

# Teaching Exploration and Discovery

*Adventure, mutiny, treachery and starvation are the staple diet of Exploration and Discovery. Here Vera McCarthy integrates her approach to bringing this topic to life with the realities of preparing students for exams*



## Introduction

With swashbuckling tales of adventure, mutiny, treachery and starvation, Exploration And Discovery is a topic already well known by students who are more than eager to hear how Columbus sailed across the Green Sea of Darkness and managed to avoid falling off the edge of the world. It's a source of great delight to students that one of the best navigators in history lost his way by half the globe. The fascinating thing about this theme is that the Columbus story is only one of several which are exciting and easy to teach.

## Time and Resources

Generally it takes 12 lessons to cover this topic i.e. all of September. It is not necessary for students to learn vast amounts of details. Knowing the exact poundage of biscuits, ale and meat that Columbus and co. brought on their trips will not gain a student extra marks. In the Junior Certificate exam, the "People in History" question carry the most marks (20 marks) that can be awarded for any one specific topic. To earn full marks, under the current marking system, it is only necessary to write eight relevant facts/statements. However, Exploration and Discovery can also be asked in Question 5 of the exam. This question tends to be structured around examining students' knowledge of 'cause, course and consequence'; hence it is necessary for students to have a good understanding of this.

The best source I have found for Exploration and Discovery is Samuel Eliot Morison's *The European Discovery of America. (2 vols.) - The Northern Voyages and The Southern Voyages.* As well as giving good factual details, it is an entertaining read and is full of glorious anecdotes that will enliven any lesson.

## Lesson 1: Background. The world in 1400; Fear of Travel; Those who did Travel and the Difficulties They Faced

The first lesson begins with a quick overview of what will be learned in the coming month. This overview should be concise but with short anecdotes to whet students' appetite. The more disgusting the details, the better the anecdote and the more eager will be the students' desire to learn about the topic.

In this overview I begin with a reference to the duration of this period – 1400-1750, the beginning of the period overlapped with the Renaissance. Indeed, it could be considered to be part of the Renaissance. I mention the fear people had of travel and I refer to the improvements made in navigation and the reasons why people explored and the countries most involved in the race for new territories. In the overview I no more than mention

Diaz and De Gama but I give a quick resume on Columbus. I also spend a little time on Magellan. Anecdotes about scurvy, mutiny, rampaging, thieving natives and a diet of biscuits riddled with worms supplemented by sucking the salt-toughened leather on the mast ropes, is marvellous to seize the students' attention. A very brief mention is made of the Incas and the Aztecs, the latter who, incidentally, had a habit of sacrificing humans by ripping their hearts out while still alive.

The overview completed, I move onto the first topic, why people were afraid to travel in 1400. Students need to know 5 points about this. I show them the Mappa Mundi with its passing acquaintance with the Earth's geography and the map's illustrations of monsters of the deep. This is usually greeted with gales of laughter from today's well-travelled students. When one faces the unknown the imagination can conjure up horrors that would convince any half-sane sailor to keep his ship glued to the coast. Students are encouraged to identify the missing countries in the Mappa Mundi. Another useful resource is the 1994 exam paper. Question 5 shows strange beings, with their faces in the middle of their torso. The land of the Jabberwocky's was not as strange as the lands imagined by the Europeans in 1400.

Having established why most people did not want to venture

## Lesson Plan

Lesson 1: Background. The world in 1400; Fear of Travel; Those who did Travel and the Difficulties They Faced

Lesson 2: Why people began to explore and the Improvements in Navigation

Lesson 3: Life on board the ship. The Portuguese Voyages

Lesson 4: The voyages of Columbus to The New World: causes and course

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beyond their own locality, I finish the lesson with a look at those who did brave the terrors of travel, i.e. merchants to buy silks and spices, pilgrims and crusaders.

We also examine the difficulties they faced. A large map of Europe and West Asia is invaluable and students can easily identify the problems of travelling from Western Europe to Arabia via the Ottoman Empire, with only boats, horses and camels for transport. Reference can be made to Columbus, who wanted to set up a factory or trading post on some island off the Asiatic coast, where European goods could be exchanged for the wares of the Orient much more cheaply than by trans-Asia caravans with their endless wars, taxes, middlemen and successive mark-ups.

## **Lesson 2: Why people began to explore and the Improvements in Navigation**

Today, when airline travel has figuratively reduced the size of the world, it is almost impossible to conceive the magnitude of these voyages. The equivalent today would only be the terror of space travel. Only the most adventurous - or the simply reckless - could hope to survive these journeys. And only a handful did. So, it is vital for students to try to understand what drove these explorers. The impulses of the early navigators were not all that different to what would drive us today in seeking out new places. With very little prompting, the class usually manage to figure out these impulses. 5 points is all that is needed here. Students should be able to recall from the last lesson the difficulties of crossing the Ottoman Empire and the need for alternative routes to the Orient.

The glibest answer, and therefore the most easily remembered, is “God, Gold and Glory”.

