

Motivating Native American Students: Strategies for Educators

Sally Brownfield

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About The Author

Sally Brownfield lives at Kamilche, Washington, where she was raised in a traditional extended family. She is an enrolled citizen of Squaxin Island Tribe. She carries the name of her great-great grandmother, Sas po litsa.

She began her teaching career at Wa He Lute Indian School and taught at Hood Canal School District, which is a public school located within the Skokomish Indian Nation, for 16 years. She served two years as visiting faculty at Washington State University and has worked with tribal and public schools throughout the northwest. Sally holds a BA from The Evergreen State College and a MEd from Pacific Lutheran University.

Sally has been an active member of Western Washington Native American Education Consortium and Washington State Indian Education Association for many years. She served six years on the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory Board of Directors. Sally was named Outstanding Indian Educator of the Year by WSIEA in 2001, and was elected to Who's Who in American Education in 1992

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Introduction

This collection of information, ideas and strategies was put together to assist pre-service and in-service teachers working with American Indian students and communities. This is not a completed work, but the seeds of what is hoped to be a growing collection of experiences, research, and knowledge.

Included here is a bit of what I have learned from years of working with Native American students in public and tribal schools, from sharing ideas and experiences with other Native educators across the northwest.

I hope you will find some strategies here that will assist you in your work with American Indian children and their families.

Sally Brownfield

Getting Started

Though the title of this collection is about motivating students I did not include a separate section on motivation because it is integrated into all of the strategies. It was very difficult to divide and put labels on sections as they are all related.

As a teacher I know time is precious so I made this as concise as possible in a format easy to read and use. You can fold the cover back and the book will stand on its own so you can focus on one idea or strategy until you are ready to move on to another. I have left room for notes, hoping you will record your experiences, adjustments made for your own unique situation or other ideas generated by trying these out.

Resources are noted throughout as well as in the appendix.

Building Relationships

The more you give the more good things come to you.

Crow Indian Saying

What should I call you?

Ok, here it is: the number one question Native people get from non-Natives. Sometimes out of fear of being offensive, curiosity or politically correctness. The truth is if you are engaged in a conversation with a native person you should address him/her by their name. When speaking about a people you should find out what they prefer to be referred to as it may vary from place to place. The indigenous peoples within the United States are generally referred to as Native American, American Indian, First Peoples, or by their tribal group name such as Muckleshoot, Yakama, Lakota, Cheyenne... The safest is to go with Native American and if there is a preference you will probably be told or corrected. Accept it with grace without a long dialog about what you have heard or what others say.

Gifts

American Indian Cultures have always had traditions of gift giving. Northwest Native peoples have long been known for the custom of give-a-ways. To motivate students and to incorporate this value into your classroom, print the name of each student on a card. Place the cards in a container (a basket would be nice). A name or several names can be drawn to motivate students to be in class on time (in the morning, after recess, when switching classes...). A name is pulled from the cards and a gift can only be given to a person who is present. The names always go back into the container so every student is motivated every time. The gifts do not need to be great. School supplies and snacks are great for all ages. The gifts just have to be "cool" to whatever age you are working with.

Looks Can Be Deceiving

A widely mistaken stereotype is that all Indians have coal black hair (which they wear long), dark skin and dark eyes. Some do. Some don't. Native people come in a wide spectrum of hues, not unlike people from any race. So just because you don't have dark skinned boys and girls wearing braids doesn't mean you don't have Native children in your class.

I recently visited with an Indian educator from an urban area who wanted to start an Indian Club in her school but the principal didn't know why they would have an Indian club... they had no Indian students. The educator convinced the principal to let her try. Thirty students showed up to the first meeting. These students represented many different tribes. There were blondes, redheads, and brunettes. And in this huge urban school they now had a sense of belonging and support.

No Assumptions, Please!

