Pocahontas Lesson Plan (Shorter Version)

Central Historical Question:
Did Pocahontas save John Smith’s life?

Materials:
- Walt Disney’s *Pocahontas* movie (segment where Pocahontas saves John Smith)**
- Copies of Pocahontas Timeline
- Copies Pocahontas Documents A and B
- Copies of Pocahontas Graphic Organizer

**Note:** Teacher must supply this resource.

Plan of Instruction:

1. *Today we are going to talk about a topic in history that you’ve probably all heard about. What do you know about Pocahontas?*
   a. Write student answers on the board.
   b. Ask students: *How do you know what you know about Pocahontas?* (Some students will almost certainly say the Disney movie).

2. Play movie clip.
   a. Ask students: *So, do you believe the movie? Is this what actually happened between Pocahontas and John Smith? Did Pocahontas save John Smith’s life?*
   b. *Why might we trust the movie’s account? Why might we not trust it? Where might we look to further investigate this question?* (Here, students might question the movie because it was produced long after the events it depicts. Some students may note that the movie might offer a simplified or exaggerated version of the Pocahontas story. Others may suggest that the movie is trustworthy because its writers could have conducted historical research when developing the script.)

3. Hand out Timeline.
   a. Explain that before we begin our investigation we are going to review some of the basic historical events surrounding the encounter between Pocahontas and John Smith.
   b. Introduce or review the concept of chronological order. Point out that this historical timeline lists events in the order in which they occurred from the left to right, from older to more recent events.
   c. Use the timeline to review important background information (English arrive in Jamestown in 1607, John Smith is taken by prisoner by Powhatan tribe, etc.).

a. Explain to students that they are going to further investigate whether or not Pocahontas saved John Smith’s life by examining excerpts from two books that Smith wrote. Note that these are primary sources. They were written during the time period that these events occurred by someone who participated in the events.

b. Point out that the first thing historians do when reading historical documents is to source them. (You might refer to the Stanford History Education Group’s sourcing poster here: sheg.stanford.edu/sourcing-poster). Before reading the document, check who wrote it, when they wrote it, and where they wrote it. You also want to consider the type of document (a speech, diary, book, etc.) and why someone wrote it. Sourcing a document helps prepare us to read it and understand how we can use the document to answer the historical question we are investigating.

c. Have students answer the sourcing questions in the first column of the Graphic Organizer. Share out responses.

d. In pairs, students read the document and answer the close reading question. Share out responses and make sure that everyone understands that this account does not mention Pocahontas saving John Smith’s life.

e. Explain that another thing historians do when reading historical documents is to think about the context in which the document was created. (You might refer to the Stanford History Education Group’s contextualization poster here: sheg.stanford.edu/contextualization-poster). Part of this skill involves thinking about the historical events that happened before a document was created and how these events might have influenced the content of the document.

f. Model for students how you place the document in context by answering the contextualization question.

i. Sample modeling script: Historians always think about the historical context of documents. This involves considering events that occurred around the time a document was created and how those events might have influenced the writing of a document. Contextualization is important because it can help us better understand the meaning of historical documents. Sometimes it can help us better understand why people wrote documents.

So, let’s look at the contextualization question here (read question). In order to answer this question, first I need to check the date of the document. I see Smith wrote this book in 1608.
Ok, now I am going to look at the timeline (draw students’ attention to the timeline). I see here that it shows Smith wrote the book soon after Chief Powhatan released him (write this information in the Graphic Organizer). This is important because I can assume that the events were still fresh in his memory. I also see that he wrote the book just a year after Jamestown was founded. I wonder, then, if part of the reason he wrote the book was to try and convince people to come to Jamestown and help build the new colony (write this information in the Graphic Organizer). If that is true, he might have left out negative information about what happened to him because he did not want to discourage others from coming to Jamestown. Moreover, describing violent interactions might have scared away potential investors.

g. Ask students: After sourcing, reading, and placing this document into context, do you think it is believable? Do you think that Pocahontas saved John Smith’s life?

   a. Explain to students that they are now going to read a second document from Smith in order to continue investigating the question of whether or not Pocahontas saved John Smith’s life.

