ... I did not find, as some of us had expected, any cannibals among them, but, on the contrary, men of great deference and kindness.

But, on an ominous note, Columbus writes in his log, “should your Majesties command it, all the inhabitants could be taken away to Castile [Spain], or made slaves on the island. With 50 men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want.”

I ask students if they remember from elementary school days what Columbus brought back from the Americas. Students recall that he returned with parrots, plants, some gold, and a few of the people Columbus had taken to calling “Indians.” This was Columbus’ first expedition and it is also where most school textbook accounts of Columbus end—conveniently.

But what about his second voyage?

I read to them a passage from Hans Koning’s book, *Columbus: His Enterprise*:

We are now in February 1495. Time was short for sending back a good “dividend” on the supply ships getting ready for the return to Spain. Columbus therefore turned to a massive slave raid as a means for filling up these ships. The [Columbus] brothers rounded up 1,500 Arawaks [Taínos]—men, women, and children—and imprisoned them in pens in Isabela, guarded by men and dogs. The ships had room for no more than 500, and thus only the best specimens were loaded aboard. The Admiral then told the Spaniards they could help themselves from the remainder to as many slaves as they wanted. Those whom no one chose were simply kicked out of their pens. Such had been the terror of these prisoners that (in the description by Michele de Cuneo, one of the colonists) “they rushed in all directions like lunatics, women dropping and abandoning infants in the rush, running for miles without stopping, fleeing across mountains and rivers.”

Of the 500 slaves, 300 arrived alive in Spain, where they were put up for sale in Seville by Don Juan de Fonseca, the arch-deacon of the town. “As naked as the day they were born,” the report of this excellent churchman says, “but with no more embarrassment than animals ...”

The slave trade immediately turned out to be “unprofitable, for the slaves mostly died.” Columbus decided to concentrate on gold, although he writes, “Let us in the name of the Holy Trinity go on sending all the slaves that can be sold.”

Looking Through Different Eyes

Students and I role-play a scene from Columbus’ second voyage. Slavery is not producing the profits Columbus is seeking. He believes there is gold and the Taíno people are selfishly holding out on him.

Students play Columbus; I play the Taínos: “Chris, we don’t have any gold, honest. Can we go back to living our lives now and you can go back to wherever you came from?”

I call on several students to respond to the Taínos’ plea. Columbus thinks the Taínos are lying. Student responses range from sympathetic to ruthless: OK, we’ll go home; please bring us your gold; we’ll lock you up in prison if you don’t bring us your gold; we’ll torture you if you don’t fork it over, etc.

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After I’ve pleaded for a while and the students-as-Columbus have threatened, I read aloud another passage from Koning’s book, describing Columbus’ system for extracting gold from the Taínos:

Every man and woman, every boy or girl of fourteen or older, in the province of Cibao ... had to collect gold for the Spaniards. As their measure, the Spaniards used ... hawks’ bells. ... Every three months, every [Taíno] had to bring to one of the forts a hawks’ bell filled with gold dust. The chiefs had to bring in about ten times that amount. In the other provinces of Hispaniola, twenty-five pounds of spun cotton took the place of gold.

Copper tokens were manufactured, and when a [Taíno] had brought his or her tribute to an armed post, he or she received such a token, stamped with the month, to be hung around the neck. With that they were

safe for another three months while collecting more gold.

Whoever was caught without a token was killed by having his or her hands cut off...

There were no gold fields, and thus, once the [Taínos] had handed in whatever they still had in gold ornaments, their only hope was to work all day in the streams, washing out gold dust from the pebbles. It was an impossible task, but those Taínos who tried to flee into the mountains were systematically hunted down with dogs and killed, to set an example for the others to keep trying. ...

During those two years of the administration of the brothers Columbus, an estimated one half of the entire population of Hispaniola was killed or killed themselves. The estimates run from one hundred and twenty-five thousand to one-half million.

The goal is not to titillate or stun, but to force the question: Why wasn't I told this before?



Columbus kneels in pious glory in a typical children's biography. This one is James de Kay's *Meet Christopher Columbus*.

Re-examining Basic Truths

I ask students to find a textbook, preferably one they used in elementary school, and critique the book's treatment of Columbus and the Taínos. I distribute the following handout and review the questions aloud. I don't want them to merely answer the questions, but to consider them as guidelines.

- How factually accurate was the account?
- What was omitted—left out—that in your judgment would be important for a full understanding of Columbus (for example, his treatment of the Taínos; slave-taking; his method of getting gold; the overall effect on the Taínos)?
- What motives does the book give to Columbus? Compare those with his real motives.
- Who does the book get you to root for, and how is that accomplished? (For example, are the books horrified at the treatment of Taínos or thrilled that Columbus makes it to the so-called New World?)
- How do the publishers use illustrations? What do these communicate about Columbus and his "enterprise"?
- In your opinion, why does the book portray the Columbus/Taíno encounter the way it does?
- Can you think of any groups in our society who might have an interest in people having an inaccurate view of history?

I tell students that this last question is tough but crucial. Is the continual distortion of Columbus simply an accident, or are there social groups that benefit from children developing a false or limited understanding of the past?