Often times Native children are called upon when a teacher does not know the history, culture, or stories of a tribe. A typical scenario goes like this: "Henry, you're Skokomish, tell us a legend about salmon," or, "Where is Point-No-Point?" or "Who is the Tribal Chairperson and how does tribal government work'?" The teacher assumes the child knows all about the tribe's history and culture and puts the child on the spot to teach others. If a Native child has these things to share he/she will volunteer to share if he/she feels comfortable in the class and with the teacher and other students. Otherwise the teacher has just singled out this child based on race and is likely to make the child feel stupid which effectively discourages the child's future participation.

A Native child does not necessarily know any more about tribal history than another child knows or can share with others about pioneer days or the Civil War that their ancestors may have participated in. Some native families teach their children tribal history and culture, others are fairly mainstreamed in how and what they are taught and very little tribal history and culture is taught in public schools for them to learn.

Lighten up - Enjoy My Sense of Humor

Listen to the humor of your students and their families. Observe the humorous interactions between student and between generations. It is said that the humor of a culture is usually the last part of a culture to be understood by others. Native Americans have always had a deep sense of humor related to life. Humor is used to help get through what otherwise may be unbearable situations.

Allow humor in your classroom. Acknowledge your mistakes, share your problems and laugh at them. Giving students this example and encouraging them to laugh at their own mistakes will help build mutual understanding as well as an enjoyable classroom atmosphere

The Silent Student

Many educators come upon and are baffled by American Indian students who simply do not speak in class. They never volunteer a response and refuse to utter a word when prodded. This behavior may begin as early as fourth grade and is quite common in middle and high school. Some Indian students use silence and non-participation with teachers who do not show respect towards them and for whom they feel no respect. Other Indian students may use silence to reduce anxiety associated with speaking.

Indian students often want teachers to be personal friends and resolve academic problems in a social rather than a task-oriented manner. Teachers who gain a relatively high level of verbal participation by Indian students tend to respond to them in a personal way rather than keeping an impersonal professional distance. Body language is easily read by many Indian students. Recognize the child outside of class by greeting him/her by name and using positive non-verbal communication to show recognition before the student is ready to risk speaking in class.

Parent Visits to School

Many parents of Indian children have had less than positive; often extremely negative experiences in school. This can make it very uncomfortable and often difficult for Indian parents to come to the school.

School staff can break the ice by attending community events where parents will be, striking a casual conversation (not as an authority figure) and suggesting the idea of a parent stopping by the class to "see what we are doing". Give the parent an open window to visit instead of setting an appointed day and time. This will help to establish a feeling of being welcome. An open invitation given in a casual manner is non-threatening to parents. Something like: "We are always in the classroom between 1 and 3, feel free to come in any time... just drop by." If the parent doesn't show up in a couple weeks, give them a call and ask if they might be free to help with a class project. Don't give up! Many Indian parents are terrified of school and are apprehensive about having to send their children to these places. Rebuilding trust takes time and patience. Home visits may also be a place to begin.

Indian Boarding Schools

I am including this brief and general overview of Indian boarding schools to give you an idea of the school experience of many Native Americans and why some families still have difficulty trusting 'school'. In the 1870's the United States government, under the Department of War working jointly with a number of Christian religions set up Indian boarding schools across the country. All had the same philosophy, "Kill the Indian Save the Child". It was the law that Indian children attend these schools, many were taken by force. Children were not allowed anything native including language, religion, clothing, hairstyles... They were taught English, religion and to become farmers and domestic servants. They went to class part of the day and worked the rest of the day. Some children arrived at the schools at five years old and never returned home. Many children suffered abuse. School was the government institution used in a systematic approach to wipe out native cultures and families. Most of these schools closed between the 1940's - 1960's and there were changes made to curriculum in some areas in the mid 1930's.

Extended Families

Recognize the importance of the extended family. An Auntie or Uncle attending a parent/teacher conference may be part of a kinship obligation and should not be construed as a failure of the parent to be involved or concerned about their child's education. An older sibling, cousin or grandparent may attend school functions or check on a child's progress along with or instead of the parent. Get to know the families of the children in your classroom and their individual norms.

Watch Your Language!

Use friendly language when communicating with parents. Despite good intentions on the part of school personnel, Indian parents often leave confused and feeling inferior or stupid for not knowing most of what was said. This leads to non-participation by the parent(s). Who wants to go where they are made to feel stupid? Parents are not necessarily aware of the language and jargon of education. Explain programs being used instead of using trade names or terms for methodology they are probably not familiar with.

