

Teaching About History

Montana State University News

Educators learn to teach history with an Indian perspective

<http://www.montana.edu/commserv/csnews/nwview.php?article=427>

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Bozeman -- Children shouldn't think only of Indians in terms of the past -- feathers, drums, tomahawks -- children should also be taught about contemporary Indian issues according to Mike Jetty, a multicultural education instructor at Montana State University, and an enrolled member of the Spirit Lake Dakota tribal nation.

He notes that the text, "Montana History," still used in more than 100 schools in Montana, details the death of the Indian culture. "That's bias. Indian culture is still lived today," he said. "The focus today should be on the genius of native intellect and that in spite of Anglo education, it survived."

Jetty directed his remarks to some 60 Montana teachers, administrators and support personnel on campus recently for the 11th annual Montana Institute for Effective Teaching of American Indian Children sponsored in cooperation with the Institute and the Center for Native American Studies at MSU.

In 1972 the Montana Constitution provided that "the state recognizes the distinct and unique cultural heritage of American Indians and is committed in its educational goals to the preservation of their cultural integrity."

Many efforts have been made since 1972 to fulfill that commitment and incorporate it into educational agencies, including public schools, but much work remains to be done.

The most significant recent effort was House Bill 528 (Now MCA 20-1-501) at the end of the 1999 legislative session. That legislation recognized that both Indians and non-Indians needed an understanding of the history, culture and contemporary contributions of Montana's Indian people. State educational agencies and local districts were to take advantage of the new law to assure that Montana's non-Indian students were given the opportunity to learn about the rich heritage of their neighbors and peers and that Indian students were able to be culturally comfortable within their schools.

Teachers attending the MSU conference were looking for ways to teach the history of Indians in Montana without bias.

"You have to recognize that people view and report historical events differently," Jetty said. "The content of curriculum reflects the culture of the dominant group. The content of texts reflects the culture of the dominant group. Many textbooks and other curricular

resources have been revised to reflect a more balanced approach, but he pointed out what has been previously written about Indians is in many history textbooks."

He cites the book "Lies My Teacher Told Me," by James Lowen, who writes, "Children's history books used terms such as 'westward expansion' and 'Manifest Destiny' to describe what would be more accurately called ethnic genocide. These books alternately portray Indians as 'noble savages,' 'faithful Indian guides,' or 'sneaky savages' who lead 'ambushes' and 'massacres.'"

Jetty reminded the teachers that there is great diversity among the 12 tribal groups of Montana in their languages, cultures, histories and government. "We use the terms Indian and Native American to refer to general groups, but in working with individual tribal nations, it is more appropriate to refer to them by their preferred tribal name," he said. "There is a great diversity among individual Indians, there is no generic Indian."

He advocated in teaching history to steer away from specialty months, like Women's History or Black History or American Indian Heritage Day. (American Indian Heritage Day is mandated by Montana law to occur on the fourth Friday of every September.) "It should be these days every day in the classroom."

He recommended to teachers to use the resources gathered by the state Office of Public Instruction in working on their Indian curriculum. The OPI web site is www.opi.state.mt.us, then choose the Indian Education section.

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