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GETTING THE "INDIAN" OUT OF THE CUPBOARD: USING INFORMATION LITERACY TO PROMOTE CRITICAL THINKING

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Often educators and school library media specialists are admonished to avoid resources that are stereotypical and to acquire materials reflective of cultural diversity. However, stereotypes of Native Americans are deeply ingrained in American and Canadian culture and thought, due to a complex mixture of history, government policy, social attitudes, and the need for national identity. Promoting information literacy is a pedagogical approach that can effectively combat the entrenchment of stereotypes of Native Peoples, by assisting students in developing critical thinking skills, and thus enabling them to do problem-solving, decision-making, and creative thinking.

In preparing students to live as citizens in a global multicultural world, it is necessary for classroom instruction and the school library media program to move beyond a curriculum that "is typically full of tipis (usually spelled teepees), Indian princesses, war bonnets, rain dances, kachinas (made >from ice cream containers), tomahawks, but not significant content" (Harvey, 1995, p. 14). It is imperative the teacher librarian actively promote critical thinking about popular representations of Native People and about information resources that purport to depict Native peoples and issues. The necessity for using information literacy to separate multicultural "fact from fiction" is well illustrated with examples from literature and media. Recognize this quotation?

> [Tom Sawyer]
> "Say, Huck, I know another othem voices; its Injun Jo."
> [Huck Finn]
> "Thats so -- that murderin half-breed! Id druther they was devils a dern sight. What kin they be up to?" (Twain, 1922, p.75)

Or this one?

> ... one of the Indians had found an opportunity to strike a straggling fawn with an arrow... Without any aid from the science of cookery, he was immediately employed, in common with his fellows, in gorging himself with this digestable sustenance...
> When Magua reached the cluster of lolling savages, who, gorged with their disgusting meal, lay stretched on the earth, in brutal indulgence, he commenced speaking...
> (Cooper, 1983, p. 105)

These two citations are taken from old *classic fiction;* one would assume that with the passage of time that sensibilities have progressed. However, consider this orientation from a 1996 syndicated newspaper columnist: The Indians lost the long war because

their overall culture and Stone Age tribal organization were inferior and could not prevail." (Hart, 1996, p. 4) Are students prepared to critically analyze such simplistic pronouncements about cultural encounters?

Or, consider the September 1997 issue of the childrens publication, *Disney Adventures* (Walt Disney), which advertised a new animated childrens television series, "The Legend of Calamity Jane," whose "cool cowgirl" heroine was: "Also Known As: Little Fire Rock, a Comanche name given to her for her spirit and stubbornness... Her Posse: Quannah Parker, a wise Comanche chief and warrior who acts as Janes big brother." How readily can students identify the old, pervasive images of Native Americans in this series?

If students see the 1998 American movie, *Stepmom* (Finerman), will they know that casting one of its young characters in a school Thanksgiving pageant replete with costumed "Pilgrims" and "Indians" singing "This Land is Your Land" is just reinforcing a ubiquitous stereotype? Will they understand that while "playing Indian is a persistent tradition in American culture," (Deloria, 1998) football "Redskins" and Thanksgiving "Indian friends" have nothing to do with "honoring" Native Americans?

The reality is that librarians are unlikely to pull classics from their shelves because of the inclusion of racial/ethnic stereotypes, and intellectual freedom stances cannot be disregarded. However, another reality is that classics are born every day, and are not necessarily an improvement over older works. Consider, for example, the book, *Indian in the cupboard* (Banks, 1980), which has been soundly trounced by Native librarians and other reviewers sensitive to a Native perspective. Articles by Moore and MacCann (1988), Caldwell-Wood (1992), LaBonty (1995), Charles (1996), and other commentators have called attention to the stereotypical portrayal of a miniature plastic "Indian" figure being magically brought to life to entertain and "befriend" a British boy. However, after two decades, the book remains extremely popular, as evidenced by the 1996 American movie version of the same title (Kennedy), and it has been self-promoted, and often lauded, as classic literature. It has also been incorporated into resources used by teachers and teacher librarians, including: *The elementary school paperback collection* (Gillespie, 1985, p. 127); *Books kids will sit still for: The complete read-aloud guide* (Freeman, 1990, p. 319); *What else should I read? Guiding kids to good books* (Berman, 1995, pp. 69-75); *Literature guide to Indian in the cupboard* (Beech, 1997). Fame and accolades do not guarantee that a literary creation is free of bias or stereotyping.

The other reality is that even if every pre-high school librarian acquired *sensitive* rewrites of the *classics,* young adults will eventually discover the unexpurgated versions. And, there is no way that students in a multimedia world are going to avoid contact with stereotypes about ethnicity. Reruns of classic television series and old movies on television reintroduce each new generation to stereotypes of Native Peoples. Ironically, many of these older productions are often considered safe for younger audiences because the level of violence and vernacular language common in many contemporary films is absent.