Learning Environment

She who does great things, should not attempt them alone.

Seneca Wisdom

I Belong

Make authentic Native American imagery a part of your room. This may include photos of gatherings you attend or activities you and your family participate in (pow wows, picnics, fishing sites). I have a dream catcher and a God's eye that hang in my room; students made them for me in years past. Siblings and cousins ask me about them and feel a connection when I tell them who made them. I have a drum I made and painted hanging in my class and I use it when appropriate. If you do not have these personal items there are wonderful Native American calendars available that will add to the character of your room and say to the Native student, "You belong here, you are a part of this place."

Note: If using calendar photos check that they are authentic to time, place and peoples depicted and use a balance of historic and current photos.

The Personal Posters

first week of class have students collect photographs, items, pictures from magazines that represent them. Give each student a piece of poster board to create a collage of themselves. These posters can be presented by the student if the student feels comfortable doing this. They are then displayed on a classroom wall or other appropriate space. In my school the 5th & 6th grades display their personal posters in the hallway, above their lockers. This helps to create a sense that the classroom is their personal place. The teacher does this as well (pictures of family, pets, maybe a button that says, "I Love To Teach," sports, hobbies) to get the group started, as well as to share herself/himself with the class. We can't expect students to reveal themselves if we do not.

Wait Time

Wait time is that time between when the teacher poses a question and student answers.

In their communities Native American children are often taught to think and be sure of the words they say, for once a word is spoken it can never be taken back. Precise communication is required. In the classroom this value is seen in the reflective learner, one who responds more slowly with a lower rate of error.

Teachers typically respond and reward the impulsive learner, the student who responds quickly and usually has a higher rate of error (answers given in 1- 5 seconds). Research has shown that extended wait time encourages higher-level thinking than simple recall and results in longer student responses. Waiting 10-15 seconds before allowing anyone to respond to a question or to begin a discussion will give most students time to formulate their thoughts.

Student Behavior Expectations

Students will buy into classroom rules they have been involved in developing.

Brainstorming: Solicit and list all appropriate ideas given about what is needed from all students to ensure all students a positive working environment. **Small Group Work:** Break class into small groups, no more than five people to a group. **Task:** decide which five expectations are the most important, write these on chart paper, present choices and reason to rest of class, post on wall for all to see. **Compare:** check charts for similarities and differences. List all ideas given, discuss, and prioritize. **Agree:** Come to a whole class agreement on the top five or six expectations. **Post:** Make a large bright poster of these expectations and post it in class for reference throughout the year.

Extended Ideas: It can be very positive to encourage each student to sign the poster as an acknowledgement and agreement of class behavior expectations. Have a student explain the expectations to any new students during the year and invite them to also sign the expectations poster.

Teacher Expectations

There are many assumptions made about what a quality teacher is, but students rarely get any say in how the teacher behaves in the classroom; here's their chance. In the first week of school, take time to not only listen, but to acknowledge student voice.

Brainstorming: List all appropriate ideas students have about what qualities a teacher should have. **Small groups:** divide class into small groups have each group come up with the five most important qualities in a teacher; write these on chart paper and present these ideas and the reasoning to the whole group; post the results on the wall. **Compare** all of the groups' ideas for likenesses and differences. **Whole Group:** prioritize the top five or six expectations for the teacher. **Post:** Make a big bright poster of these expectations to be referred to throughout the year. I have used this activity to guide my work with students. Each class is a unique mixture of human beings and given a chance they will tell you how best to work with them.

I Need My Own Space!

Many American Indian students have a difficult time being confined to a desk and chair for long periods of time. In most homes living spaces are shared, yet individuals often have "special" places to be alone to think. To accommodate this need classroom teachers can build in times and spaces to be used as these "special" places at school.

It doesn't take much. Allow some time each day when students can work at a place other than their desk, if they chose to. Allowing the freedom and choice to do some practice work sitting under a table, in the hallway, against a wall (either alone or with a chosen working partner) can go along way in encouraging productivity and building relationships. This can be done in a structured manner, without causing chaos.

