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Introduction

Mexico in Transition

Mexico is not one of the world's poorest lands. But figures on GDP or average income are deceptive in nations such as Mexico, where a small minority do very well and a huge majority are very poor. Hence, even as Mexico modernizes at a steady pace, it remains a land of stark contrasts. Modern cities and luxury hotels coexist with teeming slums. Industrial complexes arise near peasants farming small plots with primitive tools. A modern parliamentary system evolves as armed rebellion wracks the rural southern hinterland.

From 1929 to the year 2000, a single party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) ruled Mexico. But in the 1990s, calls for change mounted. These pressures finally forced the PRI to make it easier for opposition parties to compete in elections. In 2000, the PRI candidate failed for the first time to win the presidential election. A new era for Mexico had begun. Precisely what this transition time will lead to, however, remains to be seen.

This booklet and set of visual displays focus on several of the key themes in this story. Each lesson uses three visual displays to explore one broad topic. Briefly, the lessons are as follows:

The Social Divide

The gap between rich and poor is great in Mexico. The illustrations for this lesson explore several aspects of this social divide and the problems it poses.

Trade and Modernization

The North American Free Trade Agreement has accelerated already existing trends in Mexico. These trends make Mexico's export industries a key engine of Mexico's economic growth. But will NAFTA and the trade it generates modernize the nation rapidly enough to satisfy the demands of its growing population? Only time will tell.

The Political Opening

For many decades, Mexico was essentially a one-party state. Along with expanding trade and economic growth, it is now opening up and evolving a truly democratic system of government. As with the economy, this is a time of transition for Mexico. The illustrations for this lesson focus on this fact, and on the challenges ahead.

Using Visual Images in the Classroom

Many textbooks today contain colorful visuals, but, all too often, these images function primarily to fill space or offer little educational value. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable, often doing little more than providing simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, school materials pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help the students master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as social or historical documents. The lessons in MindSparks booklets focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, all of which include an emotional power and the ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general and their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

After using the booklet, you may wish to look at some of the many other MindSparks products using editorial cartoons, photographs, posters, and other visual images.

How to Use This Booklet

This booklet is divided into three lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND-INFORMATION SHEET

This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY PAGES FOR EACH VISUAL DISPLAY

Each page includes one image, and a sequence of questions is provided to help you plan an all-classroom discussion while examining the image. The questions take students step-by-step through an analysis of the visual. For students who require more support to answer the questions, you may hand them an entire discussion-activity page, reproducible in order to provide more visual support. For students who need less support to answer questions, keep the page yourself, and ask the questions of the class as a whole in order to provide a listening and response-writing activity. In addition to these questions, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. The instructions for these activities are directed to the student. Some are individual assignments while others work best as small-group or all-class activities. You may reproduce any of these pages for classroom use. Answers to factual questions are also provided on the inside back cover of the booklet.

ILLUSTRATIONS AND OTHER VISUAL ART

Images are printed alongside discussion questions and follow-up activities on reproducible pages, making them readily available to students. Stand-alone versions of all images, also reproducible, can be found in the appendix. Using images without the text may prove useful for testing or to encourage students to formulate their own analyses before consulting the text.

*Mexico***OBJECTIVES**

1. Students will understand that Mexico's economy is growing, yet its people share unequally in that growth.
2. Students will understand the way social and economic problems are linked in Mexico today.

The Social Divide

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS**Illustration 1**

Mexico is a land of stark contrasts. Some of them are captured by this photo. In it, a woman is hanging laundry near Acapulco Bay. Life for her is not easy, as is the case with millions of poor Mexicans. Behind her along the coast are high-rise dwellings of wealthy Mexicans and luxury hotels catering to foreign tourists. Overall, Mexico is not one of the world's poorest lands. By the early 2000s, average annual per-person income was about \$9,000 (as compared, say, with about \$3,500 for Ecuador).* But such averages are deceptive in nations such as Mexico, where a small minority do very well and a huge majority are very poor.

Illustration 2

Historically, Mexico has been beset by poverty, high rates of unemployment, and a wide gap between rich and poor. It has often also experienced times of rapid inflation. In wealthier nations, inflation can be a big problem. But it is usually a minor annoyance compared with the devastating effect it can have on the poor in a nation like Mexico. This cartoon captures a sense of the seriousness of this problem. However, it is important to keep some perspective. Mexico's economy has been growing rapidly in recent years, and inflation has been moderating.

Illustration 3

Another of Mexico's big problems has to do with the drug trade. Huge amounts of cocaine and other illegal drugs are produced in Latin America and smuggled into the United States each year. Many drugs come into the United States across the U.S.-Mexico border. These drugs are harmful in themselves. But they also take a toll on the social, political, and economic life of the nations that produce and sell them, which is the point of this cartoon. The drug trade wastes scarce resources in drug production and in law enforcement efforts to stop the trade. The widespread corruption and violence of the drug trade also impose costs, frighten outside investors and limit economic growth.

* Figures based on 2003 estimates by The Economist magazine of the "purchasing power parity" of national currencies in dollars. This gives a comparison of what each nation's currency and U.S. dollars would buy out of a comparable basket of goods.