

Native American History in a Box: A New Approach to Teaching Native American Cultures

EMORY C. HELMS¹, AUSTIN M. HITT², JASON A. SCHIPPER³, and ADAM M. JONES⁴

¹*Department of Secondary Education Programs, Coastal Carolina University, Conway, South Carolina, USA*

²*Secondary Science Education, Coastal Carolina University, Conway, South Carolina, USA*

³*Global Studies, Carolina Forest High School, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, USA*

⁴*Global Studies and U.S. History, St. James High School, Murrells Inlet, South Carolina, USA*

This article describes the Native American History in a Box curriculum which is designed to introduce elementary and middle-level students to Native American cultures. The curriculum consists of a five day unit addressing the following concepts pertaining to Native American Nations: settlements, tools, sustenance, pottery, and contact with Europeans. In addition, the development of the curriculum, the daily lessons, and the activities are discussed. Each daily lesson includes step-by-step instructions and the required materials. Finally, the authors discuss some of the pragmatic issues that influenced the development and implementation of the curriculum.

Keywords: Native Americans, elementary, middle level, curriculum, unit plan

Introduction

Despite positive changes in the way Native Americans are represented in the media and in historical texts, students still have a limited understanding of the diversity and complexity of Native American cultures (Fleming 2006; Meek 2006). Even today, many students' perceptions of Native Americans are derived from traditional western movies that depict plains "Indians" as the antagonists of civilization and progress (Meek 2006). Another common misconception among students is a view analogous to Jean Jacques Rousseau's concept of the noble savage. In this perspective, Native Americans are viewed as peoples who have a relatively simple wandering-and-gathering lifestyle (Fleming 2006). Both of these perspectives are inaccurate and simplistic caricatures and generalizations.

Unfortunately, education research reveals that school systems can also be responsible for propagating Native American stereotypes in several ways. First, schools may have mascots and logos that are insensitive caricatures of Native Americans (Pewewardy 2004). Second, textbooks often present a simplistic or inaccurate view of Native American cultures (Sanchez 2007). Third, teachers are fre-

quently unfamiliar with Native American cultures and may not have adequate curriculum materials with which to teach students (Pewewardy 2004). Fourth, when teachers address Native American cultures, their instruction may perpetuate stereotypes. For example, one common approach to introducing students to Native American cultures is to focus on the lives of famous Native Americans such as Crazy Horse and Geronimo (Haukoos 1996). This focus on the accomplishments of extraordinary individuals or heroes tends to trivialize ethnic cultures by reinforcing stereotypes and misconceptions (Banks 2008). For students to change stereotypical perspectives, they need to investigate the diverse cultural and technological achievements of Native Americans in a meaningful way.

Studying Native American cultures is also important because it helps students learn about the intricate connections between humans and the environment. By studying how Native Americans adapted and utilized natural resources, students gain a deeper understanding of the role the environment plays in shaping human societies. The powerful influence of the environment on humans is revealed by research in anthropology, biology, and history. For example, biologist Jared Diamond's bestseller *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997) and historian Alfred Crosby's *Ecological Imperialism* (1986) identify environmental conditions as the primary factors influencing the development of societies.

Anthropological and historical research indicates that Native Americans adapted to the local conditions, but they

Address correspondence to Emory C. Helms, Chair, Department of Secondary Education Programs, Coastal Carolina University, 211H Kearns Hall, Conway, SC 29528, USA. E-mail: helms@coastal.edu

also transformed the environment to meet their needs. Before Europeans came to North America, Native Americans were using sophisticated environmental management strategies to increase the production and harvest of natural resources. The environmental historian William Cronon (2003, 51) recounts that Native American groups in the New England territories routinely burned forests to promote the growth of grasses and oaks that in turn provided niches for prized game animals such as deer, elk, beaver, hare, turkey, and quail. In effect, the bountiful flora and fauna that the colonists observed and reported back to Europe was the result of the environmental management practices of the Native Americans living in the region.

To teach students about Native American cultures and the intimate connections between humans and the environment, we developed a hands-on curriculum titled *Native American History in a Box*. This thematic unit consists of lessons and activities that are designed to engage students in hands-on learning experiences. All of the lessons are aligned with the national standards and use multiple learning modalities to address the needs of diverse learners. In addition, each lesson/activity is accompanied by supporting teacher materials such as overheads, lesson plans, take-home extension activities, and formative and summative assessments. We initially developed the curriculum for eighth grade United States history classes in South Carolina where Native American nations are discussed. Middle school teachers have informed us that the *Native American History in a Box* is engaging for their students and that it improves their understanding of Native American culture. Starting in the fall of 2007 an adapted version of the *Native American History in a Box* curriculum is being used to teach upper-level elementary students about Native American cultures. To date, hundreds of elementary and middle school students have been introduced to the unit.

