

— Of Special Interest —

Using Self-Portraits as a Starting Point in Native American Studies for Grades 3 to 5

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I am enrolled in the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. I currently teach at California State University, Chico where I am jointly appointed as an Assistant Professor of Elementary Teacher Education and American Indian Studies. Prior to teaching in higher education, I was a public elementary school teacher in urban, low-income school settings. My scholarship is situated in culturally-appropriate representation of Native Americans in school curriculum, particularly in kindergarten through eighth grades.

Abstract

In California public schools, Native American studies is situated in grades three to five. The variance in how and what content is covered in Native American studies can lead to building or sustaining misconceptions about the rich cultures and traditions of Native Americans. This article provides a field-tested lesson exemplar using self-portraits to encourage teachers and students to reflect inward on their perceptions of Native Americans and to reframe how we teach Native American studies in a way that honors ancestors and acknowledges that Native Americans were here yesterday, are here today, and will be here tomorrow. The lesson exemplar, aligned with the History-Social Studies Framework, is designed to be a starting point for deeper conversations and explorations in Native American studies and is not designed to be a stand-alone unit of study. The lesson provides a beginning conversation for other teachers to design and implement culturally-appropriate representation of Native Americans in our elementary school classrooms.

Keywords: Native American, curriculum, misconceptions

There are 573 federally-recognized tribes in the present-day United States of America. In the California elementary school classroom, there is a specific sequence for learning about Native American cultures and traditions. In third grade, students learn about tribes that are local to their

area. By fourth grade, students are tasked with learning about California's journey to statehood which includes exploring California Indian history. In fifth grade, studies are stretched to generally understand Native American history throughout the United States of America. Imag-

ine for a moment that all tribes have their own right to self-govern and that not all governments may look or act the same. This is called sovereignty or the right to self-govern. As mentioned previously, there are 573 federally-recognized tribes. It is unrealistic to assume that a fifth-grade teacher could teach about all of the unique differences and similarities regarding all of the tribes in the United States of America. Similarly, to ask a fourth-grade teacher to be able to teach about all of the unique differences and similarities regarding all of the tribes in the state of California is impossible given curricular space in an academic year. Given the expansive nature of the topic, teachers need to be especially careful not to generalize Native American cultures and traditions; therefore, potentially perpetuating misconceptions about Native Americans.

As Loewen (2010) reminds us, curricular space and priorities in content coverage may vary widely across the nation. A narrowed curriculum (Crocco, & Costigan, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2007) may further impede opportunities to engage in academic content like social studies especially as accountability measures are more commonly centered on English language arts and mathematics achievement. With the stresses of content coverage, content integrity may suffer. Teachers are tasked to balance accurately painting history for their students. The result is a Native American studies curriculum that is highly over-generalized and much more dependent on the teacher picking and choosing certain tribes and, perhaps, regions to briefly explore. It is at this crossroad of content integrity and culturally-appropriate representation of Native Americans in the school curriculum that this article is situated. How can teachers integrate Native American studies into their classrooms in ways that do not misrepresent and marginalize Native Americans rich cultures,

traditions, history, and ongoing societal contributions?

With a shared understanding in the omnipresent concern for content coverage, my aim is to share a lesson plan that invites students and teachers to use their perceptions and, perhaps, misconceptions of Native Americans as a starting point for deeper, honest, and accurate teaching and learning. The lesson has been field-tested in third- and fourth-grade classrooms as well as with teachers in California.

Background

Deloria's (1998) work provides an historical perspective on the perception of Native American imagery and Indianness from the Boston Tea Party until more recent times. In this work, Deloria (1998) shows how societies dressed in replicated Native American regalia as part of their organization. Through time, the acceptance and understanding of Native American history and societal contributions as well as stereotyped imagery became cemented into the minds of people as accurate information about Native Americans. Ganteaume's (2017) echoes Deloria's sentiments regarding the imagined Native American imagery and subsequent cultural appropriation and extends this by calling the developed imagery as "white man's Indian" (Ganteaume, 2017, p. 14). King (2005) reminds us that we understand the world in which we live based on the stories that are shared with us. It is like the childhood game of telephone where you whisper a story into another person's ear and they retell the story to the next person in their ear. By the end of the game, the story may be completely different.

My experiences as a classroom teacher and invited presenter on Native American studies reminds me of these deeply engrained stereotypes and misconceptions that have now been

passed down from generation to generation. Loewen (2010) suggested that history textbooks focus on progress as the nation developed, not missteps along the way. Schools adopt textbooks that skew the country's development as moments in time toward becoming a nation. Stanton (2015) noted the Eurocentric narrative in textbooks where misunderstandings occurred between European settlements and Native Americans which resulted in conflict and ultimate extinction of Native Americans. When I teach or present on Native American studies, I am very cognizant of these shortfalls, stories, in the curriculum. Ganteaume (2017) reminds me that an identity marker for Indianness may be wearing a headdress. My Indianness, in general, escapes my students and audiences as my appearance does not necessarily match the narrative they experienced up to this point.

