



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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A Study of American Indian History: Cultural Identity and Artistic Expression

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by Jessy Griswold

Introduction

In my classroom, as far as cultural identity is concerned, questions have been asked, concerns have been raised, and conversations have been started with begging eyes for answers. Especially after the events in Ferguson, MO, not to name the only, the over 75% African American student body wants to talk about this. *“What is wrong with the world that people treat people so badly?” “It’s not fair.” “Do you believe in us?”* It is apparent that there is doubt, confusion and fear relating to individual identity and specifically, racially. Speaking up is a powerful antidote for this. Art is an undeniable voice, a visible word, and a multilayered medium by which the kids can explore and voice their cultural identity and subsequently bring change to the social environment they inhabit.

By studying American Indian history including the ways the US government has mistreated them, students will find historical issues that are not far removed from our modern political climate in America. Although our modern issues materialize differently, the students will be able to make connections and be equipped to bring their voice to injustices on humanity as a whole. The students will not only learn history, but empathy for people groups who have been mistreated and misrepresented.

In addition to this, the main purpose of the assignment is expression of cultural identity of both American Indians and the culture of each student. They will learn observation skills, looking to the common spaces and daily cues to piece together the narratives of another culture, and that of their own. Students will be able to find meaning in speaking out, and self-expression.

School Setting

The school where this unit will be taught is an arts magnet middle school in downtown New Haven, CT. New Haven is a demographically diverse city insofar as its containment of vastly different Socio Economic Status (or SES) groups living very closely together. The city is economically supported by Yale University, with its

middle to upper class external associates, while present as well is a conversely impoverished demographic, woven in to the fabric of the community. The rich, the poor and everything in between represent the daily workings of this city.

Similarly, this middle school carries a diverse and occasionally polarized environment. The school rests in the south-western part of the city, outside of downtown proper, in a neighborhood known for poverty and crime. The arts magnet program is well established, esteemed, and well funded from multiple sources; it welcomes students from surrounding towns of varying economic structures to apply. We attract students from a wide radius including the surrounding suburbs. Because we are a magnet school, we have both great opportunities and great challenges, which are unique because of our internal environment. The school has an extensive dedication to the arts in all forms, both performing and visual.

Our opportunities lie in the extensive resources we have for artistic production that are rare for any school, let alone for students their age. We have two dance studios, a black box theater, three music rooms, and two darkrooms for photography. As far as human resources we have a dedicated arts supervisor, three full time theater teachers, two full time dance teachers, two full time art teachers, three music teachers and various part time staff. The class sizes in Visual Arts average at 10 students per class. It is rare to see such vast resources for the arts in any school, and to see it in a public middle school is outstanding. In this, we are fortunate.

Another opportunity we have is the presence of great diversity, much like our city, due to our range of applicants. This presents opportunities for creativity, collaboration and conversation; the presence of varying cultural expressions brings a vibrant climate to our student body. However, our challenges also lie in this. While the attendance of a wide variety of demographics brings diversity and a variety of perspectives, it also brings with it a variety of learning levels (due to different educational background), socioeconomic statuses, behavior expectations and cultural expectations that challenge the students in understanding one another at times.

For as many students that are integrated and have multicultural friend groups, there are students who find themselves occasionally segregated with little understanding of those with different cultures and few intentional conversations to understand one another.

Racism and/or lack of cultural understanding is a small but present barrier and can affect the learning experiences and camaraderie between students of different backgrounds. I am invested, as an educator in promoting cultural conversations, cultivating strong individual cultural identities, and discussing important issues in a way that motivates students to inspire change and unity, thus increasing effectiveness and expression in the arts. The arts are best when we are both individualized and unified; they are not mutually exclusive.

Unit Goals

This unit is an opportunity for each student to explore individual cultural identity in order to encourage conversation, expression, and deeper understanding. The unit is developed for grades 6-8. In studying and expressing culture, each student will be able to understand him/her/their self and one another better; perhaps

the cultural differences would be bridged by each individual student giving his or her own culture a voice that the others may not have heard before. Lastly, studying the lesser known narratives of American Indian history and daily life will offer a unified cultural focus for the class with the varying perspectives at hand enlightening the subject at a greater level.

