

SOUTH AMERICA

LEVEL: MIDDLE GRADES

Source: Gibbs, Virginia G. Latin America: Curriculum Materials for the Middle Grades. Center for Latin America, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. 1985. 1999.

CATEGORY: PERU: INCA EMPIRE

CONCEPTS: GEOGRAPHY, transportation

ACTIVITY: CHASQUI RELAY RACE OF THE INCA EMPIRE.

The Inca Empire consisted of a strip of land running along the Pacific Coast from Quito, Ecuador, to Talca in Chile. Two roads, the coastal road and the mountain road, ran parallel throughout the Empire and were connected by a series of cross-roads. All roads eventually led to the capital, Cuzco.

Communication was made possible throughout the territory by the chasqui, relay running messengers assigned to relay stations called tampus. The tampus were small rest shelters situated 2-2½ miles apart along each road. At each tampus a chasqui was always on watch for other chasquis coming down the road from either direction.

When the chasqui saw a runner approach, he would rush out and meet him and then run along beside him while receiving both an oral message and a quipu or "talking string." He would then become the new runner and would race two miles to the next tampus.

Typical chasqui schedules were Lima to Quito, 3 days; Lima to Cuzco (1,230 miles), 5-7 days; and Cuzco to the far end of Lake Titicaca, 3 days.

The quipus, or talking strings, consisted of many colored cords with knots, attached to a meter-long main cord. Each colored cord had an assigned meaning i.e., red for soldiers, yellow for gold, white for silver, etc. The knots represented a numerical system. A single knot was ten, two knots equalled twenty, etc. Children of noble families studied how to read the quipus and official messages were read by the quipocanyocuna, or keepers of the knots.

OBJECTIVES: This is an entertaining way for students to learn about the Inca communication system and broaden their knowledge of the Inca Empire.

MATERIALS: Yarn of a variety of colors, cut in approximately six inch lengths.

PROCEDURE: Explain the quipu system and locate the limits of the Inca Empire on a map of South America. Play the relay game in the following way:

1. Divide the class into teams of 4-5 runners. Explain that the activity will consist of two tasks: a) designing and making a creative quipu and b) delivering the quipu to the teacher as fast as possible in a relay race.

2. Teams get together to make quipus. They should determine a message and then assign meanings to each color and numbers to each kind of knot. Give them examples such as:
 - "The Inca (ruler) died 5 days ago. There will be official mourning in the Empire for 20 days." (A blue piece of yarn for the Inca; a black for death; a yellow to mean days (suns), knotted with a loop for the number 5; white to indicate period of mourning; yellow again for days with 4 knotted loops ($4 \times 5 = 20$)).
 - "1,000 enemy soldiers camping 40 miles north of Cuzco. Send troops immediately." (Brown for enemy soldiers, knotted with quadruple knot [1 simple knot=1, double=10, triple=100, quadruple=1,000]; green for North, knotted with 4 double knots to indicate distance from capital city; red for imperial troops; yellow knotted once to mean 1 day i.e., immediately).

Each player can make a quipu so that everyone has one to keep, although only one will be used in the race. For younger children you may want to prepare messages and/or quipus yourself, since this can be somewhat complicated. (You would then only score the winning of the relay race itself.)

Everyone on the team should know the message of the quipu. The final product should be one long strand of yarn or twine with smaller pieces of colored yarn tied on in order of the message.

3. Set up and carry out a normal relay race in which the team quipu will pass from one runner to the next. The final runner will race to the teacher (who plays the role of "keeper of the knots").
4. At the end of the race teams should be scored in the following manner:
 - 6 points for relay winner
 - 4 points for second place
 - 2 points for third place
 - 4 points for most creative and well-done message
 - 3 points for second most creative message
 - 2 points for third most creative message

Be sure students are well aware at the beginning of the activity that even if they win the race they might possibly lose the game if their quipu message is poorly done. In case of a tie, have a run-off between a single student of each contending team.

RESOURCES: Alfred Métraux, The History of the Incas, New York: Pantheon, 1969. J. Aiden Mason, The Ancient Civilization of Peru, Baltimore: Penguin, 1969.



