

Notes for Teachers on Native American Cultures

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First a Note on Culture

Culture can be defined as a dynamic, creative, and continuous process, including behavior, values, and ways of thinking and reacting, shared by a people to guide them and give meaning to their lives. Differences of culture exist for historical and geographic reasons, and each culture works for its own people. As people have come together over time, the opportunity to share other cultures has given many of us additional patterns of behavior, values, and ways of thinking. This additional cultural knowledge allows us to gain valuable perspectives and move more freely in the world.

Often, the concept of culture is confused with that of race. Although racism has made many of us relate to others based on color and physical appearance, those "others" may be quite different from the expected notions we carry. All people have culture. We learn it as we grow up. A popular but incorrect view is that only "ethnics" have culture. One often fails to see one's own culture very clearly. By learning about the range of cultural differences in human societies, both teacher and student will be better able to become aware of culture in themselves and to avoid the conflicts and misunderstandings that can arise in cross-cultural situations. Each culture works for the people who carry it; no culture has supremacy over any other culture.

Culture can be very complex and very different from one group to the next. Humans beings have many similarities, however, to help non-Indians understand our cultures and our children, the information in this paper is focused on differences and the things and characteristics that make Native Americans unique – and sometimes hard to understand from a non-Indian perspective or world view. While all cultures seem to value kindness, wisdom, courage, love, respect, humility, generosity, and respect, not all cultures have an ethic of non-interference in the lives of others, use shame as a mechanism of social control (though the Japanese do), or perceive prolonged eye contact as rude.

The traditionally raised Indian child, whether rural, reservation, or urban, lives in a conflict of culture. That is, the culture they learn in the home may often be different from, and sometimes in direct conflict with, the culture they confront when they step outside their door.

These remarks are generalizations. Each tribe is unique and not all of these characteristics will apply to every tribe. Also, individuals vary in the degree to which they hold onto culture or are assimilated to different cultures around them. Some Native students may demonstrate only a few of these characteristics (or none at all). Some individuals may think of themselves as assimilated and yet demonstrate many of these characteristics. This is not a litmus test to see who is or is not Indian, but a guide to help others get an insider's perspective and develop an understanding of our cultures and our

children. Once possible differences of culture are recognized by a teacher, common sense should be the guide in the classroom.

Basic Elements and Characteristics of Native American Cultures

American Indian culture is very diverse. It is multicultural within itself. Each tribe has its own language or dialects, social customs, food, ceremonies, and history. Many non-Indian people group Indians together as one instead of respecting each individual as belonging to a nation of his or her own. People would laugh if someone said that all Europeans were Jewish and ate spaghetti, but often people don't hesitate to say one thing as being true about all Indian people. Groups of people spread out over a whole continent are going to develop differently from one another, and this is true of American Indians just as it is of Europeans, Asians, or Africans. Yet, even within these differences, groups may share certain cultural understandings: most Europeans share a common Judeo-Christian outlook. And there is a philosophy and set of values universal among American Indians: a reverence for Mother Earth, respect for elders, harmony with nature, respect for personal integrity, service and concern for the group. These qualities engender a human-oriented people whose spirituality is a way of life.

1) Native Americans are taught to respect and value the dignity of the individual. Individuality is common in America but the Native American version, among many tribes, is especially strong. In many tribes, it's considered improper to tell someone else what to do. It's thought that everyone has their own path in life and to tell someone what to do might push them off their real path. There is the Osage example of four people riding in a car when the driver starts to veer off the road. If the other people in the car are traditionally raised Osages, none of them will say, "Don't drive off the road!", even at peril to their own lives. It would be an invasion of the driver's individuality. Of course, the Osages are normal human beings who feel fear and want to live. What they're going to say is, "There's the edge of the road!", pointing out the danger, but letting the driver make his or her own decision. This seems especially true of many Plains Indians, and I've often thought it might have developed partially as a response to a harsh environment. Children needed to learn early to make their own decisions and to be responsible for themselves if they were going to survive. In any event, the ethic of non-interference does seem prevalent in most tribes. Children are given the same respect as adults. Children learn from experience and most Indian children are seldom forbidden to do anything (permissive child rearing). More usually the consequences of an action are explained to them, and they decide for themselves whether to act or not.

2) Many American Indian people have a greater acceptance of paradox than is common in many European and Western cultures. Pointing out to a Native American that they have just said something contradictory might only bring the response: "So?" (This is also true of other cultures, the Japanese for example). I've just written that Native Americans

value individuality, but they also, at the same time, value communality -- sharing, cooperation, collaboration, and the holding of many resources communally. These two core values, individuality and communality, seem to be contradictory; however, they operate together seamlessly in Native American cultures. People are expected to be individuals, but they are also expected to subjugate that individuality to the group when matters of group survival arise. Paradox may be seen as the essential nature of existence. Fire, for example, is most often thought of as destructive, but we also know that it can heat our homes. And fire can destroy forests, but certain California pine cones won't produce seeds for future growth unless the cones are first scorched by fire.

3) Sharing is a core value held by Native Americans. This also may occasionally seem extreme to some people from other cultures. For instance, among the Osage, it was customary for people who aspired to be leaders to give away everything that they owned three times in their life. It was felt that this brought them an understanding of the true value of material things and showed their commitment to the tribe. Promoting sharing behavior (i.e., flexible organization of equipment, materials, and space; emphasis on small group work, collaboration, and sharing experiences) builds upon what Native American children learn at home. Student-to student dialogue should be encouraged whenever appropriate.