"There's a Heartbeat..."

Morning music can set the mood and give students direction without a word being said. Of course you must set it up initially and let the class know what to do. Three to five minutes before class begins put on some fast paced music. When they hear the music begin they know it is time to get ready for class. When the music is over students should be seated and ready for class to begin. You must use the same selection at the same times each day.

This strategy creates a positive, up-beat atmosphere to begin the day. A cultural component can be included by using traditional, contemporary, or pow wow music; anything that is appropriate for class use, the students react positively to, and has 80 or more beats per minute. Play it loud! I have had great student response at the 4-8 grade level to Heartbeat by Red Thunder.

Curriculum

A law doesn't do any good until it is enforced, so we had to learn the legal process.

John Echohawk, Pawnee Attorney

NO "I" For Indian

Companies are still making, and teachers are still buying and using alphabet cards (books and other materials) that depict an Indian for the letter "I," even though animals or objects are depicted on all the other letter cards. This gives a very clear and negative message to Native American people that American Indians are less than human and on the same level as animals or objects. This is a great insult. There are many long and short "I" words that fit in the categories of the rest of the symbols being represented. "E" for Eskimo, is also used, the message is the same.

I once spent 5 months trying to convey this to a teacher I worked with. She had taken extensive training in a nationally recognized writing program that used these images and messages in their materials. She was sure this company wouldn't do anything unsuitable. She defended it by stating that it should make her Native American children feel good because they were represented. After many discussions the teacher did finally come to the realization that the message was negative and used an alternate image.

Dual Citizenship

This concept is rarely talked about in regard to American Indian peoples but is experienced by them everyday. This topic of study can assist the American Indian (and non-Indian student alike) in understanding the complexities of living in 'two worlds.' An in-depth study of this sort can only take place at the high school level. This would be very powerful as a part of the required government classes in all high schools.

I have taught a course such as this for an integrated high school class. It was very successful. It not only provided knowledge of tribal, state, and federal government relations, but validated the American Indian student's place in our society and opened up ideas non-Indian students had never been exposed to.

Resource: American Indian Citizenship in Balance, 1994, Close Up Foundation, Educational Outreach Department, 44 Canal Center Plaza, Alexandria, Dual. 22314-1592, (1-800-256-7387)

Tribal Sovereignty

Sovereignty, a word not often used in school curriculum. Something usually assumed in American history classes. Meaning independent or self-governing, this is how tribal nations within the United States are described by law. Tribal governments can have great impact on the communities around them. Today some Tribes and First Peoples Nations are the largest employers in the area surrounding their reservations, adding significantly to local economies and infrastructure. These sovereign governments also maintain services for their citizens that may include; education, health, social services, natural resource and law enforcement. Often times these tribal agencies have close relations to their federal and state counterparts. Washington State's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's Indian Education Office has developed a curriculum on tribal sovereignty for public school use. It has also integrated this topic into grade level expectations, with the understanding that tribal sovereignty is important for all student to comprehend.

What's A Treaty?

American Indian treaties should be included as part of a study of the United States. Colonial treaty making with a number of nations could be studied at the same time. Treaties made with Native Nations and Tribes should also be a natural part of any Washington State History course. By including 'Indian' treaties as part of the regular U.S. and/or state history course, American Indians feel a part of this history and the instructor will have a chance to pique the interest in this and other aspects of American Indian history. Not all tribes have treaties with the U.S. Government.

Resource: Questions & Answers on Treaty Rights published in 1993 by Honor Inc., 2647 N. Stowell Ave., Milwaukee, WI 5321.

Math Matters

The possibilities of making math concepts relevant to native culture are endless. Math can be taught/learned using Native American star quilts, geometric designs, basket designs, beadwork, bentwood boxes. There are cultural experts that can support teachers in these areas. Just call your local tribe and ask. Another great resource is the local tribal natural resource department. They can help you with fisheries data as well as local environmental issues and data that can be used in graphs, charts, making predictions...Tribes are often more than happy to schedule presenters for classrooms. Using tribal information and resources can make learning more meaningful to native students and rigorous for all students.