Limitations of the Curriculum

The *Native American History in a Box* curriculum was influenced by external and pragmatic issues. We acknowledge that the curriculum is a limited and generalized exploration of Native American cultures. Ideally, the unit would explore in detail one or two local Native American nations over a two- to three-week period or even longer. However, due to the large number of state standards and a relatively limited instructional time, we were compelled to create a five-day curriculum. Our goal was to design a curriculum that would motivate students to learn more about Native American cultures.

Development of Native American History in a Box

The concept of the *Native American History in a Box* curriculum was conceived by the staff of the Horry County

Museum in Conway, South Carolina. In the summer of 2005, an outline for an instructional unit was created by two candidates in the Secondary Masters in the Arts of Teaching Program at Coastal Carolina University. Then, through a joint collaboration between the candidates, college of education faculty, and personnel at the Horry County Museum, the outline evolved into a five-lesson hands-on unit. While the physical components of the unit were being created, it became necessary to develop an efficient storage and transportation system. It was decided that all of the curriculum materials for each day should be placed in separate clear boxes, and these boxes would be stored in an easily transportable trunk. It was at this point that the title for the curriculum became *Native American History in a Box*.

After the curriculum materials were completed, they were field tested on approximately two hundred middle school and elementary students during the summer of 2005. As part of this pilot study teachers and students filled out surveys about the strengths and weaknesses of the *Native American History in a Box* curriculum. One major concern the teachers had was the need for additional training and class time to complete the curriculum. Because the teachers were unfamiliar with the materials, they had to learn the lessons as they taught it, which extended instructional time. In response to the teachers' comments, the Horry County Museum, which was charged with distributing the materials, started sending out the curriculum materials one to two weeks in advance of the planned instructional date. In addition, teacher training sessions were scheduled to improve teachers' knowledge of the materials.

However, most of the comments from teachers were positive and emphasized how the *Native American History in a Box* unit enhanced their instruction by providing students with interesting hands-on activities. The teachers were generally satisfied with the materials: lesson plans, overheads, content outlines, review sheets, and assessment instruments. In addition, a majority of the surveyed teachers stated that they were interested in using the curriculum again and would recommend it to their colleagues.

The survey data also revealed that students were generally satisfied with the *Native American History in a Box* curriculum. A majority of students found the hands-on activities, such as designing tools, making pottery, and building replicas of Native American dwellings, fun and educational. Students also commented that they enjoyed the homework assignments because the work involved family members and other adults in their communities.

In the fall of 2005 the *Native American History in a Box* curriculum was presented at the South Carolina Council for the Social Studies (SCCSS) Annual Conference. Based on the positive feedback from educators at the conference, the curriculum development team decided to apply for the 2006 Christa McAuliffe Reach for the Stars Award. The *Native American History in a Box* curriculum won the award and received a \$1,500 stipend provided by the Fund for the Advancement of Social Studies Education (FASSE).

The stipend was used to create three additional trunks that could be disseminated to local middle schools. Currently, the curriculum is being taught to elementary and middle school students.

Organizational Structure

The Native American History in a Box curriculum is an introduction to Native American cultures. The curriculum focuses primarily on local Native Americans inhabiting the Coastal Plains but it also teaches students about Native American nations within five broad geographical regions: the Great Plains, southwest, northeast/woodland, southeast and Mississippi Valley, and northwest. Students learn about the connections between the environment and Native Americans' adaptations in the context of their housing, food, pottery, trade, and their initial contacts with Europeans. (See the appendix for the materials list.) The curriculum is designed to be used as a unit that consists of five connected lessons. Depending on the available class time, each lesson can last one to three class periods. In the school district where the curriculum materials were tested, the middle school teachers were allotted only five days of instruction on Native American cultures. The materials can be completed in this time frame, but we strongly recommend that teachers allow for more time in order to engage students and provide detailed coverage of the contributions of Native Americans.

We also recommend that teachers focus on "local" Native American nations and cover them in detail. Teachers can invite guest speakers and bring in materials that relate to local Native Americans. For example, the Native American History in a Box curriculum emphasizes Native Americans living along the Coastal Plains such as the Waccamaw and Catawba Nations, because of their connections to the local communities. We encourage teachers to modify the curriculum to include information about Native American nations in or near their communities. For more information and free downloadable versions of the curriculum, please visit the following Web site, <http://ww2.coastal.edu/helms>.

