

Aboriginal Content Validation

Guidelines for Evaluating Learning Resources for and about Aboriginal People

1. Validation and/or Involvement by Aboriginal People
2. Historical Accuracy
3. The Origins of Aboriginal People
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Learning resources that accurately portray the cultural and racial diversity of Aboriginal people in our society will encourage students to understand:

- a) the historical roles and contributions of Aboriginal people
- b) the forces that shaped those roles and contributions, and
- c) why the contemporary roles and contributions of Aboriginal groups are different than in the past.

Textbooks and library resource materials that misinterpret Aboriginal people and their cultures are inappropriate. The key concept underlying the following guidelines is balance. Aboriginal people and their cultures should be described as objectively as possible.

1. Validation and/or Involvement by Aboriginal People

- Were Aboriginal people involved in the development of the resource?
- Was the resource validated by an Aboriginal group or elders?
- Are the author and/or illustrator well-qualified to deal with specific Aboriginal content?

2. Historical Accuracy

Aboriginal cultures are often portrayed as static and unchanging. Jack Forbes (1969) describes the problem as follows:

“it is technically incorrect to speak of “Navaho culture”, “Quechan culture”, or “Sioux culture” without a reference to a particular time period unless it is fully understood that one is speaking about a fluid, changing “tradition” which has only one basic, unifying element, that is, that it is associated with particular people. “Navaho culture” before 1000 was very different from 1960.” (p.134)

Writing about Aboriginal cultures as if it were static implies that Aboriginal peoples are only part of the past, that they do not exist in contemporary life.

Does the resource:

- provide accurate information about sites, dates, actions and statements about treaties?
- include the Aboriginal’s perspectives on historical events?
- show the contributions of Aboriginal nations to law, medicine, philosophy, sports and literature?
- explain the economic, political and cultural differences and similarities between Aboriginal people and other people that have led to conflict and the current status of people in our society?
- describe Aboriginal heroes with different political viewpoints, not just those who are/were friendly and helpful to other people?

3. The Origins of Aboriginal People

Aboriginal people have their own perceptions of their origins and do not usually believe that Aboriginal people were immigrants to North America. Aboriginal people believe that they are the original North Americans. Many Dene First Nations and Inuit peoples state that they follow the Bering Strait theory.

Does the resource:

- give only one theory of origination, that Aboriginal people migrated to North America via the Bering Strait?
- present the two theories, an Aboriginal theory and the “Bering Strait” theory, but give more importance to one of them?
- acknowledge that most Aboriginal peoples believe that they originated here.

4. Cultural Authenticity

Arlene Hirschfelder makes this comment in *American Indian Stereotypes in the World of Children*;

“The Non-Native-created “Indian” imagery consists of inauthentic representation of Native people and cultures. This imagery is used in books for one or more of the following functions: For humour, by portraying Indians as silly and laughable; for fantasy, by portraying animals or non-Native children as ‘Indians’, or by placing ‘Indians’ in a fictionalized; mystical past; for purely decorative purposes, as in the frequent addition of a headdress in a manner unrelated to the text; and for symbolic reasons, employed to suggest violence, danger or fear. Whether used for comical, fanciful, decorative or symbolic purposes, this ‘Indian’ imagery degrades Native people and distorts non-Native children’s perceptions of Native people. These images play a crucial role in distorting and warping non-Native children’s attitudes toward Native people”.

Does the resource:

- respectfully portray Aboriginal culture in terms of its underlying values and belief systems?
- communicate the positive cultural traditions of Aboriginal people, such as a strong sense of family relationships, a sense of honour, respect for elders, humour and responsibility for the welfare of the total group?
- show that reverence for life is expressed through Aboriginal music, dance, art and literature?
- accurately portray the traditional world views and the cultural meaning of artifacts, such as headdresses, peace dances, and pipes?
- take sacred stories out of context, translate and write them down?
- equate sacred stories to fables, fairy tales or magic?

5. Cultural Diversity

Some people tend to speak of Aboriginal people as if all Aboriginal people were, and are, alike. Aboriginal nations are diverse, and each culture/tribe has its own world views, political and social organizations, and cultural ceremonies. Speaking of Aboriginal people in terms of the aboriginal group they belong to (instead of just “Aboriginals” or “Indians”) helps to personalize and humanize them as individuals, and eliminate inaccurate representation and over-generalization.

Does the resource:

- show the diversity as well as similarities among cultures, tribes and languages of Aboriginal peoples, now and in the past?
- identify types of clothing, housing, and other cultural artifacts belonging to a particular nation?

6. Negative Images

Stereotyping

The definition of stereotyping is to characterize an entire group in a specific way and to attribute these qualities to all individuals who belong to that group. Probably the best known Aboriginal stereotype is of tomahawk-wielding, fierce and violent men, wearing feather headdresses. Stereotyping, both positive and negative, is harmful.