Bernal Diaz del Castillo said of the Conquest of Mexico, “We came here to serve God, and also to get rich”.

Columbus wrote of the natives of America, “How easy it would be to convert these people – and to make them work for us”.

Students need to know also that gold was not the only commodity that the adventurers sought. Quick reference to a map of the West Coast of Africa showing the Ivory, Slave and Gold Coasts fulfils this.

One can also prompt students of the need to acquire spices by reminding them of medieval feasts consisting of meats liberally smothered in spices from India and the Spice Islands to preserve the foods and disguise the rotted taste.

One cannot emphasise enough the explorers’ desire for adventure. Columbus could have settled for a castle in Spain and a pension after any one of his first three voyages; but he always had to make one more. Drake sailed around the world, brought home (some say) a million pounds in booty, bought a country estate, and set up as an English squire, but at the first call, off again to sea he went, and died there.

I then look at Prince Henry the Navigator’s school at Sagres, which was more of a facility providing an information service where shipmasters might consult the latest charts and pick up useful data about wind and currents. Students need to be able to define and explain at least 6 of the improvements in navigation viz. caravels (clinker built and lateen sails), compasses, astrolabes/quadrants/sextants, maps, knots, swinging the lead and the log. Students must be able to define each of these terms in 2 lines or less in order to be prepared for Question 3 (the short answer question) in the exam. Since our school is located near Crosshaven with its famous Yacht Club, at least half the class is

aware of the significance of lateen sails and tacking against the wind, and are only too eager to explain it to the rest of the class. I end the lesson with some excerpts from the film *1492, Conquest of Paradise*, which provides marvellous illumination on how aids to navigation were used. In one scene Columbus stands on the deck of the Santa Maria with a Pinzon brother and demonstrates the technique of plotting latitude with an astrolabe. There is a later scene that shows the sailors counting knots, swinging the lead and Columbus writing in his log. Another way to aid students’ memory as to what a log is is to remind them of Star Trek. Every student has seen it and every student remembers the first line in every programme – “Captain’s log: Star Date ....”

## **Lesson 3: Life on board the ship. The Portuguese Voyages**

The only props needed for the first part of this lesson are a glass of stagnant pond water (or puddle water that has been left to stew for a week or so), a piece of an old leather boot and a rock hard biscuit, preferably covered with mould. Maggots are an optional extra. One generally gets a good reaction by telling the students “grubs up!” and offering one a glass of typhoid inducing water. A few minutes may then be spent discussing the firebox, sleeping sailors tied to the deck, pirates, scurvy and the risk of being capsized.

One may also show another scene from *1492, Conquest of Paradise*, where Columbus and co. are whiling their days away on board ship, waiting to find land. One can hear the horrendous moaning and creaking of the wooden ships and it is not difficult to imagine how fragile they were relative to today’s steel tankers. The class is asked to imagine what it would have been like to face into a storm in such a boat. This can be immediately followed by 5 minutes of the storm scene from *A Perfect Storm* – a nauseating, churning horror.

Once the students are convinced of the lunacy of the explorers, I introduce them to the Portuguese heroes – Diaz and De Gama. Students must know why each explorer sailed (which they should be able to recall from previous lessons, and so are only reinforced here), where they went and what were the consequences of their voyage. They must also recognise the route they took. This can be shown on an overhead using the map from Question 5 in the 1998 exam paper. Students only need to study one exploration in any great depth and since I concentrate on Columbus, I only spend about 10 minutes on the explorations, although, time permitting, I do go into a little more detail about Diaz as students love the tale of his accidental discovery of the Cape of Good Hope while desperately trying to get home.

## **Lesson 4: The voyages of Columbus to The New World: causes and course**

The emphasis in this topic is on the voyages to the New World, and not on a biography of Columbus. Students can rave on about his bright red hair, his trip to Galway and swimming prowess when his boat capsized, but the most amount of marks they can get for this background material is 2 marks. However, I always show the class pictures of the relevant person and I give them these trivial details, while warning them not to write them in an exam, as it helps to show that these men were not abstract beings but actually lived. This, I believe to be the real part of our job as history teachers: to infuse people from previous centuries with life and character, and to make their feats and

conquests real to our students.

There are wonderful colour pictures of all the navigators in Dermot Lucey's book *The Past Today*.

The causes of the voyage are the first topic to be dealt with. Students should already know some of the causes from previous lessons. Other causes, i.e. to prove that the world was round (although by 1492 most sailors had accepted this as a fact) and most importantly, to show that one could sail west to reach the Spice Islands in the East, can be introduced

here. The students then write down all of these causes in their notebook. This is marvellous reinforcement of the material.

"1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue" is a chant that every student, even the very weakest can remember but I have changed it slightly to "In 1492 Columbus sailed the Atlantic blue". Very weak students are often not aware of the name of the ocean between Europe and America and since the Columbus question is one where these students can score high marks, it is important to make everything as clear-cut as possible. I leave nothing to chance.