4) American Indian values include a focus on cooperation. A person's success in life may be judged more on his or her ability to work well with others rather than on an orientation that stresses competition and the acquisition of material wealth.

5) Indian children are competitive. However, the type of competition in a traditional classroom that singles out individuals and pits one student against another is contrary to what some Indian children learn at home and may serve only to embarrass them, creating negative feelings toward school and teacher. Small group competition (e.g., one side of the room against the other) offers a more satisfactory alternative for young traditionally raised Indians to compete within the framework of their own value system.

6) Time is relative in the American Indian perspective and is looked upon as a continuum, with no beginning and no end. This does not mean that time is unimportant, but rather that it is de-emphasized. Things are done as needed. In the [p]classroom, it is best if the pace is unhurried, and children work within certain time limitations, but schedules are flexible enough to allow for individual differences in needs and interests.

7) American Indian children are encouraged to listen to the wisdom of their elders and to seek their counsel, but also to learn to be independent, to make their own decisions. Indian children may not be accustomed to adults in the role of authoritarians who impose their will on others. For many traditional Indian students, their entire existence, since they have been old enough to see and hear, has been an experiential learning situation, arranged to provide them with the opportunity to develop their skills and a confidence in their own capacities. They have learned "by doing," by exploring the world for themselves. Didactic teaching will be an alien experience for them. Also, most Indian cultures emphasize non-hierarchical thinking and arrangement of society. Relationships and connections horizontally in society may be more important than differences vertically

(e.g., social class, wealth or poverty). Everything and everyone has an important role to play and contribution to make. Teaching methods that offer a certain amount of structure, but that allow the student decision-making input and self-reliance, seem best for Indian students.

8) Human beings have developed many different ways of “knowing” about our world. In Western culture “analysis,” taking something apart to know about it, is most prevalent. Traditionally raised Native children may be more comfortable with “synthesis,” or putting together bits of information to know about something. As an Elder once said, “We wouldn’t be likely to take a drum apart to know where its sound comes from. We might knock against a hollow log and tap a hide stretched out for drying then put those two bits of information together to know where sound comes from in a drum.” In the classroom, it’s best to develop learning situations that value the students’ prior knowledge and experience.

9) Traditionally raised American Indian students may have learned to see the interconnectedness of all things. They may recognize their connection to a tree that produces oxygen we humans need to breathe or to soil that produces (through the plants we eat) minerals our bodies need to survive. They may recognize that what happens to the student sitting next to them could also happen to them. Students may see themselves as part of nature and the “circle of life” rather than as separate from, or better than, any other part of nature. In the classroom, students may be most comfortable with teachers who encourage learning across disciplines, where connections and similarities are recognized, rather than learning which tries to stay within rigid boundaries. For example, students studying angles in math class may respond well to being asked to estimate the angle of a rebounding basketball in Physical Ed. class.

10) Indian students have learned that courtesy is an essential part of human conduct, and that rudeness is any action that makes another person feel stupid, foolish or ashamed. Do not mistake their patient courtesy for indifference or passivity. Many Indian people believe that eye contact is rude, an invasion of privacy. Also, be aware that body language is part of communication for all peoples, but this is especially true for American Indian children; they can often be experts at reading body language.

11) Many American Indian children come from a culture in which harmony is highly valued and argument and controversy are not socially accepted. Students may gradually be shown that healthy disagreement is not hostility.

12) For best results in the classroom, a teacher should start with subjects that are common to the Indian student, things that take the student into familiar experiences he or she has had (e.g., students fresh from reservations in the Southwest may relate more easily to a pickup truck on a dusty road than to a subway). Learning experiences should be culturally relevant.

13) For many Native American tribes, social discipline is maintained by the mechanism of shame rather than the mechanism of guilt prevalent in many European cultures. (There may have been no such thing as guilt in this hemisphere before Columbus arrived!) To be shamed, in an Indian community, is a grave punishment. As a result,

many Indian students may be reluctant to try something at which they are not adept for fear of bringing shame upon themselves. They may wait and use their powers of careful observation until they feel confident about what it is they are to do. Indian students can learn that acknowledging a mistake is not a failure. (Care must be taken that a negative evaluation never be placed on the cultural practices of others. Native American cultures have survived for millennia and the mechanism of shame has proven to be appropriate and viable. It is best to avoid cross-cultural behavior comparisons and judgments).

14) Great delicacy and sensitivity of feeling are essential to even a moderate standard of Indian good manners. Indians in many tribes learn from earliest childhood to regard absolute non-interference in interpersonal relations as decent or normal. They may react to even the mildest coercion in these areas with bewilderment, disgust, and fear. This ethic of non-interference stems from a respect for the individuality of others and is reinforced by non-authoritarian methods of child rearing. In a classroom, it seems best to set up situations where the atmosphere of power and authority in which Indian and non-Indian often meet is mitigated or absent. Approach the classroom as a learner/participant first, a teacher second. Provide an open and informal classroom structure and try to build a warm supportive psychological climate. Listen sincerely to what students have to say. Allow for individual diversity.

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“In the story of creation, trees were the first teachers for all the life that followed. Trees were to develop the most powerful method of teaching, and the teaching doesn’t utilize language, or words, because it’s teaching by example, which is the strongest form of teaching that can be established.

Animals teach, by example, their young ones. Things that teach by example have the unique absence of lying. Language gives us the ability to become liars and develop false sets of values. Trees were placed on earth as an example of what true harmony and contribution is to the world. Their example was: they existed side by side from the beginning of time with no criticism of one another.” - Bruce Miller