This seminar unit has added substance to my previously more limited knowledge on the American Indian history. In traditional American classroom settings and lecture halls, a small amount of the history is part of the curriculum, if any, and is taught as written only by the victors of wars. Studying the history holistically and in detail from primary sources both literary and visual in this seminar has formed the foundation for these lessons that are specifically designed to educate students about said history from more than one perspective. As a result, each individual student will be able to represent the detailed information in his or her artwork more thoroughly and accurately and give American Indian history a voice in the modern urban American classroom.

As the unit begins, students will discuss a brief narrative of American Indian history, how this history has led to modern American Indian culture and daily life, and how the representation of American Indians is often closer to the former. Students will draw commonalities between themselves as Americans, and American Indians as the first Americans, discovering what all Americans might have in common. These can include cultural practices, dance, and art. Thirdly, students will make connections, noticing common injustices served to various cultures in this country's history. Meaning, by observing their own lives and the lives we study and seeing if there are any injustices that have been served to American Indians, that they may find to be present in their own lives as well. These conclusions will be the focal point of the final project.

The unit is divided into a Didactic Portion, with assignments and an Artistic Expression/Culminating Assignment. The Didactic Portion has three parts: Part I. American Indian Narrative: "Then and Now", Part II. Looking to common spaces and observing details to find cultural identity, Part III: Didactic Portion Summary and Modifications. Next, is the Creation of Culminating Assignment: Cultural Identity Expression and Connections. This section is divided into Parts based on the steps of the artistic execution. Lastly, the unit is summarized and modifications are offered.

Didactic Portion: Part I: American Indian Narrative; "Then and Now"

The history of American Indian culture at its roots pre-1492, as it appears in narrative and art will be studied first. Students will analyze age appropriate historical art that represents the land as it was, including cultural traditions (clothing, art [poetry reference], music, dance and architecture), and cultural beliefs. Students will visit prints available through Yale's Print collection of the historical indigenous imagery. Students will understand which images are portrayals by non-Indians and be asked to question what implications lie in non-self-portraiture as truth. We will review online the Peabody's collection of moccasins and American Indian artifacts to observe historical tradition.

Blood Struggle

In order to put representation in context, we will review the narrative regarding the path of injustices and political moves, the decades of allotments and broken treaties that were made involving American Indians,

using excerpts from *Blood Struggle* by Charles Wilkinson, and any documentary clips that apply.

It is a common misconception that when the Europeans settled in America that we peacefully divided and shared the land with the American Indians here first, and merely acquired more due to population and economic growth. When in fact, the whole history is one large systematic injustice and history of oppression that absolutely decimated a nation of indigenous people groups, and that still, today these people groups are held under the thumb of Uncle Sam in a way that lessens the quality of life, inalienable rights, and sense of cultural identity. The American Indians were joined by treaty with the settlers that delineated the land unfairly, but convincingly enough that both parties agreed. The new American government amended treaties over and over again, pushing the natives from their lands to the point of being left with as little as 1% of the original space agreed upon which was already a small percentage of the country they inhabited fully to begin with. Along with this there were allotments of the land given out to foresters and farmers who subsequently destroyed the land that the people called home. Greed and power took over the land and changed its boundaries and its face.

In *Blood Struggle*, the second chapter “The Deadening Years” discusses the timeline and circumstances on the loss and destruction of what was once American Indian Territory and continues to be American Indian homeland. This information is key to the initial discovery of the whole narrative of American Indian life after the settlement of Europeans. The third chapter, “Termination” discusses the concept of Termination, which is the system that keeps them from getting their land back, among other things. The students will review these chapters in a simplified form, to ensure a complete grasping of the concepts.

