Suggestions for Effective, Respectful Teaching of American Indian Origin Stories in Diverse Classrooms

That tribes have been able to maintain their discrete identities as national groups can be attributed to their steadfast adherence to their mission as a distinct people, as revealed to them in creation or upon one of their migrations... Tribes are, therefore, ultimately guided by internal prophetic instructions rather than external political and economic events, and the success or failure of the tribe in dealing with unexpected problems can be traced to this concern with fulfilling their cosmic responsibilities.

-- Vine Deloria, Jr.

Origin stories pervade the *Lessons of Our California Land* curriculum in all grades, K-12, because they provide keys to understanding of American Indian views of land in the past and the present. Stories engage, inspire, and motivate listeners and readers in ways that technical instructions or scientific explanation cannot. An American Indian origin story is not only a sacred text that teaches about Creator and the Creation, it is also a guiding text in the sense that the founding documents of the United States such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are guiding texts. Origin stories show people how to put values and principles into action.

These stories are much more than simple fables or fairy tales. The uncomplicated sentence structure of many California Native American stories build narratives that are often intentionally left open, stories that allude to other stories in the tribe's repertoire and that reward repeated readings and tellings. If students read or hear stories numerous times, they may begin to acquire the knowledge that Indigenous cultures have passed on for centuries. Repetition helps

readers and listeners to deeply learn the stories' lessons. Remembered and even partially understood, the story becomes knowledge belonging to the student.[1]

As spiritual and ethical guides, California Indian origin stories are worthy of great respect in the classroom. The stories generally reflect *animistic* beliefs in that they are "peopled" by animals, plants, and sometimes by bodies of water, rocks, or other objects that possess wills, souls, and spirit. Moreover, the stories sometimes associate specific animals with land or water and with clans or "sides" of the tribe, and individual tribal members may come to know and tell stories of particular animals as their helpers with great spiritual power. Animal characters fill the stories of Native California, often to the exclusion of human characters.

The stories can be read as allegories -- as examples of behavior to emulate or to avoid -- but the pervasiveness of animals in the stories goes beyond allegory and figures of speech. These stories can directly indicate the relationships that Indian peoples can have with animals as full members of their physical and spiritual communities. The narratives also often employ place names or directional terms to establish a specific sense of place. They guide the actions of tribal members and their leaders today as they build a positive future for their people and their homelands. Below are several suggestions[2] for teachers to incorporate origin stories into their instruction in classrooms with non-Indian students and, perhaps, American Indian students of many different tribes.

Recommended Instructional Approach to Origin Stories

Take a respectful, academic approach to origin stories: strive for student awareness of the importance of the stories to American Indian peoples, but do not press for student acceptance or belief in the stories. Do not promote or denigrate the stories; do not impose any particular view of them on your students.

Content: Knowledge and Factual Accuracy

- Try to increase your knowledge by reading supplemental material (especially primary sources), using online resources, attending conferences and workshops, and taking American Indian Studies courses at local colleges.

---

[1] For an elaboration of these ideas, see Dawn Maracle's discussion of her Iroquois Creation Story Lesson Plan at http://www.debramorningstar.com/docs/lessonplan_iroquois_creation.pdf .

[2] These suggestions are adapted with permission from Jennifer Norton's "Teaching About Religion in the World History Classroom," available at http://www.freedomforum.org/publications/first/california3rs/journalofthecaliforniacouncil.pdf.

- Recognize and admit your limited knowledge in certain areas. Disclaimers are important, especially when you have students of particular Native American communities in your classroom.
- Use primary source materials whenever possible. Familiarize yourself with origin stories, and select passages for students to read and discuss.
- Know the sociocultural background of the student population served by your school district. It will be important to obtain accurate and in-depth knowledge of those Native American communities and traditions represented in your classroom.
- Avoid comparing origin stories in ways that lead students to classify them as being superior or inferior to one another. Similarities and differences in stories must be pointed out carefully.
-

Climate: Creating a Respectful Classroom Climate

To foster a classroom environment that is receptive to the examination and discussion of unfamiliar origin stories, teachers must provide students with clear guidelines for appropriate behavior, language, and responses to the stories.

The first step is to apprise students of the course content early in the process and point out certain topics to be covered throughout the unit could be sensitive. Explain that the goal of examining such topics is to help students become better citizens in a diverse nation and world. Expectations should be supported with the creation of a classroom contract or charter that ensures that students accept the process.

A Classroom Charter: The classroom charter is an agreement created by the entire class in one or two class periods, based on the ideas of rights, responsibilities and respect.

Have students list all the annoying behaviors that they have experienced in classroom settings, from other students and teachers too. The behaviors will fall into three broad categories:

- Physically intrusive actions (pushing, tripping, etc.)
- Verbally annoying behaviors (interrupting, being a know-it-all)
- Verbally hurtful behaviors (pejoratives, put-downs, etc.)

Engage in a short discussion about the fact that these are disrespectful actions and words that have no place in a classroom. Guide the discussion to emphasize three main ideas:

- Students have the right to learn in a respectful environment.
- Teachers have the right to teach in a respectful environment.
- Each person in the class is responsible for ensuring that his or her own and others' rights are being respected.

Call the agreement a contract, charter, code of conduct, compact, or declaration. Print out a copy, have each student sign it as a guarantee of his or her agreement and adherence, and post it in the classroom. Make copies to send home for parents to read and sign. Throughout the lessons, as incidents arise, remind students of their agreement to treat others and their beliefs with respect.

Communication: The Parent Connection

Parents have a right to know what their children are being taught. To earn the trust of the parent community, teachers should explain, either during back-to-school night or in a letter home, what the lessons entail, including examination of Native American origin stories. Good communication with parents is the critical element in establishing and maintaining trust. For more suggestions for communicating with parents and with Native American communities, see "A Teacher's Guide to Community Engagement."

Response Journals and Respectful Engagement with Issues

Teachers concerned about inadvertently offending American Indian students in their classrooms may find **response journals** to be a useful tool for communicating individually with students. Just as teachers may fear accidentally saying the wrong thing, students may be acculturated to avoid correcting an instructor or may be too inhibited to do so in a classroom discussion. Response journals allow students to express privately and in writing any concerns they have with lesson content.

Students might also include in their journal entries any other information that they think classmates should know about their community's history or traditions. Always be aware of the possibility of limitations of students' knowledge of their own traditions. They have learned about them in their home-community, not academic, settings. Still, this technique helps teachers gauge how much their students know about the stories and traditions explored in the curriculum.