Let's Get Physical - Fish Trap Game

This game can be played by children of all ages. It can be set up with a traditional fish story, or the teacher can do a lesson using the contemporary story and teacher guide: Fisherman on the Puyallup (available through United Indians of All Tribes, Seattle or Puyallup Tribe, Tacoma).

Directions: All you need is three to sixteen players. 'Fishers join hands in a line, like a net. The 'fish' are given a lead of about 20', after which the fishers together try to trap the fish. The fish run and dodge trying to keep from being caught. The individual fisher cannot touch or trip the fish. A catch is only made when the two ends of the trap meet with the fish inside. The fish must then give up without trying to break out of the net. The game can continue with others being the fish. It is a good outside game for physical exercise. It also teaches cooperation, as all the fishers work together to catch the fish. This aspect can be debriefed after the game.

"Indian Arts & Crafts"

Know the authentic method and use proper materials for any Native American art projects you have students do. If you don't know the methods and materials seek the information from a reliable source or have a Native American Artist come in. It is appropriate to offer such a person an honorarium and for them to be treated as an educator, not an entertainer. Avoid arts and crafts activities that trivialize native dress, dance, beliefs, customs, structures and art. An example of this is paper bag costumes or egg carton totem poles. There are hundreds of educational books on the market with activities associated with learning about American Indian culture. Most of them are quite offensive to American Indian people. Check with your school's Indian Education Program or a local tribe's cultural resource department for help and/or information.

Biographies

Introduce American Indian personalities as appropriate role models with whom children can identify. Include well-known accomplished American Indians from all levels (community to nationally and internationally known) within the curriculum. These role models need to include men and women from pre-contact time to the present. **Often used and inappropriate:** Citing only "Great Chiefs" from the 1800's. This limited exposure teaches children that the great American Indians have been dead for two hundred years, making the study of American Indian leaders irrelevant to them. It also perpetuates the practice of textbooks that speak of American Indians in the past tense only, inferring that native peoples and cultures no longer exist. There are accomplished American Indians in all areas that can be included in literature, social studies, science, math, the arts etc.

Resource: Extraordinary American Indians, Susan Avery & Linda Skinner, Children's Press, 1992. Also check with local tribes, museums, or local publications for well-known Native people from the local area.

Methods

Our secret is we never give up.

Wilma Mankiller, Cherokee

The Big Picture

Show students several samples of acceptable, successfully completed projects or papers first, before beginning to teach the component parts. If students know where they are going the steps along the way will make more sense to them. While teaching the component parts refer back to the samples so students can see how they all fit together. If visual learners are not shown what is expected of them it is very difficult to be successful. It is like providing the jigsaw puzzle pieces but not the picture.

A visual cue is important, as a majority of American Indian students are visual learners. Traditionally, American Indian children learn most tasks through observation.

Support Me and My Learning

Depending on local tribal social norms and customs support can be many things, but common to all is the personal relationship, support of self and then supports for learning. Some common ways of showing support may be sitting close, leaning forward, listening intently, touching, nodding, smiling and being available.

Do not over correct; rather find alternate ways of showing how to complete a task. Demonstrating a skill is very important as a traditional way of learning is by observation. A teacher can talk a process through while doing it with the student observing or while the student participates congruently.

Please Don't Shut Me Down

A shutdown is when a student is there but not taking in anything going on in the room. Some shutdowns come directly as a result of what teachers chose to include in how they teach. I became acutely aware of its effects as a teacher when taking a math class at a major university. The professor diverted from the lesson to tell a story about some people on a stagecoach being chased by Indians. He made a remark, "We all know what Indians do to people on stagecoaches" as he went on I shut down, going into my own thoughts about why he was saying this. I spent the rest of the class writing about my reaction and reflecting on how this same kind of thing, that happens all too often in our k-12 classrooms, effects native children. Not only does the student not get anything out of that day's lesson but distrust and disrespect builds for the teacher as a person and anything he/she tries to teach becomes suspicious.