Even the rewrites of classics and the repackaging for popular consumption of traditional Native stories may prove problematic. For instance, issues of appropriation have sparked debate about the retelling of traditional stories. As Joseph Bruchac (1996) has said, "those who just pick up a story that they think is lying around unused...can easily err in recognizing just what is they have found, how it is to be properly used and to whom it truly belongs" (p. 90).

Unfortunately, it is naive to assume that decades of commentary, discussion and education have managed to eradicate adoption of stereotypes as part of popular culture or as part of the worldview of many young people. Indians are still icons for professional

and educational institution team sports mascots, still mythologized as beautiful princesses rescuing noble explorers, and still marketed as knowledgeable in secret ways leading to spiritual redemption. In the years since Disneys 1995 popular animated film, *Pocahontas* (Schumacher), "Native American princess" Halloween costumes have resurfaced, with politically correct "Native American" replacing "Indian" as the operative adjective. A perusal of any local book or music store will yield an abundance of titles geared to non-Indian audiences who seek the knowledge of shamans, healing ceremonies and Native American spiritualism.

Integrating Critical Thinking

It is impossible to pretend that the reiteration of these fantasized images of American Indians comes without cost. In 1998, a University of Oklahoma senior, whose major was anthropology/Native American studies, and who had just finished an elective "Native American Film" class, wrote a column in the campus newspaper about her new "remarkable and totally unexpected insight" that "popular culture is where I made my first assumptions regarding Native Americans," and it "shaped my interpretation of an entire race of people" (McFayden, p. 4). It is disconcerting that insight came so late for this university student with her specialized academic major in a state that boasts of the number of tribes within its borders. It is also daunting to ponder the numbers of other individuals who will never make this analysis. Individuals whose educational experiences have not prepared them to approach media, issues and conflicts critically are ill-prepared to interact effectively with others, whether similar or different from themselves, or to make rational decisions related to politics or social issues.

There is no way any student can be protected from all stereotypical depictions. These images are too pervasive to be totally avoided thats the bad news. The good news for teacher librarians is that a **critical thinking skills** model of instruction, coupled with resources carrying the authentic voices of Native Americans, can inoculate students against becoming victimized by rhetoric, assumptions or visual images.

There are many interpretations of **critical thinking**. And, although there is no absolute definition, much research addresses how best to teach students to be problem solvers and applicators of ideas and information. The bottom line, however, is that when one goes to a physician, one prefers to have a specialist who can observe, interpret, judge and evaluate rather than one whose educational career had been characterized by note-taking and recitation. One would prefer to have citizenry, whether in the voting booth, in the jury box, on the school board, or next door, whose ideas about Native Americans had not been exclusively formed through coloring cut-outs of Pilgrims and Indians or producing ice cream container Kachinas and brown paper bag headdresses.

Resources for Information Literacy

Information literacy in a variety of information formats should be an instructional goal, and using video as an information resource is a strategy that effectively captures Standard 2 of the AASL national information literacy standards: "The student who is information literate evaluates information critically and competently" (American, 1998b, p. 14). Videotapes, especially those produced by Native Americans, can be utilized in a three-pronged approach to address this standard.

First, videos are very appropriate resources for todays media-oriented students to use in learning to evaluate stereotypes of Indians. The five 30-minute videos of *Images of Indians* (Lucas & Hagoplan, 1979) detail the history of movie stereotypes of American Indians, and provide provocative visuals for discussion. These fantasy images can be contrasted with the real presence of contemporary Native Americans.

Second, videos are useful in presenting issues unique to Native Americans. Cognitive

skills used in evaluating issues critically should include distinguishing between verifiable fact and opinion, and between relevant and irrelevant information. Videos can easily present the many facets of controversies. For example, *White shamans, plastic medicine men* (Macy & Hart, 1995) is a Native Voices Public Television production, and "this exceptional documentary explores the popularization and commercialization of Native American spirituality by non-natives" (Patterson & Taylor, 1999, p. 132). The video raises issues that can be discussed in terms of determining credibility, detecting bias and recognizing inconsistencies in reasoning.

Third, videos can provide a Native American cultural context and authentic perspective, which can be integrated into information-based instruction about historical events and contemporary issues. In the PBS video, *Surviving Columbus: The story of the Pueblo people* (Walsh, 1992), "Pueblo historians and elders provide their perspective on the European conquest" (Patterson & Taylor, 1999, p. 136), and students can hear Native voices that speak out against facile interpretations of historical events.

Videos, which are resources with inherent viewer appeal, can be used to help a student to "make connections, and develop problem solving strategies," and thus to become an information literate individual "who uses information accurately and creatively," (American, 1998a, p. 3). The utilization of videos can be supplemented with other techniques that integrate **information literacy** and **critical thinking skills**. The opportunities for holistic approaches exist in collection development, in curriculum collaboratively developed with classroom teachers, and for in-service training for teachers. In relation to an American Indian emphasis, the teacher-librarian can focus on strengthening library resource coverage of Native Americans, enhancing content area instructional design in relation to Indian history and issues, and promoting development of realistic attitudes about Native Peoples and issues. Specifically, a teacher librarian can:

1. develop the collection so that library media resources, including non print, adequately supplement classroom instruction and reflect not just mainstream perspectives about Native Americans, but Native perspectives (and remember that there are multiple perspectives in the Indian world);
2. collaborate with teachers in strategizing instructional design that gives students the opportunity to hear voices from a Native perspective and the opportunity for experiential learning that realistically contextualizes issues of diversity; and
3. recognize stereotypes about Native Americans and assist teachers and students in identifying them and in understanding why they persist.