Does the resource:

- portray Aboriginal people as maliciously attacking European settlers and showing a disregard for human life?
- portray Aboriginal people authentically rather than as mythical human beings appearing mostly in the past (as in “cowboys and Indians” movies)?
- describe Aboriginal people by using exaggerated or derogatory physical descriptions?
- show Aboriginal people spending a lot of time dancing?
- imply that Aboriginal culture and values are unsuited to a modern, technological society?
- portray reverse discrimination or stereotyping?

Negative Tone

References to Aboriginal people often focus on what they did not have and did not do. One common way of ignoring Aboriginal people is to omit any mention of their contribution and positive behaviors.

Does the resource:

- focus on what the Aboriginal people accomplished rather than what they did not have or did not do?
- include the traditional world view regarding the proper use of the land and its resources.
- insure that Aboriginal peoples knowledge of: (a) technology, (b) geography, (c) agriculture, (d) medicine, and (e) law and order are included?
- give the message that Aboriginal people really had nothing to offer anyone?

Subtle Bias

Subtle bias, being difficult to detect, may do more harm than obvious stereotyping or negative comments. Subtle bias undermines people's perceptions of Aboriginal cultural roots, values and ideas.

Does the resource:

- present only middle-class European values as ideals, in terms of wealth and success?
- give one the vague feeling that being Aboriginal is not such a good thing?

Paternalism

Aboriginal people are often presented as having to be taken care of. It is implied that they really do not know how to cope. Sometimes people give the impression they must save the Aboriginal people from themselves and their beliefs.

Does the resource:

- show Aboriginal people as confronting and solving problems for themselves, rather than other people solving the problems for them?
- suggest that Aboriginal people were unable to survive before the arrival of Europeans?
- suggest that Aboriginal people have no minds of their own and need to have everything done for them?

7. Presentation of Aboriginal Women

Aboriginal women are often presented in domestic roles or doing menial work. In fact, many Aboriginal societies were matrilineal; women were the heads of the clans. In many cases, Aboriginal women are completely ignored. The Aboriginal men, who were peace makers and hunters, receive all the attention.

Does the resource:

- show that women were contributing members of their society?
- show contemporary Aboriginal women as role models?
- show Aboriginal women only in domestic situations?
- present Aboriginal women as “baby makers”?
- present Aboriginal women as docile?
- use denigrating terms to describe Aboriginal women?
- give the impression that Aboriginal women did not exist?

8. Language/Terminology

The language used in resources should not stigmatize Aboriginal people nor make fun of particular dialects.

Does the resource:

- use full names of Aboriginal characters, or are Aboriginals labeled as “the Indian”, “Injun Joe”, and so on? Are names treated as having significance in the language or are they mocked or treated humorously (e.g., Gitchi Gumdrop)?
- mock the speech of Aboriginal people, (e.g., grunting, whooping, and howling their way through a book or using stilted phrases such as “many moons ago”, “me come”, etc)? If so, what purpose does this serve?
- use derogatory words such as buck/brave, squaw, papoose, Indian Princess, half-breed, mixed blood, savage, warpath, warrior, nomadic, costume, slave?
- use phrases such as “wild as an Indian”, “turning Indian”, “Indian file” and “Indian giver”?

9. Photos/Illustrations

There are too many illustrations featuring painted, whooping, befeathered Indians closing in on too many forts, maliciously attaching “peaceful” settlers or simply looming menacingly in the background. There are also too many illustrations of the incompetent, childlike Indian.

A number of resources for students repeatedly refer to Aboriginal people in an impersonal and anonymous way, and then reinforce the anonymity with illustrations that are nondescript, suggesting that Aboriginal people belong in the past and do not exist today.

Does the resource:

- accurately portray clothing, hairstyles, headdresses, and homes for the particular nation and history illustrated?
- show Aboriginals wearing traditional dress in situations where they would ordinarily wear the same type of contemporary clothing as other people?
- show certain traditional sacred items (e.g., the pipe, bundles, etc.) when these items are not to be shared with everyone?
- have pictures depicting/illustrating details of traditional sacred rituals (e.g. Sun Dance, tea dance, ghost dance)?

10. Viewpoint

Many resources have been Eurocentric, ignoring Aboriginal peoples’ view on important issues such as treaties and the settlement of North America. The Aboriginal viewpoint should be reflected in anything Aboriginal people were/are involved in.

Does the resource:

- present the Aboriginal viewpoint where relevant?
- show and describe events so that all readers will understand the Aboriginal peoples’ perspectives?
- show that Aboriginals were fighting and/or defending their land?
- show that Aboriginals were killed off by disease brought here by Europeans and not by the “Europeans”’ “Superior” brains and bravery?
- show that Columbus and other Europeans did not “discover” America?
- romanticize Aboriginals as “noble savages”?

References

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Henry, Jeanette, Textbooks and the American Indian, American Indian Historical Society, San Francisco: Indian Historian Press, 1976

Hirschfelder, Arlene B., American Indian Stereotypes in the World of Children: A Reader and Bibliography, United States: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1982