Lesson Implementation

The lesson, titled Self-Portrait, can be completed in as little as 30 minutes, but a larger whole class conversation extends the lesson to about 50 minutes in length. In the lesson, students use colored crayons or pencils to draw portraits. Students can be given a mirror to help them draw details of their face. The use of colored drawing utensils is important as color selection for the illustrations consistently provides for a starting point in discussing students' work. The lesson is divided into five parts.

The first part is to hook the students into the Self-Portrait lesson. Inform the students that they will be creating a self-portrait to help us study about others. It is not necessary at this stage to articulate what is meant by "other" as the students need to experience the lesson as it unfolds.

Second, provide each student with a piece of plain white paper and colored drawing utensils. Have each student fold their paper in half. On

one half of the paper, have the student draw their self-portrait. Encourage students to use color in their illustrations. On the second half of the paper, ask the students to draw where they live. At this point, students occasionally ask clarifying questions like if you expect them to draw their



house, neighborhood, or city. I encourage students to interpret the directions however they feel is appropriate. The openness in instructions allows for colorful conversations and insights later in the lesson. Teachers can modify the amount of directions to best reach their individual student learning needs.

Once both halves of the paper have illustrations, instruct the students to turn their paper over. On one half of the paper, have students draw what they think a Native American looks like to them. On the second half of the paper, request the students to draw where they believe a Native American lives. Keep the instructions as consistent and open as possible to the first half of the lesson where students illustrated their image and home.

The third step in the lesson is to ask students to work with a partner or small group to discuss their illustrations. Encourage the students to

identify similarities within and between the illustrations. The amount of time given for the partner or small group work may vary based on classroom learning needs.

The fourth step involves facilitating a whole-class discussion to elaborate on the partner or small group work. Ask students to share what they noticed, observed, and felt about the illustration experience. What types of feelings or thoughts emerged for them? Depending on the classroom conversation, it is at this point that the teacher may choose to share some observations from the student illustrations. Some consistent observations I have noticed include: different hair and skin colors for the self-portrait and Native Americans, different hair styles, different environments, a general feeling that a Native American lives in a tipi, regardless of tribe or region.

The fifth and final step is to ask the students how the discussion relates to studying about Native Americans. It is from this final questioning that students start to identify their own preconceived notions (or misconceptions) of what a Native American looks like and how Native Americans, as a people, are very diverse and could look and act just like them. To extend this lesson into different backgrounds and to foster an inclusive learning environment, I recommend Hoffman and Binch's classic book, *Amazing Grace*, as an extension to the Self-Portrait lesson as it tells the story of an African American girl that challenges misconceptions of her peers.

Lessons Learned

I created this lesson to help teachers unpack students' prior knowledge and to elicit a starting point for deeper and accurate teaching and learning in Native American studies past, present, and future. As an enrolled Citizen Potawatomi Nation tribal member and through the

lesson creation, my personal feelings of invisibility in the school curriculum surfaced. I acknowledged the personal connection and importance to the lesson and also took away three other lessons learned.

First, misconceptions of Native Americans are deeply seeded in education. This important challenge far exceeds the aim of this article. Nonetheless, through multiple engagements with this lesson implementation, I would be remiss if I did not mention that misconceptions of Native Americans run deep in our pedagogy and narrative and were witnessed throughout my experiences in classrooms.

Second, beginning a unit of study with looking inward at our own perceptions on a topic, such as Native American studies, brought greater depth to conversations and generated an emo-



tional reaction that became a motivation to learn that was unanticipated. Students were eager to learn more when their perceptions or misconceptions were addressed directly instead of being focused on content coverage with the cloud of misconceptions lingering throughout the unit of study and rarely, if ever, being given atten-

tion.

Third, the lesson (on a rare occasion) was a trigger to students both in teacher training and the elementary school classroom. In teacher training, an occasional participant reported that they felt uncomfortable after they were asked to draw what they thought a Native American looks like; however, they did not report a lack of comfort when asked to draw where a Native American lives. In the elementary school classroom, rarely did a student question the prompts, but there were times when a student was concerned that they had an incorrect answer. The elementary school student appeared to have anxiety around uncertainty more so than sharing a potential misconception about Native Americans.

Overall, the lesson provided a space and place in the curriculum to allow students and teachers to be reflective, engaged, and effective in the teaching and learning about Native Americans past, present, and future. The entire classroom community is lifted when the prior

knowledge of students served are welcomed into the classroom in meaningful ways that enrich the curriculum. Furthermore, when multi-



ple voices and perspectives are invited into the curriculum, then the entire learning community grows tenfold.

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