

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

At the beginning of the 21st century, museums and schools are continually faced with issues surrounding the sensitivities and concerns of cultural diversity. Lessons that were once common to all American schoolchildren, such as recreating Thanksgiving at Plymouth Rock, are now recognized as culturally inaccurate and historically misleading. Educators have since developed several sets of guidelines for teaching about American Indian cultures as well as for evaluating books on American Indian history. Considerations most pertinent to teaching with the Lakota winter counts are listed below.

- 1. Avoid qualitative assessments of either Lakota or European beliefs, traditions or lifestyles.** Do not compare the “White” version of history against the version of history represented in the winter counts. History is, by nature, subjective and represents the needs, beliefs and viewpoints of the culture to which it belongs. Transposing one people’s history into the needs, beliefs and viewpoints of another people’s culture leads to cultural bias and misunderstanding.
- 2. Strive to portray the Lakota as real human beings.** Are they attributed with both strengths and weaknesses, joys and sadnesses? Do they appear to have coherent motivations of their own comparable to those attributed to non-Indians?
- 3. Avoid portraying the Lakota as purely reactionary.** Discuss how the Lakota’s actions are based on their own values and judgments, rather than simply a reaction to outside forces such as government pressure or cattle ranchers.
- 4. Emphasize diversity found within the Lakota as much as diversity found between the Lakota and different ethnic groups.** American Indians portrayed in your curriculum material should not look like typical homogenous Hollywood movie “Indians,” whether Tonto from the Lone Ranger days or more contemporary Disney characters like Pocahontas. Just as all Europeans or African-Americans do not look alike, neither do all American Indians.
- 5. Challenge stereotypes and clichés surrounding American Indians.** 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 American Indians. At least 350 different languages were spoken in North America alone when the Puritans first stepped foot on the shores of what is now Massachusetts. Many are still spoken, including Lakota.
- 6. Be critical of culturally biased descriptions of American Indians.** Language such as “obstacles to progress,” “noble savages” who are “blood-thirsty,” “child-like,” “spiritual,” or “stoic” should be kept out of classroom discussions or curriculum material. American Indians were not “savage warriors,” nor were they “noble savages.” They were no more nor less noble than the rest of humanity.
- 7. Set the standard for cultural sensitivity within the classroom.** Stereotypes can be actively diffused if teachers check their own expressions and eliminate those such as, “You act like a bunch of wild Indians!” or “Don’t be an Indian giver.”
- 8. Recognize regional, cultural and tribal differences.** Instead of generalizing the Great Plains Indians, the Sioux or the Lakota, distinguish between the Brulé, the Pawnee, the Assiniboin, etc. Discuss both the differences between and the similarities among the various groups.

- 9. Avoid portraying the Lakota as people solely of the past with fixed traditions and beliefs.**
Lakota communities are dynamic, evolving entities that can adapt to new conditions, migrate to new areas and keep control of their own destinies. Over time, their lifestyles have adapted to the changing world, as have those of their non-Lakota and non-American Indian counterparts.
- 10. Avoid activities that trivialize Lakota culture.** Craft activities that “reconstruct” Lakota (or other American Indian) dress, dance, rituals and beliefs (i.e. outfits and headdresses made from paper bags and construction paper) belittle the traditions and skills held by true Lakota artisans. Instead, research authentic methods and have proper materials. Resist highlighting the “exotic,” especially if it was not the norm. Also avoid referring to Indian clothes as “costumes,” a word that often brings to mind Halloween or “dress-up” and is considered culturally insensitive.
- 11. Appreciate the unique circumstances of American Indian tribes in the U.S.** Do not equate American Indians groups with other ethnic minorities. The reality is that American Indian tribes—by treaty rights—own their own lands and have other rights that are unique to them as descendants of the native people of North America. Most are “dual citizens” of both their tribal Nation as well as the United States. No other minority within the U.S. shares a similar legal and/or historical position.
- 12. Remember that culture and ideas are learned and not inherent according to ethnic background.** Do not single out Lakota students in your class as “experts” on their ancestry and/or the ancestry of all American Indians. All American students, Lakota or otherwise, need to be taught about American Indian heritage.

References

These guidelines were extracted from various sources and adapted to specifically address the material found on this online resource. The original texts on which these guidelines are based are listed below.

“Checklist,” *Meeting Ground*, Biannual Newsletter of the D’Arcy McNickle Center, Issue 23, Summer 1990.

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