Peer Tutoring

Most Indian children are a part of an extended family. These children are accustomed to spending much time with groups of children who play and work together and who learn from each other. In many traditional cultures, younger children are looked after by older children. The younger children learn through observation of and participation in activities with the older children. In a school setting this traditional learning style can benefit both younger and older students. Not only is this a teaching method that works but there is an infusion of a cultural value from the home into the school culture. This seldom happens for Indian children.

When a fourth grader teaches a reading buddy in the first grade that he must stop where there is a period, the younger student hears yet another voice and another model, (often a non-threatening voice) while the older student practices fluency, inflection, and questioning techniques and has a purpose which will build confidence.

Group Problem Solving

Encourage students to work in groups to eliminate frustration for both the teacher and the Native child. Allowing two to six students to work together to solve problems provides students the opportunity for oral language development and confidence in understanding a concept before being expected to demonstrate knowledge in other practices or on an assessment. Instead of individual oral reports give the option of panel discussions. Many math assignments can be given as group problem-solving tasks. This strategy can be used in any academic area. When the class is given individual tasks still encourage the whole group to help out. If giving reports on the United States, offer a list of students and the states they are researching. Encourage everyone to be on the look out for information they may come across that may help someone else. It becomes the responsibility of the group to see that everyone is successful. If an individual does not do well then the group did not provide the help needed. Plans for group problem solving are more likely to be understood if the teacher and students develop them together.

Forward March ... Not Yet

Because of the structure of most schools, especially elementary, students move from place to place in an orderly fashion. Often, this task is not taught, just expected. When, in a child's life is he/she expected to form a line with 15 to 25 other children, maintaining this form while maneuvering corners for a sizable distance? Often this results in frustrated teachers and students alike.

Try this: Teach the procedure at the beginning of the year. Demonstrate what a functional line looks like, using older students or adults. Then, at times when the class line may not be straight and quiet, quietly ask the class, "What should our class line look like?" When they get this down ask, "What should our class line sound like?". Do not point out any individual positively or negatively. Another good strategy is to make comments such as "Oh, this couldn't be my class, I know my class knows how to line up properly." The class will straighten up to meet your expectations. This will also instill a sense of pride in the group.

Appendix

It does not require many words to speak the truth.

Chief Joseph, Nez Perce

Notes:

FEDERALLY RECOGNIZED TRIBES OF WASHINGTON STATE



Forward March ... Not Yet

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Non-Federally Recognized Tribes in Washington

Note: Washington State does not have state-recognized tribes, as some states do. The following Tribes are landless, non-federally recognized. Some are categorized as non-profit corporations; some are pending federal recognition.

Chinook Tribe
Kikiallus Indian Nation
Snohomish Tribe
Steilacoom Tribe

Duwamish Tribe
Marietta Band of Nooksack Tribe
Snoqualmoo Tribe

Resources in Washington State

Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

PO Box 47200

Olympia, Wa. 98504-7200

(360) 725-6160

Contacts: Indian Education/Community Outreach

Denny Hurtado, Program Supervisor

Joan Banker, Instructional Program Specialist

Governor's Office of Indian Affairs

531 15th Ave. SE

PO Box 40909

Olympia, Wa. 98504-0909

(360) 586-3653

Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians

1827 NE 44th Ave., Suite 130

Portland, Or. 97213-1443

(503) 249-5770

American Indian Community Center

E. 905 3rd Avenue

Spokane, Wa. 99202

(509) 535-0886

Northwest Indian College (Main Campus)

2522 Kwina Rd

Bellingham, Wa. 98226-9217

(360) 676-2772

Potlatch Fund

801 2nd Ave., Suite 98104

Seattle, Wa. 98104

(206) 624-6076

United Indians of All Tribes Foundation

PO Box 99100

Seattle, Wa. 98199

(206) 285-4425

Northwest Indian Fish Commission

6730 Martin Way E.

Olympia, Wa. 98516

(360) 438-1180

Seattle Indian Center

611 12th Ave., Suite 300

Seattle, Wa. 98144

(206) 329-8700