

American Foundational Mythology and Best Practices for Teaching About Native Peoples

Chris Newell
Director of Education

endawnis Spears
Director of Programming and Outreach

Akomawt Educational Initiative

BEST PRACTICES WHEN TEACHING ABOUT NATIVE PEOPLE



Norman B. Leventhal
Map & Education Center
at the Boston Public Library



Akomawt

TERMINOLOGY

- Native American, American Indian: Umbrella term for 570+ federally recognized tribes. Most commonly used in American culture.
- Native People, Indigenous People: Terms in English that are not tied to the concept of the United States.
- Indian: Term for inhabitants of Turtle Island by colonists/early Americans. Also, the terminology used in the writing of the Constitution. Federal laws about and for indigenous peoples in America is known as Federal Indian Law. Legal terminology of Native peoples as one large group, although incorrect, in use to this day. Sometimes informal term used within emic situations.
- *These are all generalized terms. Whenever possible identify tribes by their own name*
- Tribe: Anthropology term for a culturally distinct society.
- Nation: Term forced on tribes through the Indian Reorganization Act (1934). Gaining popularity after the AIM era in the 1970s amongst Native governments as they reassert sovereignty and
- self-sufficiency.
- Tribal Nation: Sometimes used by tribal governments as a way to include both.
- Community: social term for all Native People and their families (both 1. Native and 2. non-Native People with kinship or marriage ties to the Native People) within an immediate geographic area.



Norman B. Leventhal
Map & Education Center
at the Boston Public Library



Akomawt

HISTORY

- Be aware of tense: “Lived and continue to live;” or “traditionally lived here, as they do today.”
- Before asking students to consider primary sources, take a step back and ask:
 - Who is the writer/storyteller? What is their background and motivation?
 - Are there alternatives? What vocabulary/language do Indigenous teachers/educators/communities use when discussing this historical event?
 - What other primary sources do you need to hear from to create an equitable understanding of the past?
- Native place names pre-date colonial place names. Use when appropriate to the time frame (which can include the present). If you don’t know it, use a non-colonial descriptor (i.e. Instead of “1500’s in New England” use “1500’s in the Northeast.”)
- Be aware of perspective and vocabulary: “wilderness,” “frontier,” myths of “discovery” etc.



CULTURE

- “Native American culture” is not singular. There are over 1,000 Native communities in existence. Each with their own communal, tribal and land specific ways of life.
- Be specific when talking about a particular tribe or culture. When naming a tribe/culture, use the language of the tribe/culture uses for itself when available from a competent source.
- When highlighting cultural practices, utilize tribally sourced material/language/examples.
- Do not ask students to replicate cultural practices.
- Consider the limits of talking about a Native culture or cultures in the foreign language of English.



Norman B. Leventhal
Map & Education Center
at the Boston Public Library



Akomawt

CONTEMPORARY NATIVE COMMUNITIES

- Seek to understand the homelands where you live and work.
- Over 70% of Native peoples live off reservations. “Indian Country” is everywhere.
- Indian Country is also a very complex landscape of ideas and opinions where people often disagree. No single voice can speak for a community or collection of communities.
- Native communities have always adapted and progressed in knowledge and technology. Absorbing new knowledge or realities does not diminish the authenticity of a culture as it evolves.



Norman B. Leventhal
Map & Education Center
at the Boston Public Library



Akomawt