Sliver of a Full Moon: A play

In addition to the unfavorably amended treaties, students will learn the issues of jurisdiction, reading clips from *Sliver of a Full Moon* (for grade 8 only). The reservations have only jurisdiction over Indians, so that if a non-Indian commits a violent crime against an Indian, or on Indian lands, they cannot be prosecuted because the Indians don't have jurisdiction over that person. Rights are continuously being taken away from and denied to the American Indian people groups. Because of this, economic problems have been created. Because the US is now based on a money economy and not a trading as it was pre-settlement, the Indian skills that were once highly valuable among themselves, are not as valued in the money-economy working-world and the sense of personal worth and ability to provide for ones family is declining. Because of the demoralizing nature of the reservation existence under the oppression of the US government along with the BIA, alcoholism, mental health issues, and poverty are prevalent in most communities.

Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian, a story

The narrative of American Indians will lead us to explore what present day American Indian life is like. The issues discussed in the previous portion are also discussed in the humorous down-to-earth narrative from an adolescent perspective, written by Sherman Alexie, discussing the issues of alcoholism and growing up in a poor, politically and socially oppressed family. The class will start by reading clips from Sherman Alexie's *Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*. This narrative brings a humorous, on the ground perspective of modern life on the “Rez”, and highlights the key issues of poverty, family dissolution, and alcoholism. More global political themes of reservation assimilation schools, employment, interactions with the BIA, and racism are also brought to light. Students will complete Assignment 1. A, listed below:

Assignment 1. A

The students will be able to pick scenes from a hat from Sherman Alexie's narrative and act it out briefly in class to connect personal emotions to the story. They will also have a chance to create fictional scenes from their own culture that could be allegories for these events as homework, which will be read aloud the next class period.

Students will pick one chapter upon which to read and reflect, as well as a cartoon to analyze. In reflections they will describe the context that their chapter describes regarding life on the Reservation, family dynamics and/or the "flip side" of his life as the only American Indian in an all white school. After describing the characteristics to create a context, they will pick one issue upon which to focus. They will then take a cartoon that highlights that particular issue, and write one paragraph describing how this issue is highlighted and what message Alexie might be trying to get across. Ask the students why it is important that it is a cartoon and not prose? Lead them to the connection of humor, satire and sarcasm, and imagery/visual language as a way of communicating political ideas beyond mere words. Why is it valuable? The instructor will highlight the multidimensional aspect of speaking through art.

Visual Language: Art Says Something

The teacher will also provide examples of modern poetry, photography, and paintings by Native Americans that concentrate heavily on cultural practices. The source for these pieces will be the book *A Gathering of Spirit: A Collection by North American Indian Women*, edited by Beth Brant. The first poem is "Pow Wow" by: Vickie Sears, which describes the Sundance festival in beautiful imagery and colorful language as it pertains to her life experience (page 135-137).

One example of photography will be *Photograph* by Diane Reyna (168), which depicts American Indian clothing and a bottle of Coca-Cola™ at a Sundance festival, bringing both traditional and modern imagery in the same image to challenge the time period in which students might believe certain imagery to be stuck, when they are in fact very much present.

From the same book, students will review drawings by Jaune Quick-To-See-Smith and will revisit Sherman Alexie's book for the cartoons. These drawings use satire and humor to contrast stereotypical representation of the American Indians of the past with the reality of American Indians in the present. Throughout these studies, the students will interact with the art, ask questions about artistic choices in group-work, and use the critiques to draw conclusions their own about what they see. Students will complete Assignment

Students will select and watch 4 videos to watch from *theways.org*, which is an educational resource made for teachers in Wisconsin. The videos are short documentary styles of first-hand story telling, accurately depicting modern life as an American Indian in Wisconsin. Students will complete the following assignment:

Assignment 1. B

Students will reflect on one of the videos of their choosing. They will write one paragraph comparing and contrasting what they saw with their own life, what is similar and what is different. They will also answer the questions. *How might this person have been misunderstood if their story were not told in this way? Meaning, what did you think about this topic before you saw the video and after? Did it change? Lastly, pick one aspect of American Indian life we have covered in our study, how would you tell a story about it and in what medium?*

Field Trip

Students will visit the Yale Art Gallery prints library, images and prints representing past and present American Indians. Students will be asked to discuss how they are represented in the past, how they are represented now and if there is a sense of disappearance. *In the imagery that we see now does it ever give us the feeling that Indian Americans no longer exist?* If the students are asked this question, the answer will most likely be yes . We will discuss: *How are American Indians represented in art we see around us ? And how , remembering the modern narratives in our unit, can they be more accurately represented? How can American Indians be represented in a way that reminds our viewers the culture is very much alive?*

Students will reflect on this discussion with a small paragraph answering these questions and an expression in a small drawing.

