

Traditional Native American Values and Behaviors

The following paragraphs draw contrast between selected and widely shared Native American core cultural values and non-Native American values and associated behaviors and attitudes. These brief descriptions are somewhat idealized. They cannot reflect the wide variations within Native American communities that result from different levels of cultural assimilation among individuals nor the differences among various Native American cultures across the North American continent; yet, these values are common enough that readers may have encountered them already.

Personal differences. Native Americans traditionally have respected the unique individual differences among people. Common Native American expressions of this value include staying out of others' affairs and verbalizing personal thoughts or opinions only when asked. Returning this courtesy is expected by many Native Americans as an expression of mutual respect.

Quietness. Quietness or silence is a value that serves many purposes in Indian life. Historically the cultivation of this value contributed to survival. In social situations, when they are angry or uncomfortable, many Indians remain silent. Non-Indians sometimes view this trait as indifference, when in reality, it is a very deeply embedded form of Indian interpersonal etiquette.

Patience. In Native American life, the virtue of patience is based on the belief that all things unfold in time. Like silence, patience was a survival virtue in earlier times. In social situations, patience is needed to demonstrate respect for individuals, reach group consensus, and all time for "the second thought." Overt pressure on Indian students to make quick decisions or responses without deliberation should be avoided in most educational situations.

Open work ethic. In traditional Indian life, work is always directed to a distinct purpose and is done when it needs to be done. The nonmaterialistic orientation of many Indians is one outcome of this value. Only that which is actually needed is accumulated through work. In formal education, a rigid schedule of work for work's sake (busy work) needs to be avoided because it tends to move against the grain of this traditional value. Schoolwork must be shown to have an immediate and authentic purpose.

Mutualism. As a value, attitude, and behavior, mutualism permeates everything in the traditional Indian social fabric. Mutualism promotes a sense of belonging and solidarity with group members cooperating to gain group security and consensus. In American education, the tendency has been to stress competition and work for personal gain over cooperation. The emphasis on grades and personal honors are examples. In dealing with Indian students, this tendency must be modified by incorporating cooperative activities on an equal footing with competitive activities in the learning environment.

Nonverbal orientation. Traditionally most Indians have tended to prefer listening rather than speaking. Talking for talking's sake is rarely practiced. Talk, just as work, must have a purpose. Small talk and light conversation are not especially valued except among very close acquaintances. In Indian thought, words have a primordial power so that when there is a reason for their expression, it is generally done carefully. In social interaction, the emphasis is on affective rather than verbal communication. When planning and presenting lessons, it is best to avoid pressing a class discussion or asking a long series of rapid-fire questions. This general characteristic explains why many Indian students feel more comfortable with lectures or demonstrations. Teachers can effectively use the inquiry approach, role playing, or simulation to demonstrate they have a full understanding of this characteristic.

Seeing and listening. In earlier times, hearing, observing, and memorizing were important skills since practically all aspects of Native American culture were transferred orally or through example. Storytelling, oratory, and experiential and observational learning were all highly developed in Native American cultures. In an education setting, the use of lectures and demonstrations, modified case studies, storytelling, and experiential activities can all be highly effective. A balance among teaching methods that emphasize listening and observation, as well as speaking, is an important consideration.

Time orientation. In the Indian world, things happen when they are ready to happen. Time is relatively flexible and generally not structured into compartments as it is in modern society. Because structuring time and measuring it into precise units are hallmarks of public schools in the United States, disharmony can arise between the tradition-oriented Indian learner and the material being presented. The solution is to allow for scheduling flexibility within practical limits.

Orientation to present. Traditionally most Indians have oriented themselves to the present and the immediate tasks at hand. This orientation stems from the deep philosophical emphasis on *being* rather than *becoming*. Present needs and desires tend to take precedence over vague future rewards. Although this orientation has changed considerably over the past 40 years, vestiges are still apparent in the personalities of many Native Americans. Given this characteristic, the learning material should have a sense of immediate relevancy for the time and place of each student.

Practicality. Indians tend to be practical minded. Many Indians have less difficulty comprehending educational materials and approaches that are concrete or experiential rather than abstract and theoretical. Given this characteristic, learning and teaching should begin with numerous concrete examples and activities to be followed by discussion of the abstraction.

Holistic orientation. Indian cultures, like most primal cultures, have a long-standing and well-integrated orientation to the whole. This is readily apparent in various aspects of Indian cultures, ranging from healing to social organization. Presenting educational material from a holistic perspective is an essential and natural strategy for teaching Indian people,

Spirituality. Religious thought and action are integrated into every aspect of the sociocultural fabric of traditional Native American life. Spirituality is considered a natural component of everything. When presenting new concepts, teachers should keep in mind that all aspects of Indian cultures are touched by it. Discussing general aspects of spirituality and religion is an important part of the curriculum, although precautions must be taken to respect the integrity, sacred value, and inherent privacy of each Indian tribe's religious practices. Ideally all discussions of Native American religion should be kept as general and nonspecific as possible. Specifics should be discussed only in the proper context and with the necessary permission of the particular tribe involved.

Caution. The tendency toward caution in unfamiliar personal encounters and situations has given rise to the stereotypical portrayal of the stoic Indian. This characteristic is closely related to the placidity and quiet behavior of many Indian people. In many cases, such caution results from a basic fear regarding how their thoughts and behavior will be accepted by others with whom they are unfamiliar or in a new situation with which they have no experience. Educators should make every effort to alleviate these fears and show that students' subjective orientations are accepted by the teacher. To the extent possible, the class and lesson presentation should be made as informal and open as possible. Open friendliness and sincerity are key factors in easing these tensions.