Day 3:

Topic: Cuneiform and the Epic of Gilgamesh

Standard:

* *Early Civilizations: 4. Compare the geographic, economic and social characteristic of the river civilizations in the Tigris and Euphrates (Mesopotamia), Nile (Egypt), Huang Ho and Indus valleys before 1000 B.C.*

Geography Themes:

* Movement, Place, and Region

Lesson Objectives:

1. Students will discuss why cuneiform was an important first step for civilization.

Summary:

* During this lesson, students will explore the first form of written language, cuneiform. Begin by asking students if they have ever heard of hieroglyphics. Most students have and will be willing to explain what hieroglyphics are and might be able to tell you what they look like (pictures) and who used them (Egyptians). Tell students the Mesopotamians also had a form of writing but it was called cuneiform. Show them pictures of cuneiform. Have a picture of hieroglyphics next to the pictures of cuneiform. As a class, brainstorm how the two are different. Students, with help if needed, will see that hieroglyphics are pictures while cuneiform is made of symbols. Mesopotamian culture was the first civilization to have a written language that used symbols rather than pictures. Ask students if we use pictures or symbols for our writing. They will come to the conclusion that we use symbols, which shows them that Mesopotamians helped to begin the usage of symbols for written language. However, their language did not start off this way. Show students the progression of the Mesopotamian language from pictures to symbols. Have students think-pair-share about why they shifted from pictures to symbols. The answer is it was easier and faster when writing. Then challenge students to use picture to write the sentence “The dog ran quickly through the school yard to the hospital.” This will show them it is faster to use words (symbols) rather than drawing pictures. Also, compare two different students’ picture interpretation of the sentence. They should see that the two interpretations look different. By having symbols, you eliminate different pictures for different words, which allows for less misinterpretation. They used this writing to keep track of farm records, such as how much a crop is worth, or how much was sold or traded. It was also used to write down stories and laws.
* As an activity, students will each be given a small chunk of play dough. They will roll the play dough out so it looks like a clay tablet, which is what the Mesopotamians used to write on. I will give them a guide of the different words in cuneiform and they will replicate the symbols to make whatever sentence they want. They will use a toothpick to “crave out” the symbols and then trade their tablets to have others interpret them.
* While craving out their tablets, I will read an except from the Epic of Gilgamesh. Explain to students that the Epic of Gilgamesh is about a Mesopotamian king who goes on different adventures The reason why this epic is important is because it was the first written book. This is the link to a simplified, kid friendly portion of the Epic of Gilgamesh: <http://www.mesopotamia.co.uk/geography/story/sto_set.html>
* Extension: If there is extra time, or if students would like to for extra credit, they may write an alternative ending to the story that was read.