Day-by-Day Lessons and Activities

Lesson 1. Early Native American life in North America and the Coastal Plains

During the first lesson, the students investigate the settlement patterns and the styles of housing created by Native American nations throughout North America and specifically the region in which the students live.

Step 1. After entering the classroom, the students respond to the questions: "Have you and your family ever moved? Why?" They share their responses with the entire class.

Step 2. Students are given a blank timeline and, with assistance from the teacher, they record the following infor-



Fig. 1. Models of Native American houses.

mation: dates, regions, names, and brief descriptions of Native American settlements.

Step 3. Next, the teacher presents an overhead for the settlements of early Native Americans. The teacher specifically emphasizes the settlements of Native American nations located near the students' communities. The teacher also discusses the climatic conditions and the available resources within the five geographic regions of North America—the northeast, southeast, Great Plains, southwest, and northwest—but specifically focuses on local environmental conditions. Students take notes and record the information on a blank map.

Step 4. The students are then divided into groups based on the five geographical regions. The teacher discusses the diverse forms of housing used by Native Americans with a specific focus on local Native American nations.

Step 5. Each group of students is provided with a variety of materials to create a scale model (approximately 12" × 12") of a Native American dwelling from a distinct geographical region. After constructing the models, the student groups present them to the whole class (see figure 1).

Lesson 2. Tools used and created by early Native Americans in North America and the Coastal Plains

The second lesson is designed to develop students' understanding of the tools used by Native Americans across North America and focuses on locally produced tools (see figure 2).

Step 1. After entering the classroom the students respond to the question: "What tools would you use if you had to build a tree house?" They then share their ideas with the entire class.

Step 2. The teacher discusses the similarities and differences between the tools developed by Native Americans and the variety of tools available today.

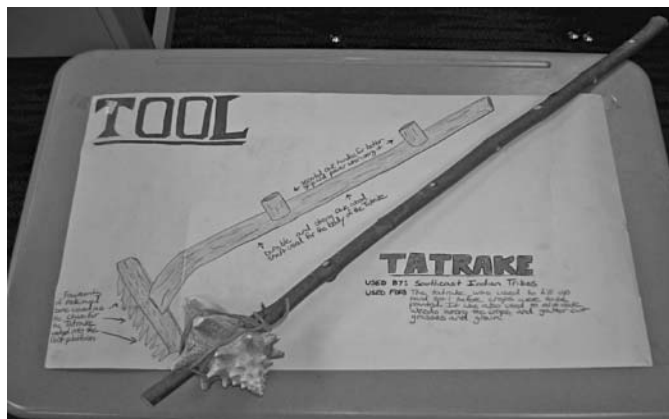


Fig. 2. Example of Native American tool poster.

Step 3. The students are divided into groups, and each group designs a tool that they believe would be useful to the Native American nations located near their communities. Some students may have an interest in Native American nations from different geographical regions and should be encouraged to create a tool from that region. The student groups then sketch an image of their tool on poster board or build a replica of the tool (see Figure 2). Each group is required to identify the tool's purpose, label all of its functional parts, and identify the local materials that are used to construct the tool.

Lesson 3. Sustenance of early Native American tribes in North America and along the Coastal Plains

During the third lesson, the students develop a better understanding of the foods consumed and the cultivation practices of early Native Americans across North America and their own geographical region (see figure 3).

Step 1. After entering the classroom, the students respond to the question: "What is your favorite food and explain how you would make it from scratch?" The students then share their ideas with the whole class.

Step 2. The teacher identifies foods consumed by Native Americans in different geographical regions and specifically in regions near their communities.

Step 3. The students are divided into groups, and each group is assigned one of the five geographic regions discussed above. Each student in the group is assigned a season, and he or she designs a four-course menu using food items that are available during that season.

Step 4. For homework the students create a list of all of the food items in their homes that were used by Native Americans.

Lesson 4. Early Native American pottery along the Coastal Plains

During the fourth lesson, the students develop an understanding of the skills, techniques, various styles, and materials used in the creation of pottery by early Native Ameri-



Fig. 3. Example Native American menu.

can nations. Specifically, the lesson focuses on local Native American pottery.

Step 1. After entering the classroom students answer the following questions: "After a big holiday dinner, what would you do with the leftovers? What would Native Americans do?" The students share their responses with the entire class.

Step 2. The students then discuss the different food items they found in their homes that have a connection with Native American cultures.