Assignment 1. C

Students will use the connections made from the poetry, cartoons, and photography to create a page of thumbnail sketches. The sketches will be brief snapshots of what they imagine past or present American Indian life to include. Simple daily things are to be included such as moccasins, sneakers, teepees, houses, their cultural foods, ceremonial clothing, symbols of religious practices and moments in modern life. They might also make cartoons like Alexie.

When the Students bring their pages back they will divide into small groups and discuss their representations. They will analyze together the accuracy of their interpretations. Are the images from the past real, or based on stereotype? Are the images from the present true to what life is currently like on the Reservation, or stuck in the imagery that represented American Indians in settlement days. They will use the analytical skills they learned when reviewing American Indian Representations at Yale Art Gallery and in the videos.

Students will be able to see the simplicity of the culturally specific snapshots and be able to draw connections with their own life. For example, noticing the shoes, ceremonial clothes, religious practices, architecture, and food of his/her own, and from his/her own family. Students will discover to the concept of cultural identity that everyone is not like the other and that each facet is valuable in making up a unique culture.

Assignment 1. D

Students will keep small journals each day to log feelings and thoughts related to the ongoing narrative, and most importantly to make connections with their own lives. They will log any connections they make with cultural aspects, feelings towards political decisions, poverty, racism etc. They will be encouraged to sketch any imagery that comes to mind as they contemplate these issues.

Didactic Portion: Part II: Looking to common spaces and observing details to find cultural identity

In this portion of the unit students will be exposed to concepts found in *Art and Social Justice Education* , edited by Therese Quinn et al. and have discussions about the importance of art in speaking for social issues, as well as observing the common spaces and daily life for cues that make up the expression of cultural

identity.

Background

For this unit, teachers would need to read the chapter in the same book “Art Matters” and “Art History and Social Justice in the Middle School Classroom” and use this information as the framework for lecture and guiding the learning experience. These chapters expand on the concept of “looking to the students” and teaching them to look to themselves for answers when creating artwork. It is based in the idea that the students look to themselves and their cultural surroundings for their definition of visual culture, and find out what they call art. This includes the common spaces they see every day that are essentially living canvases. This conversation is in hopes of drawing attention to the details in their own lives that they may dismiss, but are in fact distinctly cultural, and the visual experiences they take in each day that are seen by them as art. These are visual experiences that we the teachers can’t predict or predetermine. The purpose is to validate the cultural signals they create and receive all day as a part of their cultural identity, and as art. This concept will be heavily emphasized throughout the unit.

Daily Life Observation

Inspiration for this portion comes from “Miracle on 79th Street: Using Community as Curriculum” in *Social Justice Education: Culture as Commons*. The chapter describes a project done in an urban elementary school to make their Christmas performance something that brought their community into the space. The students used common landmarks in their neighborhood as the set and settings displayed in the play. They did this by doing neighborhood tours and taking pictures, bringing the pictures back to the class and painting them.

This simple example will be alluded to briefly for the students, to draw attention to the value of observing/discovering and communication culturally specific every day things. This will support the main goal of their project.

Assignment 2.A

The students will fill a page of thumbnail sketches, similar to the first. Only these pages will include snapshots of *their* life. This time it might look more like a sneaker, their breakfast, what their mom looks like, a show they watch, a cartoon about their teacher, their smartphone, how they get to school etc. Examples will be given to offer prompts to the abstract concept. In returning with their sheets, and reviewing those of their peers, they will be able to see glimpses of similarities and differences that bring into clearer view their own, unique and specific cultural identity by juxtaposition.

Didactic Portion Summary

Studying the history, beauty, and richness, along side the battles, oppression and muffled outcries of the American Indian community, and discovering how to observe and portray cultural features, students will hone their voice, and will speak not only for their own story but speak to stand along side those that went before them through their art.

