

TEACHER'S CORNER: ERASING NATIVE AMERICAN STEREOTYPES

How can we avoid stereotypes about Native Americans when we are teaching, selecting textbooks, or designing exhibits and public programs?

Cultural institutions reflect current issues of society. Both museums and schools are wrestling with new sensitivities and concerns with cultural diversity. For instance, at a recent Smithsonian symposium on Contemporary American Indian Art, several Native American artists asked why their paintings and sculpture are rarely shown at fine arts museums, but are more likely to be exhibited at anthropology and natural history museums. Native American artists also question why their work is not combined with other American artists' work in shows on American art (Kaupp, 1990).

In directing an alternative school for Native American children in Chicago, June Sark Heinrich found many misnomers and false ideas presented by teachers as they instructed students about the history and the heritage of Native peoples. She devised ten classroom "don'ts" to help teachers correct these common errors. The D'Arcy McNickle Center for the History of the American Indian at the Newberry Library in Chicago recently began designing a sample checklist for evaluating books about American Indian history.

This *Anthro. Notes* Teacher's Corner combines the two approaches. The questions that follow provide teachers and museum educators with ways to evaluate their own teaching and criteria to evaluate the materials they use.

1. Are Native Americans portrayed as real human beings with strengths and weaknesses, joys and sadnesses? Do they appear to have coherent motivations of their own comparable to those attributed to non-Indians?

2. In books, films, comic strips and curriculum materials, do Native Americans

initiate actions based on their own values and judgments, rather than simply react to outside forces such as government pressure or cattle ranchers?

3. Are stereotypes and clichés avoided? References should not be made to "obstacles to progress" or "noble savages" who are "blood thirsty" or "child-like" or "spiritual" or "stoic". Native Americans should not look like Hollywood movie "Indians," whether Tonto from the Lone Ranger days or Walt Disney's recent portrayals. Native Americans are of many physical types and also have European, African or other ancestry. Just as all Europeans or African-Americans do not look alike, neither do Native Americans.

Heinrich urges that television stereotypes should not go unchallenged. For example, "when Native Americans fought, they were

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not more 'savage' than the Europeans and were often less so. Help children understand that atrocities are a part of any war. In fact, war itself is atrocious. At least, the Native Americans were defending land they had lived on for thousands of years. If Native Americans were not 'savage warriors,' neither were they 'noble savages.' They were no more nor less noble than the rest of humanity."

Television, especially old movies, often portrays the "Indian" speaking only a few words of English, often only "ugh." Yet anthropologists have carefully documented the complexity of Native American languages. At least 350 different languages were spoken in North America when William Bradford and the rest of the Puritans first stepped ashore in Massachusetts.

Stereotypes can be defused if teachers check their own expressions and eliminate those such as "You act like a bunch of wild Indians" or "You are an Indian giver." In a similar way, do not use alphabet cards that say A is for apple, B is for ball, and I is for Indians. It may seem trivial, but Heinrich argues that such a practice equates a group of people with things.

4. If the material is fiction, are the characters appropriate to the situations and are interactions rooted in a particular time and place? If they are, a particular group such as the Navajo or Chippewa living at a specific moment in history will be more likely to be brought accurately to life.

5. Do the materials and the teacher's presentation avoid loaded words (savage, buck, chief, squaw) and an insensitive or offensive tone?

6. Are regional, cultural, and tribal differences recognized when appropriate? As everyone knows but does not always put into practice, before the Europeans came there were no people here that called themselves "Indians." Instead, there were and still are Navajo or Menominee or Hopi, or Dakota, or Nisqually, or Tlingit, or Apache. Instead of teaching about generalized Indians or "Native Americans," study the Haida, or Cree, or Seminole.

7. Are communities presented as dynamic, evolving entities that can adapt to new conditions, migrate to new areas, and keep control of their own destinies? Too many classroom materials still present Native American traditions as rigid, fixed, and fragile. For example, some filmstrips and books may have titles like "How the Indians Lived," as though there are not any Indian people living today. In fact, over two million Native Americans live in what is now the United States, about half of them live in cities and towns and the other half on reservations or in rural areas.

8. Are historical anachronisms present? The groups living here prior to the 1540's did not have horses, glass beads, wheat, or wagons. Can your students determine why that is the case and do they understand that these items were all introduced by Europeans?

9. Are captions and illustrations specific and appropriate for a specific time and place? (Wrapped skirts in the Arctic, feather bonnets in the North Pacific Coast, or totem poles in the Plains never existed.) Are individuals identified by name when possible?

10. Are the different Native Americans viewed as heirs of a dynamic historical tradition extending back before contact with Europeans? Similarly, Native American groups should not be equated with other ethnic minorities. The fact is that Native American tribes--by treaty rights--own their own lands and have other rights that are unique to the descendants of the real Natives of America, because they are that. No other minority within the United States is in a similar legal position. Native peoples view themselves as separate nations within a nation. U.S. laws and treaties, officially endorsed by U.S. presidents and the Congress, confirm that status.

11. If you have Native American children in your class, do not assume that they know all about their own ancestry and the ancestry of all Native Americans. All children including Native American children need to be taught about the Native American heritage, which, in a very real

sense, is the heritage of everybody living in the U.S. today. Culture and ideas, after all, are learned and not inherent from birth.

References:

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