The assignment's subtext is to teach students that all written material should be read skeptically. I want students to explore the politics of print—that perspectives on history and social reality underlie the written word, and that to read is both to comprehend what is written, but also to question why it is written. My intention

is not to encourage an “I-don’t-believe-any-thing” cynicism, but rather to equip students to analyze a writer’s assumptions and determine what is and isn’t useful in any particular work. Reading is a metaphor. How we encourage students to approach written material reflects how we hope students will approach the world. Will they be mere consumers of text—and the world—or will they feel empowered to question, critique, and act?

*“With 50 men we
could subjugate them
all and make them
do whatever we want.”*

— Christopher Columbus, 1492

For practice, we look at excerpts from a textbook, *The Story of American Freedom* (Macmillan, 1964). We read aloud and analyze several paragraphs. The arrival of Columbus and crew is especially revealing—and obnoxious. The reader watches the events from the Spaniards’ point of view. We are told how Columbus and his men “fell upon their knees and gave thanks to God,” a passage included in virtually all elementary school accounts of Columbus. “He then took possession of it [the island] in the name of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain.” The narrative does not question Columbus’ right to assume control over a land that was already occupied. The account is so respectful of the Admiral that students can’t help but sense it approves of what is, quite simply, an act of naked imperialism.

The book keeps us close to God and the Church throughout its narrative. Upon returning from the “New World”—new to whom?—Columbus shows off his parrots and “Indians.” Immediately following the show, “the king and queen lead the way to a near-by church. There a song of praise and thanksgiving is sung.” Intended

or not, linking church and Columbus removes him still further from criticism.

Students’ Conclusions

I give students a week before I ask them to bring in their written critiques. Students share their papers with one another in small groups. They note themes that recur in the papers and any differences that emerge. Here are excerpts from some students’ papers in an 11th-grade literature and U.S. history class that Linda Christensen and I co-taught at Jefferson High School in Portland, Ore.

Matthew wrote: “As people read their evaluations the same situations in these textbooks came out. Things were conveniently left out so that you sided with Columbus’ quest to ‘boldly go where no man has gone before.’ ... None of the harsh violent reality is confronted in these so-called true accounts.”

Gina tried to explain why the books were so consistently rosy:

It seemed to me as if the publishers had just printed up some “glory story” that was supposed to make us feel more patriotic about our country. In our group, we talked about the possibility of the government trying to protect young students from such violence. We soon decided that that was probably one of the farthest things from their minds. They want us to look at our country as great, and powerful, and forever right. They want us to believe Columbus was a real hero. We’re being fed lies. We don’t question the facts, we just absorb information that is handed to us because we trust the role models that are handing it out.

Rebecca’s reflected the general tone of disillusion with the textbooks: “Of course, the writers of the books probably think it’s harmless enough—what does it matter who discovered America, really; and besides, it makes them feel good about America. But the thought that I have been lied to all my life about this, and who knows what else, really makes me angry.”

Why Do We Do This?

The students' written reflections became the basis for a class discussion. Repeatedly, students blasted their textbooks for giving readers inadequate, and ultimately untruthful, understandings. While we didn't press to arrive at definitive explanations for the omissions and distortions, we tried to underscore the contemporary abuses of historical ignorance. If the books wax romantic about Columbus planting the flag on island beaches and taking possession of land occupied by naked red-skinned Indians, what do young readers learn from this about today's world? That might—or wealth—makes right? That it's justified to take people's land if you are more "civilized" or have a "better" religion? That white people have the right to rule over people of color?

Whatever the answers, the textbooks condition students to accept inequality; nowhere do they suggest that the Taínos were sovereign peoples with a right to control their own lands. And, if Columbus' motives are mystified or ignored, then students are less apt to question U.S. involvements in, say, Central America or the Middle East. As Bobby, approaching his registration day for the military draft, pointed out in class: "If people thought they were going off to war to fight for profits, maybe they wouldn't fight as well, or maybe they wouldn't go."

It's important to note that some students are troubled by these myth-popping discussions. One student wrote that she was "left not knowing who to believe." Josh was the most articulate in his skepticism. He had begun to "read" our class from the same critical distance from which we hoped students would approach textbooks:

I still wonder ... If we can't believe what our first grade teachers told us, why should we believe you? If they lied to us, why wouldn't you? If one book is wrong, why isn't another? What is your purpose in telling us about how awful Chris was? What interest do you have in telling us the truth? What is it you want from us?

These were wonderful questions. Linda and I responded by reading them (anonymously) to

the entire class. We asked students to take a few minutes to write additional questions and comments on the Columbus activities or to imagine our response as teachers—what was the point of our lessons?

We hoped students would see that the intent was to present a new way of reading, and ultimately, of experiencing the world. Textbooks fill students with information masquerading as final truth and then ask students to parrot back the information in end-of-the-chapter "checkups." We wanted to tell students that they shouldn't necessarily trust the "authorities," but instead need to participate in their learning, probing for unstated assumptions and unasked questions.

Josh asked what our "interest" was in this approach. It's a vital question. Linda and I see teaching as political action: we want to equip students to build a truly democratic society. As Brazilian educator Paulo Freire once wrote, to be an actor for social change one must "read the word and the world."

We hope that if a student maintains a critical distance from the written word, then it's possible to maintain that same distance from one's society: to stand back, look hard, and ask, "Why is it like this? Who benefits and who suffers?"

And finally: "How can I make it better?" ■

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