In summary, students will explore how to re-tell a story, notice cultural characteristics, and subsequently give

the culture a voice in their own way by retelling the story through their artwork “using culture as commons”. This will open the door to the possibility of taking a political stance, expressed through the artistic voices of these urban middle school students. Specifically as it supports the making of their 2D art piece that will in their own way portray the statement they wish to make in imagery and text. Keeping in mind the current political and social issues surrounding and less-represented cultures in America, light will be shed and a connection will be made that we in the Melting Pot have a tendency to chronically misunderstand one another. The curriculum unit supports this by helping students see that what they have seen in their lifetime is not by any means the first of such tensions, moreover, the American Indian story is how it all began in our country. This is an invaluable connection to make for the children to sort out their own personal relationship with ethnicity, race, and culture as well as find positive attributes and commonalities in daily life.

Creation of Culminating Assignment: Cultural Identity Expression and Connections

The students will make a triptych, a singular piece made of three images that will portray the similarities and differences between the student, as an American, and American Indians now.

Students will first refer to the thumbnail sketches from the first and second portion of the didactic section. They will look at their snapshots of the American Indian Life and the snapshots of their own life and find two images that compare and contrast, meaning two images that are the same in essence but different in expression. For example, moccasins and basketball shoes, a dancing circle and a ballet studio, a ceremonial dress and a first communion dress. These two images will be the anchors of their piece.

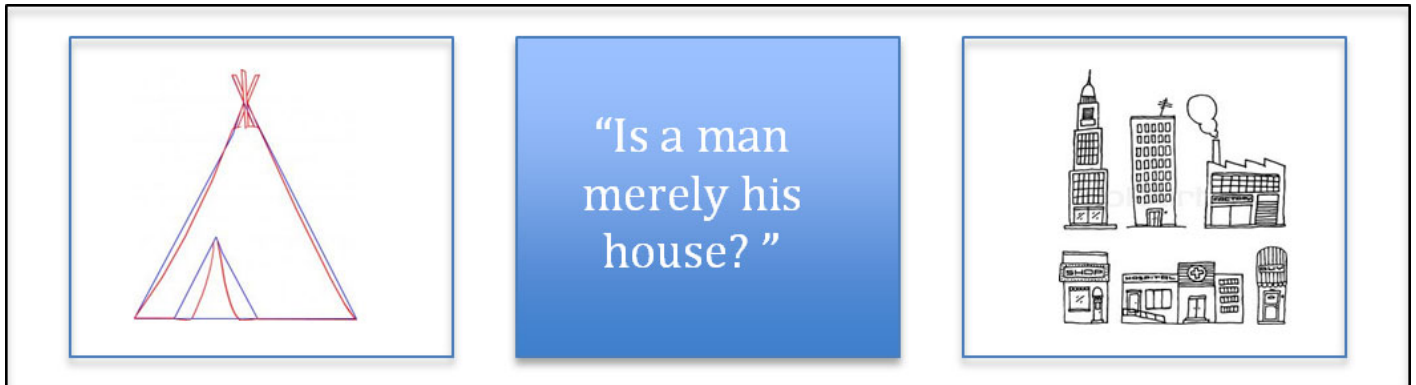
Creation of Culminating Assignment: Part II

Students will create the anchor pieces using printing and painting techniques. Students will use layers of ink drawings for the structure of the image and learn about multi layer block printing to create the rest. The limited color palette they chose should reflect the mood they are creating. Students will also have the option to ink-draw and watercolor the pieces. The mood of the piece should reflect the student’s connection to his/her/their own cultural identity as well as his/her connection to American Indian life, personally. The mood should reflect the American identity over all and what it means to be an American in certain people groups. An example is Image 01 in Part III.

Creation of Culminating Assignment: Part III

Students will be offered a list of quotes, poetry and excerpts related to cultural identity, social justice, community, and life in America. From this collection they can pick a quote that they will have as the centerpiece for their project. The quote should relate directly to the images the chose to create as well as to

the themes that they learned from their studies of American Indian culture. Students will use the combination of imagery and text to work as a unified piece and “say something” specific. Students will be able to choose texts from only American and American Indian authors. They may want to choose from the Sherman Alexie excerpts, or the poetry in the previous portions of the unit. The key factor will be the connection between the text and the idea they are conveying in the pair of images. When their quote is selected, students will be introduced to basic principles of typography and design. In order to create their text block, students will have to pick fonts and colors, and placement that support the mood and themes they are trying to portray. Group work will be the format for discussing all the possible design elements that will effect their artistic goals.



