

# More Than Feathers and Casinos: Rethinking Native American Education

by Rick Hill

Every November we get popular. Between Indian Summer and Thanksgiving, teachers' thoughts often turn toward Indians...I mean, Native Americans...I mean, the indigenous people. No matter what you call us, you are still calling us names. In my case, we are the Haudenosaunee, the People of the Longhouse, whom the French called "Iroquois" (a derogatory reference) and the English called the Six Nations (how civilized!).

As leaves turn red and fall to the ground, Indian images go up on bulletin boards. Talk about mixed metaphors. Teachers seek ways to share a multicultural perspective between their students and Native Americans. Unfortunately, that sharing is often a one-sided story and most often about Indians of the past. Remember the infamous epithet: "The only good Indian is a dead Indian." By freezing Indians in the historical past, teachers may be unconsciously keeping that notion alive.

But, relax, help is on the way. I guess you can say "Tonto to the rescue." Just don't tell my Indian friends that I let you call me Tonto, played by a Haudenosaunee actor whose name was Harry Smith. His Hollywood name was Jay Silverheels, and he grunted his way to fame and fortune as the faithful Indian companion of the Lone Ranger. Although the characterization seems wildly old-fashioned, the reality is that most of your students will have even crazier stereotypical notions about what Indians look like, talk like, and do.

The source of these characterizations can be found in toys, books, videos, and games. One good exercise is to have students bring in things they have that present images of Indians, and then you can help them to begin to understand what is a stereotype, a cliché, and a realistic portrayal of Native Americans. You need to do your homework first, however, to inventory your own inherited stereotypes. You'll find some good sources on the Internet. Many deal with sports team mascots and logos of Indian images. This is a

familiar starting point for students. Show them the Washington Redskins' old logo and ask if they find it derogatory in any way. Most will say no. It is pretty benign. Have your students look up the word "Redskin" in the dictionary and see how that might change their point of view. The same can be said of the words "squaw" or "papoose." These are words to avoid.

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Again, the students may already have them in their heads, so you will delicately have to help them understand how words from one generation might not be appropriate to another.

The most difficult thing to impress upon your students is that there is no one standard of Native American culture, dress, art, language, or experience. Over 400 native groups in the U.S. have very different realities. Our cultures are as different from one another as Japanese culture is from Polish culture. It is difficult to generalize. We commonly have an earth-based belief system. It is not that we don't believe in celestial spirits, it is just that we have an intimate understanding of how nature works in our backyards. That comes from centuries more experience living on this land. Most native societies have profound beliefs in the living spirit of all elements of the sacred web of life. Our respect for nature provides an avenue for students to appreciate our larger worldviews, arts, dances, and stories.

We are a storytelling people—not legends or myths, but stories. Our oral histories are part of our living memory and often provide a very different view of the past, interaction with the newcomers, and current relations with the larger society. Your students need to understand that written history often contains inherent

biases and is only one form of documentation that they need to look at in seeking their own understanding of the past.

One good teaching tool is to compare concepts of time and important events as reflected in a winter count of the Plains Indians. These "calendars" are painted images on buffalo hides that recall events of importance to individuals, communities, and nations. The winter counts are usually depicted as a circle or spiral, a reflection of the native notion of time as a series of cycles, rather than linear time exhibited in historical timelines.

The use of symbols rather than words requires a good storyteller or oral historian to bring the events alive. This living history is also an important aspect of native cultures. We relive events of our ancestors as if we witnessed them ourselves. We often speak as if we were there. This allows the past to be kept fresh in our collective memory—both the good and not-so-good events that shape our identity.

The Haudenosaunee use wampum belts to record our history. Most of your students will already think that wampum is a form of Indian money. This is not true. Wampum, which we call Otkoa, is actually tiny tubular shell beads, both white and dark purple, that were used to make symbolic designs to recall sacred history, treaty councils, and significant aspects of our history.

One such wampum belt (called a belt only because they were woven into long and narrow bands, not because they were worn as belts) is called the *Guswhenta*, or Two Row Wampum. It is a white belt, about three feet long, with two parallel purple rows. One row represents my ancestors, floating down the river of life in their bark canoe. The other path is that of the early Dutch settlers, floating in their large ship with big sails. Inside each vessel are the distinctive culture, beliefs, law, and government of its inhabitants. This belt was made to document a treaty of the early 1600s near present-day Albany. Our ancestors agreed to live in peace, trade, and resolve any problems that might arise through negotiation, not armed conflict. Our ancestors used the symbolism of the vessels to explain that we are equal partners, traveling side by side. But we also pledged not to attempt to steer one another's vessel. We agreed to respect each other's right to govern ourselves. Now, compare that exchange to what is typically thought to have taken place in the sale of

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Manhattan Island to the Dutch. The Two Row shows Native Americans as sovereign, separate nations, not hapless victims of a smarter race.

There is another message in that belt, however. While many streets and towns have Dutch names, the Dutch were defeated and replaced by the British, who also made such treaties with the Haudenosaunee. The English were defeated and replaced by the Americans, who made similar treaties with the Haudenosaunee. The hidden message is that we are still here, holding up our end of the agreement. You won't find many Dutch fur traders running around, or soldiers in red coats, yet, you still find us planting the same corn as we did in 1492, holding our same ceremonies, speaking our same languages, governing ourselves by the same law, and passing the same traditions to our children.

Certainly we have changed in many

ways. Helping your children understand the nature of those changes is important. Equally important is helping them understand that we don't have to dress in beads and feathers to be "real Indians." What makes us real are our traditions, our languages, our customs, our beliefs, and our identity. We are still the Haudenosaunee living in the lands of our ancestors. That is a great feeling to us who have come to be known as Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk, and Tuscarora.

As the People of the Longhouse, we see ourselves as living under one large longhouse, stretching from the sunrise in the East to the sunset in the West. We live under one law, which we call the Great Law of Peace. Your students should learn that we have very real laws under which we operate. It is not a matter of a few all-powerful chiefs grunting out orders to a bunch of wild braves. In our case, the women of the nation have a significant role on the social, cultural, political, and economic life of our communities. Descent flows through the female bloodlines. The women select the male candidates for the clan chiefs. The entire clan—men, women, and children—has a say in that selection.

Once approved, the chief serves with the other clan chiefs on the nations' council. We have one of the last surviving traditional systems of governance. (Learn more about our governance, wampum, and culture at [www.sixnations.org](http://www.sixnations.org))

Our nations gather in a Grand Council to address issues that affect all our people, such as treaties, land claims, or environmental issues. If this system sounds familiar, there is good reason. The Founding Fathers (who excluded women from their decision-making) met with the Haudenosaunee and were inspired by our form of democratic representation. While this is a subject of academic debate, the fact that our ancestors had met for centuries, using our council protocols, symbols, and wampum, should teach us one thing. We were once more respectful of each other. Our ancestors understood each other better than we do today. All that means is that we all have to do a better job of reconnecting to that important legacy of peace and friendship. Just try to call us in the spring instead of the fall. We might be less busy.

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