Cultural Considerations When Teaching Native American History

Hey Teachers!

We recognize that it can be daunting to teach historical lessons about a culture you do not belong to. Many of the lessons that we grew up with (such as recreating Thanksgiving at Plymouth Rock) are now rightfully seen as culturally inaccurate and historically misleading. Native Americans have been on this continent for more than 14,000 years. Their history is an incredibly important part the history of North America. In order to help you bring these topics to life, the Wyoming State Museum has created this guide.

Keeping these nine cultural considerations in mind will help you teach about Native American history in a thoughtful and respestful manner. These considerations were originally created by the Smithsonian Institution and the National Anthropological Archives; they were included in their "Lakota Winter Counts Teacher's Guide." The Wyoming State Museum thanks them for their leadership in this field.

Cultural Considerations:

1. Explain to your students the concept of *Ethnocentrism*, which Merriam-Webster defines as "the attitude that one's own group, ethnicity, or nationality is superior to others." Encourage your students, as they learn about how other people historically lived on our continent, to approach what they learn from a point of curiosity. Be curious about how others lived, without using the United States' current culture to pass judgment. Watch for "ew," "gross," and similar phrases; use them as an opportunity for reflection.

2. Teach your students that Native People still live in our communities as neighbors, classmates, friends, and leaders. Native Americans are not a people and culture that existed and then ceased to exist.

3. Strive to portray Native Americans as real human beings. Are they portrayed with both strengths and weaknesses, joys and sadnesses? Do they appear to have motivations of their own, just like how you teach about non-Indigenous people?

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4. Emphasize the diversity found within Native American groups as much as the diversity found between different ethnic groups. Just as all European Americans and all African Americans do not look alike or live the same way, Native Americans throughout the continent and across time lived vastly different lives. For example, when it comes to the diversity of Indigenous dwellings in North America, Native Americans lived in tipis, grass houses, igloos, pueblos, wigwams, longhouses, plank houses, wattle and daub houses, and chickees! As of 2025, the US federal government recognized 574 different Native American tribes in the United States alone!

5. Avoid portraying Native Americans as purely reactionary. Discuss how their actions are based on their own values and judgments, rather than simply a reaction to outside forces – such as pressure from the US government, US military, and European American immigrants.

6. Be the example of cultural sensitivity and inclusion within the classroom. Avoid perpetuating stereotypes and derogatory sayings/expressions, such as “You act like a bunch of wild Indians!” “Sit Indian-Style.” or “Don’t be an Indian giver.”

7. Be careful of culturally biased descriptions of Native American people. Language such as “obstacles to progress,” “noble savages,” “blood-thirsty,” “child-like,” “spiritual,” “primitive,” “backwards,” “simple,” or “stoic” should be kept out of classroom discussions or curriculum material.

8. Actively challenge stereotypes and clichés surrounding Native Americans. For example, television, especially old movies, often include “Indian” characters with a limited vocabulary. Yet anthropologists have carefully documented the complexity of languages developed and used by Indigenous people. At least 350 different languages were spoken in North America alone when the Puritans first arrived in what I now Massachusetts. Many of these are still spoken.

9. Remember that culture and ideas are learned and are not inherent according to ethnic background. Do not single out Native American students in your class as “experts” on their ancestry. Remember, there are 574 different recognized tribes in the United States. All American students, Native American or otherwise, need to be taught about Indigenous peoples’ heritage.