Religion and Dance in India

This lesson plan was created by Sarah Brown with support from Pamela Lothspeich, an Asian Studies professor at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and Padma Rao, a Hindu community member.

Grade Level/Duration:

- Middle School Social Studies and Dance
- Duration: 1-2 days

Lesson Objectives:

- Understand the role of dance in Indian culture and history by reading about Bharatanatyam and Bhangra
- Discuss how religion impacted Indian society in the past with a specific focus on Bharatanatyam
- Analyze the impact of Bhangra on North Carolina
- Optional: Create a Bhangra dance

Standards:

Dance:


Social Studies:


Standards:

Dance:


Optional: 6.CP.1,1, 7.CP.1.2, 8.CP.1.2, 6.DM.1.3, 7.DM.1.3, 8.DM.1.3

Social Studies:

Mini-Lesson:

Introduce today's topic by asking how dance portrays American culture. Dance can depict a society's values. Give the example of hip-hop dancing and hip-hop culture. Hip-hop culture originated in New York among Hispanic and African-American communities during the late 1960s. The style showed the cultures' moves from the streets and clubs.

In many communities, religion becomes intertwined with a society's values. Cultural expression, such as dance, can reveal a religion's impact on the society. Society can revive past religious art forms. In addition, religious art forms can shed positive light on a culture. Can you think of a cultural expression of America that went out of style, but has become popular again?

Activities:

*Bharatanatyam* is a classical dance in India. Dancers show their devotion to the Hindu gods and goddesses through their movements. Teach the basic tenets of Hinduism. Information down below. Assess how much students know about Hinduism, Indian culture, and *Bharatanatyam* through questioning. Explain *Bharatanatyam* has been around as far back as the 17th century, but has been revived in the modern period. Pass out the handout and have students read quietly to themselves. Have them actively circle words they do not know. After, have students define words among themselves and then with the class. Lead a discussion on the handout. Suggested topics include how does *Bharatanatyam* reveal the values of the Indian society (give specific examples), how does Hinduism shape Indian society and how is *Bharatanatyam* similar or different to dance here today.

We caution you to not try to teach the controversy of devadasis. It is very complex and it is easy to be too quick to judge a culture without understanding the whole picture. I am attaching a handout on the history of *Bharatanatyam* and controversy of devadasis for teachers' personal knowledge. It is important to know this information to understand why *Bharatanatyam* has gone through a revival. Please do not hesitate to contact sarbrown@email.unc.edu if you have questions.

Next, watch the video of the beginning dance of *Bharatanatyam*. This dance performs salutations. Ask the students to try and pick out where she bows to the deity. Point out to the students how she beats her feet to the *tala* with the bells. Ask them to notice how her face changes like an actress. At the end, ask them how she showed her devotion to the Hindu gods and goddesses. Ask them what emotion they felt she was trying to convey.

Introduce the region of Punjab in India. Point to it on a map. The dance *Bhangra* originated in Punjab. It is a harvest dance. After the dance was created, there was an influx of Sikhs who moved to Punjab. One can teach the basic tenets of Sikhism. Information down below. However, emphasize that *Bhangra* is not a Sikh-specific dance. Explain how *Bhangra* has evolved with western culture in North Carolina. To illustrate this, give the example of how dance music has changed from the hip-hop 90's to techno now. Some Sikhs in North Carolina feel *Bhangra* has been a way to diminish racial prejudice against the Indian community. Pass out the article on *Bhangra* from the News & Observers shown on the Interlochen Public Radio website. Have
students read quietly to themselves. After reading the article, lead a discussion on the handout. Suggested topics are how Bharatanatyam differ from Bhangra, what does the popularity of Bhangra in North Carolina do for Indian culture, how has the Indian culture impacted North Carolina and American society and what are other cultural expressions that helped shift attitudes about a certain society in North Carolina. Emphasize how this is a fusion between two cultures that add to North Carolina.

Next watch a video of a bhangra dance from Bhangra Elite from UNC-Chapel Hill. Discuss what they watched. What were their reactions? How did Bhangra incorporate western culture into Indian culture?

Extension

Depending on time and space, you can have them follow along to the intro video of Bhangra given below. LearnBhangraApp is a great YouTube series that shows different steps. You can use the first video of dhamaal only or use two or three of these videos. They are about 5 minutes each.

If you have time, you can have students create their own dance. Ask students to use their own music or Bhangra pop music online. They can put bhangra moves to them for a 30 second dance. Make sure that music is school-friendly. They can research what moves they want to do. The LearnBhangraApp YouTube series would be a great choice!

Assessment

Have students look at Kathak, a north Indian dance. Show students two web sites provided below. Ask them to write a short paragraph comparing and contrasting Kathak to Bharatanatyam. How do Kathak performances show Indian society in their dances? Compare and contrast Kathak's and Bharatanatyam's ties to religion.

Have students find a Bhangra youtube video. Ask them to write a short "article" pretending to be a reporter. Have them write about Indian culture's impact on North Carolina. Ask them to write about Bhangra's impact on prejudice in North Carolina.

Resources

Bharatanatyam Handout

https://carolinaasiacenter.unc.edu/files/2016/07/Bharatanatyam-Handout-modified.docx

News Article on Bhangra in North Carolina

http://www.publicbroadcasting.net/wiaa/.artsmain/article/1/1083/1247915/Columns/Bhangra.dance.blends.the.ages./

Information on Bhangra: scroll down to find information on the dance itself
Information on Hinduism
http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/

Note: NC schools teach students about the caste system. When you are teaching about Hinduism, please do not focus just on this issue. In the words of one journalist, "any generalizations about it [caste system] need to be regarded with some reservations."

Information on Sikhism
http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/sikhism/

Video on Bharatanatyam
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgiLOzFQh14

Video on Bhangra
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fndMUI20z1c

Kathak Source 1
http://www.kathadance.org/about-2/what-is-kathak/

Kathak Source 2
https://www.kathak.org/index.php/about/what-is-kathak

Bharatanatyam Performed- A Typical Recital: Turn to page 45-47 for history of Bharatanatyam and conflict with devadasis

LearnBhangraApp
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9Gbl6r8ZkE