(Image 01)

Creation of Culminating Assignment: Part IV

Lastly, students will work as a group to discuss the audience for their pieces and newfound discoveries. This will help them to make adjustments in their projects as well as plan carefully and intentionally the location, timing, and circumstances of their artistic installation. Because these truths and discoveries will come from the students, it cannot be predicted what kinds of places, times or events will be chosen to surround the messages they have created.

Unit Summary and Modifications

Summary

I hope to see the students discover the narrative of American Indians in a way that stirs up empathy and understanding. The lesson in the narrative of American Indians will expand their knowledge of our country’s history and the current state of Indians in various states around the US, as well as expand their familiarity with Indian art. There will also be a more developed sense of cultural identity as a theme in itself.

The students will understand that their art can and will say something, and can speak for the humanity of different people groups or for justice where they find injustice, or for any message they want to spread. Their awareness of the public space as a place for art will grow, and creates the possibility of a journey in public art.

The goal of the artwork itself is for the students to more clearly understand American Indian Culture, and more clearly understand their personal culture specifically and how it pertains to their daily visual experiences. If common threads are found whether in similarities by virtue of being human, or similarities due to cultural experiences, that will be a powerful message for the artist and the viewers.

The goal of such studies of American Indian narratives and expressions of cultural identity is for wider understanding and the possibility of using art to give this history a voice. Through this lesson series students will form a stronger sense of their own cultural identity, identify commonalities that all in America have, and portray the humanness of cultures they choose to express. By expressing identity and humanness of any people group, the students speak against injustice that fails to stand for that humanness by creating empathy in the viewer. Lastly, the art is a cultural study and comparison of two people groups who share homeland. The “common ground” becomes the path for empathy and justice.

Modifications

The older and/or more advanced students will be expected to think conceptually. There will be encouragement to look at similarities beyond concrete objects. Students will be prompted with questions like the following: Are there any injustices to which you relate? Are there any cultural issues that you feel you have in common? Are there any moments Sherman Alexie described that you can relate to in your own life at home or at school? With these concepts their anchor pieces are allowed to be conceptual and portray a feeling or a scene, either by using a cartoon, action imagery and especially symbols. The goal will be to draw similarities in their differences to portray the common threads in humanity as a whole.

The younger and/or less advanced students will be looking at things in a more concrete way and will be offered examples to choose from as a starting point. Examples can include templates for moccasins and sneakers, teepees and houses etc. Another option given to the younger students will be to take the teepee drawings by Jaune Quick-To-See-Smith. Her illustration depicts a row of teepees labeled Beauty Shoppe, Day Care etc. to display the modern and stereotypical, outdated views of Native American daily life. Students will be asked to make a comparable drawing of their own neighborhood and the places they visit (barber shop, corner store, grandma’s house etc.) and draw attention to how viewers might stereotype their view of the city, and how their city appears to them.

Appendix

This unit reflects the content standards for visual arts in the Visual Arts Standards from Connecticut Curriculum Framework. Vis-à-vis the following: Students will develop understanding of the process through the development of the culminating assignment, learning about typography and the technique of mounting various works on one piece. As well as develop skills in planning techniques such as thumbnail sketches for reflection. This also meets the standard for developing organizational principals of art. In their culminating assignment students are arranging symbolic images to convey meaning and must demonstrate understanding of symbolism and communications. Students will be learning history through visual language thus meeting the standard for developing knowledge of history and culture. Through the visit to the Yale Art gallery especially, students will be analyzing the work of others and representational bias. They will also be reflecting on their own work and the work of others to analyze, interpret and evaluate their own images. The goal of the unit is

making connections between their art and the common space in which it is shared, they will learn about the value of art-making in developing the narrative of various cultures, and will be making connections with daily life in the imagery they select and in the planning process.

Reading List

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