Step 3. The teacher then discusses the function of different forms of pottery and presents samples or images of local Native American pottery. The teacher also discusses the diverse materials used to make pottery (sand, moss, seashells, charcoal, clay, etc.) and different techniques for making pottery.

Step 4. The students then create models of local Native American pottery using materials provided by the teacher (see figure 4).

Step 5. For homework the students are required to interview their parents, grandparents, or older citizens to find out how they used to store food items before the advent of modern plastic storage containers and refrigeration systems.

Lesson 5. Initial contact between Native Americans and Europeans

The final lesson focuses on the trade of goods and the unfortunate transmission of diseases from Europeans to Native Americans. The teacher introduces these concepts



Fig. 4. Models of Native American pottery.

and then divides the entire class into two groups. Half of the class assumes the role of the Native Americans and the other half fills the roles of European traders and settlers. Next the students engage in the Trade Game in which both sides exchange game pieces that are representative of the goods that were exchanged between Native Americans and Europeans. To simulate the language barrier, students are not allowed to talk during the game, making it even more difficult to obtain the goods they are assigned to get.

Typical trade items for the Native Americans included fish, tobacco, pottery, and fruit, while typical trade items for the Europeans included horses, blankets, firearms, and jewels (see figure 5). The students follow exchange rates that existed between Native Americans and European traders. In addition, some of the European goods are contaminated with small pox as indicated by a red dot on the game pieces. When Native American players receive such a piece they are removed from the game in order to represent the Native Americans' susceptibility to small pox. The purpose of the



Fig. 5. Trade game pieces.

Trade Game is to demonstrate to students the dynamics of the trade between Native Americans and Europeans and to underscore the devastating impact that introduced diseases had on the indigenous North American populations. At the end of the game the students then discuss the financial benefits and the ethical and moral consequences of contacts between Native Americans and Europeans. The procedures are stated below.

Step 1. After entering the classroom, the students respond to the questions: "Why was there a general decrease in Native American populations after Europeans came to North America? What could have caused the populations to decline?" The students then share their ideas with the entire class.

Step 2. The teacher presents the content information on the route European discoverers took to North America, the country that the settlers were from, and European influences on local Native Americans.

Step 3. Next, the teacher introduces the European contact activity. (All of the directions for the Trade Game are available on our Website).

Step 4. During the next class meeting, the teacher reviews the entire unit.

VI. Final Thoughts

Presently, the Native American History in a Box curriculum is being used in upper-level elementary grades and middle schools in Horry County, South Carolina. Overall, the feedback that we have received from teachers and students has been encouraging. Students find the curriculum engaging because it provides tangible hands-on learning experiences that immerse them in Native Americans cultures. The curriculum also addresses the impact of the environment on human societies. In effect, the curriculum helps students develop a sense of place within the global human community by having them reflect on their connections to other peoples and cultures. Teachers find the Native American History in a Box curriculum to be a student-friendly thematic curriculum that engages students in classroom inquiries. In addition, the curriculum is aligned with the national and state social studies standards and is relevant in the contexts of instruction and assessment.

We believe the most important achievement of the Native American History in a Box is that it improves students' awareness of the accomplishments of Native Americans. When students are building the replicas of houses and tools they acquire gain a deeper understanding of the skill and ingenuity of Native Americans. For example, students are surprised by how difficult it can be to create a small model of a pueblo or teepee with modern conveniences such as glue and tape. We have observed that when students participate in these types of hands-on activities, their understanding and interests in local and regional Native American nations dramatically increases.

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Appendix. Day-by-day materials list for a class of approximately thirty students

Day 1. Native American houses

One large box of popsicle sticks

- 2 yards brown cloth
- 2 yards green cloth
- 5 bottles of regular school glue
- 5 pairs of scissors
- 5 packages of various mosses
- 3 lb. bag of pine bark
- 3 lb. bag of cedar chips
- Various sticks, twigs, and leaves
- 6 sheets of canvasboard

Day 2. Native American tools

- 10 large sheets of poster board
- 5 packages of markers and/or colored pencils
- Various Native American tool replicas

Day 3. Native American food resources

30 medium sheets of poster board

Various plastic fruit and vegetable pieces

- 5 packages of markers and/or colored pencils (use from day 2)

Day 4. Native American pottery

25–30 lbs. self-hardening clay

- Newspapers
- Small kitchen sponges
- Wooden paddles and other decorative pottery tools

Day 5. Native American and European trade

250 various wooden cut-outs of animals, fruits, vegetables, and various other objects

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