   b. In pairs, students answer the sourcing questions for Document B in the second column of the Graphic Organizer.

   c. In pairs, students read the document and answer the close reading and contextualization questions.

   d. Share out responses. Make sure to establish that in this account Smith claims Pocahontas saved his life. Students should also note that Smith published this account in 1624, after Pocahontas had moved to England, become famous, and died. Students may hypothesize that Smith added on to his earlier story in order to capitalize on Pocahontas’s fame in Europe. They may also hypothesize that he hoped to sell more copies of his book. They could argue that Smith was willing to exaggerate because Pocahontas was no longer alive to contradict his account. Students may also hypothesize that by the time of his second account, Smith might have been more willing to describe the true nature of the interaction with Powhatan because he no longer had to worry about its possible impact on Jamestown.

6. Discussion: Lead students through considering similarities and differences of the two documents and the trustworthiness of each.
   - How are these documents similar? How are they different?
• Why would John Smith write two such different accounts?

• Do you think that Pocahontas saved John Smith’s life? Why or why not?

• Which document do you think is most believable?

• What other documents would you want to examine to better answer this question?
  
  o Students should note that accounts from Pocahontas and Powhatan would be particularly helpful. They should also consider that such accounts may not exist or may have been destroyed.

7. Individually, students write a response to the final question: Which document do you think is most believable? Why? In answering this question, make sure students include evidence from each document.

8. Lesson extension: This lesson underscores the importance of considering the date of the two John Smith documents. After students have completed this lesson, a possible follow-up activity in a subsequent class period would be to ask students to complete the First Thanksgiving assessment (https://beyondthebubble.stanford.edu/assessments/first-thanksgiving).

This assessment asks students to identify the three-century gap in time between a painting and the event it depicts. You could include this task as part of a test or quiz to see if students are paying attention to the dates of documents. Alternatively, this could be a formative assessment. You could give it as an exit ticket at the end of class and look through student responses to see whether they are paying attention to the painting’s date. If students do not attend to the date, you could then begin the next class period with a mini-lesson about sourcing.

Sources

Document A
John Smith, A True Relation of such occurrences and accidents of note as hath happened in Virginia Since the First Planting of that Colony, 1608. https://lccn.loc.gov/rc01002803 and https://archive.org/details/truerelationofvi01smit

Document B
Document A: True Relation (Modified)

Arriving in Werowocomoco, the emperor welcomed me with good words and great platters of food. He promised me his friendship and my freedom within four days. . . . He asked me why we came and why we went further with our boat. . . . He promised to give me what I wanted and to feed us if we made him hatchets and copper. I promised to do this. And so, with all this kindness, he sent me home.

Source: Excerpt from John Smith’s book A True Relation of Such Occurrences and Accidents of Note as hath Happened in Virginia Since the First Planting of that Colony, published in 1608.

Vocabulary

hatchet: a small ax
Document B: *General History* (Modified)

They brought me to Meronocomoco, where I saw Powhatan, their Emperor. Two great stones were brought before Powhatan. Then I was dragged by many hands, and they laid my head on the stones, ready to beat out my brains. Pocahontas, the King’s dearest daughter took my head in her arms and laid down her own upon it to save me from death. Then the Emperor said I should live.

Two days later, Powhatan met me and said we were friends. He told me to bring him two guns and a **grindstone** and he would consider me his son.

**Source:** Excerpt from Smith’s later version of the story in *General History of Virginia, New England and the Summer Isles*, published in 1624.

**Vocabulary**

**grindstone**: a round stone wheel used for sharpening
## Pocahontas Graphic Organizer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source:</th>
<th>Document A: True Relation</th>
<th>Document B: General History</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who wrote this document?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When was it written?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What type of document is this?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Close Reading:</th>
<th>Document A: True Relation</th>
<th>Document B: General History</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>According to this document, did Pocahontas save John Smith’s life?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contextualization:</th>
<th>Document A: True Relation</th>
<th>Document B: General History</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What events occurred before Smith wrote this document?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How might those events have influenced Smith’s story?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Which document, *A True Relation* or *A General History*, do you think provides a more believable version of whether or not Pocahontas saved John Smith’s life? Why? Make sure to use evidence from each document in your answer,