

BOSTON NOTES

ANTHRO·NOTES, Winter 1981 inaugurated a new regular feature, BOSTON NOTES to be compiled by three Bostonians: John Herzog from Northeastern University, Mary Anne Wolfe from North Reading High School, and Beatrice Kleppner from the Beaver Country Day School. BOSTON NOTES will offer precollegiate anthropology news from the Northeast of general interest to teachers and anthropologists throughout the country.

We have developed BOSTON NOTES to serve the needs of these teachers, and to promote the exchange of ideas between Washington and Boston. We hope that Boston teachers will contribute articles to ANTHRO·NOTES as well as send us names of teachers who would also like to receive ANTHRO·NOTES free of charge. Send both articles and names to Ann Kaupp, Department of Anthropology, Stop 112, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 20560.

CONTRASTING REPORTS: A "WRITING - - ANTHROPOLOGY MODEL"

By presenting contrasting accounts of life in another culture, a teacher can increase student interest in that culture. The contrasts also help students to develop critical thinking skills as they try to construct a more subtle and complete picture of the society than one account alone would provide.

I have found that this approach works well for the study of any society. But I first began to develop it in depth when I was faced with a mass of contrasting, and sometimes contradictory, information about the situation of the Yanomamo Indians in southern Venezuela and northern Brazil.

The following unit plan¹ focuses on the Yanomamo, whose situation is important and controversial. They are frequently cited as being among the world's fiercest people, while at the same time their way of life is being threatened and some Yanomamo themselves are reported to be in danger. The picture students have of the Yanomamo may influence their thoughts about the nature of human aggression as well as any position they might take toward the problems currently faced by the Yanomamo and other indigenous groups in Latin America.

¹ My unit is based on a "Writing -- History" model designed by Henry A. Giroux, "Teaching Contents and Thinking Through Writing," SOCIAL EDUCATION, March 1979, pp. 190-194.

On the opening day of the unit, students are given a "set of information" about the Yanomamo upon which all authors agree. This includes their location, village sizes, type of horticulture, kinship system, and the statement that much fighting and raiding has been reported in some areas.

For homework the class is divided into thirds, each group being assigned an excerpt from a different source to read and report on. The three sources are YANOMAMO: THE FIERCE PEOPLE by Napoleon Chagnon (or a shorter article by Chagnon), THE YANOMAMO INDIANS by William J. Smole, and THE GEOLOGICAL IMPERATIVE published by the Anthropology Resource Center (A.R.C.).

The students' reports usually create some surprise because the pictures of the Yanomamo which emerge are quite different in their emphasis. The students reading Chagnon typically report that the Yanomamo are very "fierce", frequently raid each others' villages to capture women, practice female infanticide, and lose 24% of their adult men in warfare. The students also report that aggressive headmen from large lineages dominate village politics.

Students reading Smole report that some Yanomamo try to appear "fearless", but that this characteristic varies greatly with location. Students report that "gentle" and "tender" also aptly describe the people; that the social structure is egalitarian; that leadership is variable and most often in the hands of vigorous, mature males; that some matriarchs have great influence; and that young women speak up loudly with their views.

Students reporting on the A.R.C. article tell about the disruptive effects of modern trade goods, highway construction and missionary acti-

vity on traditional Yanomamo culture. They note that 54% of all adult deaths among the Yanomamo are due to epidemic disease.

The three lists of information are put on the board and examined for areas of agreement and conflict. Students usually question why the people sound so different in the three reports. At this point, I introduce the concept, "frame of reference": a person's most basic interests, beliefs and values shape the questions asked, data collected, and conclusions drawn. We discuss how Smole, a geographer; Chagnon, an anthropologist; and people at A.R.C., a center for "public interest" anthropology might differ in their frames of reference. Students read forewords, introductions, and concluding chapters for clues.

At this point, students are asked to write their own "organizing idea" about the situation of the Yanomamo. They will test their generalization by reading more material from a number of authors (see Bibliography) and by viewing several ethnographic films about the Yanomamo. The films include "The Axe Fight", which is usually deemed less violent than the local hockey games; "Morning Flowers", a "slice of life" at dawn in a Yanomamo village; and "A Father Washes His Children", a study of a shaman with his children and grandchildren. These and many other ethnographic films are available from Documentary Educational Resources, 5 Bridge St., Watertown, Ma. 02172. A film about the effects of the highway construction on the Yanomamo may be available from A.R.C. in the future.

During several days of additional "data collecting", students are directed to seek out the frames of reference of authors and filmmakers whose work they use. In each case we discuss how the subject chosen, hypotheses, data collected, and frame reference may be influencing each other.

After discussing the films and readings, students work in pairs or individually to write up their own reports on

the Yanomamo, centering the reports on the issues of "fierceness", threats to the Yanomamo, or another aspect of Yanomamo life which has struck them as important. In larger groups or as a class, the students then check the consistency between their evidence and their conclusions. Finally, they help each other to recognize aspects of their own frames of reference and

how these have influenced their reports.

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*For more information on other contrasting accounts units developed by other teachers, please contact Mary Anne Wolfe, c/o North Reading High School, North Reading, Ma.

YANOMAMO BIBLIOGRAPHY

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