Thinking Skills Sequences

For implementing all three of these strategies, K-12 teacher librarians can take guidance from Beyers excellent model of thinking skills sequences (1988, p. 185), concentrating on recognizing the problem, devising a solution and modifying concepts.

1. **Recognize the problem**. Become familiar with resources that address stereotyping of Native Americans, such as Mihesuahs *American Indians: Stereotypes & realities* (1996), Hirschfelders *American Indian stereotypes in the world of children* (1982), or Slapin, Seale, and Gonzales chapter on "How to tell the difference," in *Through Indian eyes: The Native experience in books for children* (Slapin & Seale, 1998). Look within the community for locally produced guidelines by groups of Native parents or educators. Of particular interest to classroom teachers will be the poster available from Oyate, "Teaching respect for Native peoples," which is located on the World Wide Web at http://www.oyate.org/main.html Also, an article by Charles (1996) includes seven myths about Native Americans that he recommends teachers address. Expand professional reading in areas of collection development to include

resources concentrating on diversity, such as the periodical *Multicultural Review.*

2. **Devise a solution**. Become familiar with resources that offer sample curriculum units providing guidance on the way topics related to Native Americans might be introduced into the classroom, such as Mihesuahs (1996) book focusing on stereotypes, and Harveys (1995) book on *How to teach about American Indians,* or Reeses (1996) *Teaching young children about Native Americans.* The Michigan Humanities Council has a sample lesson plan about stereotypes of American Indians, adaptable for grades 3 through 12, available on the World Wide Web http://mihumanities.h-net.msu,edu/roads/nativelesson.html. A useful book for reminding teachers about differing student learning styles and expectations is *Teaching American Indian students* (Reyhner, 1992).

   Identify Native American authors/producers and become familiar with book and non-print resources that present the Native perspective. Two excellent web sites for locating electronic resources include *Lisa Mittens Home Page* (she is a former President of the American Indian Library Association) at http://www.pitt.edu/~lmitten and Karen M. Stroms *Index of Native American resources on the Internet,* at http://www.hanksville.org/NAresources/.

   The latter resource is especially useful for its list of Frequently Asked Questions that offers the parameters of the site and provides common sense protocols for use of web resources. Includes a note to teachers asking that they "not tell your students to e-mail me for information." This advice should be taken seriously; as Strom says, "because it is simple to send an e-mail question does not mean that it should be done." Too often, Native Americans with e-mail access are overwhelmed with questions from students who should have been taught how to do basic research and provided guidance in selecting resources about American Indians.
3. Modify concepts. Remember that all subjects, whether chemistry or history, have implications for the lives of students, or as I*nformation power* (American, 1998b) says, "connections beyond school means that the work students do should have value beyond being an indicator of success in school" (p. 59). Do not isolate Native Americans in a mythic paradigm bordered by the Mayflower, beadwork, and "once upon a time." Many observers have noted the propensity of education to focus solely on the history of Native Americans, leaving the impression that they have "vanished" as contemporary peoples. Consideration of current individuals and issues is just as important as understanding historical nuances. In addition to the possibility of hosting Native guest speakers from the local community, there is a variety of Native produced media appropriate for instructional settings. Consult the Strom and Mitten WWW sites for producer names and contact information.

   Avoid treating topics related to Native Americans as "set-asides" tacked onto the regular curriculum. As *Information power* (American, 1998b) suggests, curricula should be integrated across subject areas, and the school library media program is integrated into the curricula. Topics related to Native Americans should not be restricted to history and language arts curricula and collection development, but should be included in science and art and other content areas. Also, it is important to note that special months of recognition, including November as American Indian Heritage Month in the United States, are useful for highlighting, but should not replace, integration across the curricula of American Indian history and issues.

The historical, social, and commercial momentum that drives the perpetuation of stereotypes of Native peoples is powerful. And, those stereotypes have easily morphed from older print and oral presentations into contemporary visual, audio and electronic

images. However, teacher-librarians and classroom teachers can address the problem with knowledge and collaboration and thus produce "more authentic assignments and more significant and meaningful achievement" by students (Gross & Kientz, 1999, p. 24). Using information literacy of all media as a tool to enhance critical thinking skills can promote the cognitive and affective prowess that non-Native and Native students need if they are to be those "lifelong learners who can assimilate varying viewpoints, accommodate change and contribute to the well-being of the community" (American, 1998b, p. 4).

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