The course of the voyage from his failure to gain sponsorship from Italy, Portugal and England, his success with Isabella and Ferdinand of Spain, his acquisition of three leaking, clapped out old ships, his subterfuge regarding the log books, the threatened mutiny and his eventual landing at San Salvador, his meeting with the "noble savages", his futile searches for spices, the discovery of tobacco, maize and jams, his enslavement of the natives in return for saving their souls, the triumphant return to Spain, the establishment of colonies, the extermination of almost the entire native population of Hispaniola within half a century from forced labour and disease, Columbus' humiliation, imprisonment and death, is all told as a story. I use no gimmicks, no charts, posters, slides or overhead projectors. Even to their contemporaries these voyages had a mythic quality, the story alone is enough to capture the students' imagination and attention.

### **Lesson 5: The course of Columbus' voyage to America**

Having told the story of Columbus' voyages in the previous lesson, it is now the students' turn to recall the story and write down the course of the voyage in note form in their notebooks. Rather than letting the students loose to write the notes on their own, I tend to prompt them by asking questions. For example: Who sponsored the voyage? What country were they from? What were the names of the ships? What instruments were used on board? etc. etc. etc. All students will write up their notes in class based on these answers. At this stage students will have reviewed the Columbus story three times and so should be very familiar with it.

For homework, I ask the students to illustrate their notes either



*An imaginative drawing of Columbus's departure*

by drawing pictures or by cutting out pictures from books. This is particularly useful for especially weak students who, frustrated by a lot of reading and writing, find it diverting to learn by drawing pictures and cartoons. Even more able students enjoy illustrating their note copies and are encouraged by the idea that they are creating their own text-book.

### **Lesson 6: The consequences of Columbus' voyages: Quiz**

Students need to know the effects of Columbus' voyages on both Europe and the New World. Caveat: Students will automatically say that lots of sailors died on these trips. Actually, not one sailor died on the voyages, and this should be emphasised. It must also be emphasised that Columbus did not prove that the earth was round.

The students should write the results into their notebooks.

This lesson is finished with a quiz; with one half of the class pitted against the other half. Students adore this: it is competitive but fun and if the teacher chooses the questions carefully it can produce a close and exciting finish to the lesson. It is also a marvellous way of practising the short answer type questions, i.e. Question 3 in the Junior Certificate exam.

For homework I require the class to write two People in History questions. One: a named explorer. Two: a native of a land taken over by a European power during the Age of Exploration and Discovery.

### **Lesson 7: The Treaty of Tordesillas. The voyage of Magellan**

The Treaty of Tordesillas can be easily explained. Any student with even a passing interest in the World Cup should know that Portuguese is spoken in Brazil and Brazil is on the East coast of South America, therefore newly discovered countries to the east of the line of Tordesillas were given to Portugal. Anything to the west was given to Spain.

According to the syllabus and the guidelines, students are required to study only one exploration in depth, therefore, they really only need an overview of Magellan. Of course, there is no reason why one could not emphasise Magellan's voyage, which was probably the greatest and most wonderful voyage in history, and merely give an overview of the Columbus' voyages.

In order to teach Magellan, I use the textbook. *The Past Today* has marvellous illustrations, and the account of Magellan's voyage is short and to the point. The amount of detail which one teaches is entirely dependent on one's students.

### **Lesson 8 and 9: The Conquistadors**

For students, the most difficult part about the Conquistadors is

remembering who conquered what and where. I tell my students to remember CAM – Cortes, Aztec, Mexico and PIP – Pizarro, Inca, Peru.

I then let them teach this topic to each other. The class is divided into groups; each group must research both Incas and Aztecs. I submit a list of questions, the answers to which must be included in their project. They are expected to do this research at home and may write it up during class time. Time permitting, each group will give a 2-minute presentation to the class. All projects are displayed in the History Room and the group deemed to have produced the best project receives a gift voucher for Waterstones. (Such vouchers are also redeemable in HMV and so are favourites with students).

### **Lesson 10: Dutch and English Explorers. Results of the Age of Exploration**

The trend in the Junior Certificate exam in recent years has been to ask more narrowly defined questions, especially with regard to International Relations viz. “early German Victories in World War Two” (i.e. before the invasion of France). It would not be surprising if this were applied to other areas of the course as well. Consequently, I spend about half a lesson teaching the Dutch (Tasman) and English (Drake) explorers.

With regard to the results of the Age of Exploration, students must know about 6 or 7 points from both the impact on Europe and on the conquered peoples. Students should be familiar with these results from previous lessons, nevertheless, it is important for them to write them into their notebooks for clarification, emphasis and reinforcement.

### **Lesson 11 and 12: Exam Questions and Test**

I ask my students to buy exam papers in 2nd Year and I spend at least one lesson going through exam questions. In the final lesson of the series, students are given a test during a full class period.

*Vera McCarthy teaches History in Carrigaline Community School, Co Cork.*