Interdisciplinary Unit

Native Americans

CHALLENGING

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Introduction

In 1492, two very different cultures came together for the first time on the sandy white beaches of a small island in what are now known as the West Indies. From the beginning, the relationship between the two groups was marked by misunderstanding and miscommunication. One group saw the other as friendly children just waiting to be made into Christians, while the newcomers, in turn, were seen by their hosts as messengers from the gods. Both sides were wrong, and over the centuries to come, this initial misunderstanding grew larger and led to exploitation, war, broken promises, suffering, and many needless deaths.

The initial error the newcomers made was to think that this land to which they had come was India, so their leader named the residents “Indians.” After they realized they had not landed in India, they made a second error in believing that they were discovering a new land for the first time, little knowing that the people who “met them at the dock,” as Cherokee humorist Will Rogers put it, were the descendants of people who had discovered North America at least 30,000 years earlier. A third error the newcomers made was that these friendly natives had no culture or religion of their own, and, therefore, they must be given those things.

Being accustomed, for the most part, to settling differences in councils or village meetings, and having strong traditions of sharing whatever they had with each other, the native residents of North America did what they could to help their strange new visitors. The natives brought food to the newcomers and showed them how to use the wild game and plants for food and medicine. When the newcomers asked for land on which to live, the natives obliged. After all, there was plenty for everyone. But they did not know how many newcomers there would be, or how hungry for land and minerals they would be. The natives had traditions which said that humans must live in harmony with nature. They had no conception of the belief that nature’s resources were to be exploited or that people had a manifest destiny to tame the land and make it their own. And the newcomers thought that the natives had no god, when, in truth, they believed God was in everything.

The newcomers were aggressive, and step by step, year by year, they took over. At first, and for a long time, many of the natives were defeated without the newcomers having to raise a hand. As many as eighty to ninety percent of them died from European diseases for which they had no immunities. And as the settlers kept coming, they pushed the natives out of the way. It was fairly easy to push them. Most of the natives were good warriors, and once they realized they needed to fight for their homelands, they did fight and with growing anger, but in the long run there were just too many to defeat, and the newcomers had better weapons. Many natives were destroyed by alcohol the settlers brought and for which the natives had no physical tolerance. Much of the damage done to the natives was by treaty. The settlers changed their minds frequently about what they wanted from the natives, except usually they wanted more.

To justify killing Indians and pushing them off their land, the newcomers fabricated reasons. The Indians were “dirty,” “savage,” “godless,” and had to be paid back for any fighting they had done. They did not use the land, so it was not right for them to have so much space when there were white men wanting to farm and to look for gold. Then, after the white men settled the Civil War, there were many men left at loose ends. Jobs were hard to find. Some men became professional Indian fighters, and they were proud of it. They believed Indians were not citizens and the only good one was a dead one.

Suddenly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some of those who had exploited the native people began to say, “Hey! The Indians will all soon be extinct! We had better start learning something about them before they are gone.” That is when they learned that the Indians did have cultures and religions. They were people, after all. However, this realization did not stop more treaties from being signed, and it did not stop more land from being taken away. And ironically, in the land where people felt secure having “freedom of religion,” the Indians did not get that freedom legally until 1979.
Introduction (cont.)

The purpose of this unit is to give the teacher activities which raise the level of understanding about the real discoverers of America and to help them show their students some of the richness which was, and is, in American Indian life. In this unit, these very diverse groups of people will sometimes be called American Indians and sometimes Native Americans. The terms can be confusing, because anyone born in the United States is a Native American, and Indians are people who live in, or come from, India. Most Native Americans/American Indians would prefer to be called by their tribal names (for example, Cherokee, Lakota, Absaroka, Cheyenne, or Modoc, to name a few) because lumping the tribes together suggests that they are alike, which is not the case.

Because folktales and legends tell much about a people and what is important to them, many of the activities are themed around a few characteristic stories of the groups. There are thousands of stories from which to choose, so the ones chosen have been carefully selected, but they represent only a tiny fraction of a percent of the total lore of a region or group. All the tribes had rich languages and rich oral traditions.

Sadly, it has been customary in American education to unintentionally teach racial stereotypes about Native Americans. Mention the word “Indian” and many non-Indians immediately think of a noble savage of the plains, hunting buffalo, living in tipis and scalping his enemies, or a pastoral picture of a colorfully-dressed Navajo sitting at an outdoor loom with red rocks in the distance. The Native American is neither all good nor all bad anymore than the European American is. The reality of the lives of Indian peoples is varied and complex.

This unit will attempt to give the teacher resources to teach students about the wonderful complexity and diversity among the original discoverers of North America and their descendants, showing them as human beings worthy of respect for the qualities of their characters, just as the teachers and students want to be seen themselves.

This unit suggests a wide variety of activities which utilize many different types of learning situations, including the following:

• Cross-curricular activities thematically related to the subject and organized by group
• Activities in language arts, social studies/history, science, math, games, and crafts
• Samples of Native American poetry and oratory
• An annotated bibliography of literature and biographies by and/or about Native Americans
• Activities which teach to written, oral, listening, and kinesthetic modalities
• Suggestions for alternative responses to the literature
• Individual and group activities
• Sources of materials for further reading
• Activities which encourage team-teaching of core curriculum

About the Author

Mari Lu Robbins is a retired teacher who is also part Cherokee. She says, “My father’s family came from Tennessee to Indian Territory in the 1800s, and my childhood was spent in Oklahoma. I grew up being proud of my Cherokee heritage. Most of my classmates and friends were also all, or part, Indian, and I did not realize until we moved to California to be near my mother’s family that the people with whom I identified were often misunderstood by others. I hope this unit will show some of the wonderful diversity and value of the cultures of the original inhabitants of North America.”