

Culturally Responsive Instruction for Native American Students

English Language Arts (ELA)

1. Include Native Authors

To expand on an idea expressed in earlier sections, it is important to include literature written by and about Native Americans. Jacqueline Jones Royster, a writer on cultural studies, asserts that it is critical for members of particular communities to speak for themselves. Most people receive their information about Indigenous Nations from content written by non-Native people, which is often overly general or contains inaccurate portrayals of Native America. In contrast, including Native authors in the curriculum supports the exploration of diversity among Native Americans, as each author conveys individual and community experiences tied to specific times, places, and tribes—each distinct from the others.

In addition, explore various forms of literature by Native authors, including novels, short stories, poetry, and essays. Other relevant forms of text may include film, websites, narratives, and historical documents. Analyzing these texts helps students make sense of the world, ask questions, and think critically.

2. Utilize Storytelling

Storytelling is an important mode of learning for Native students. As Laura Tohe (Navajo) states in *The voices of power and the power of voices: Teaching with Native American literature*, “At the heart of Indigenous belief come expression of songs, prayers, and stories that bring us to learn where we came from, who we are, and our paths toward greater knowing.”

Judith Ortiz Cofer, a contemporary Puerto Rican author, adds, “Literature is the human search for meaning.”

3. Provide Background

When reading about a particular tribe that is unfamiliar to your students, it is helpful to support their reading experience by providing background information about that tribe—its culture, social structures, history, and current status. While this may seem obvious, it

is worth noting that students in one tribal community may not be familiar with the background and details of other tribes.

4. Prioritize Relevance

To provide relevant learning for students, it is important to connect lessons in ELA to real-life experiences. Ensure students engage in meaningful, text-to-self experiences. Provide opportunities for expressive practices, such as speaking and writing, that involve a genuine purpose and audience. Native students may speak a dialect of English that is unique to their community. Honor this and support its use in the classroom.

In other words, create learning experiences where students feel a connection to the content, can use their linguistic funds of knowledge to express themselves, and have something meaningful to say about the topic. Share a rationale for choosing a particular format with students or engage them in a discussion about it. For example, ask, Why express oneself in a poem versus a letter to an editor? Why give a speech rather than write a short story? As students begin to see the benefits of one form of expression over another in specific contexts, they can develop greater agency and creativity in communicating their ideas.

5. Scaffold Literary Analysis

Literary analysis may need to be scaffolded for students in various ways. Start by considering where students currently are in their understanding. Identify ways they may already be engaging in literary analysis through everyday texts such as stories, songs, jokes, or other forms of expression. Consider how students' everyday practices align with literary skills and modes of reasoning. Drawing connections between these modes can help students bridge the two.

Carole Lee conducted a study aimed at doing just that. She examined the effects of activating students' cultural knowledge when interpreting instances of signifying—a form of discourse in the African American community that includes irony, double entendre, satire, and metaphorical language. In Lee's study, students applied the cognitive processes they used in signifying to literature written by African Americans. Students who participated in this instructional approach—where they connected their everyday cognitive processes, sense-making, and cultural knowledge to literary analysis of complex texts—demonstrated significantly greater proficiency than their peers who

received standard instruction. The goal of this instructional model was to support students in developing reading comprehension strategies that they could then apply to any type of literature. This process can also support Native students as they draw from their lived experiences in the classroom.

References

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