



Stereotyping and Racism Curriculum
Growing Up with Stereotypes:
A Native Woman's Perspective
Grades 6-8

The Abbe Museum

*Promoting understanding and appreciation of Maine Native
American cultures, history, and archaeology.
Bar Harbor, Maine*

In 2007, the Abbe Museum and Rhonda Frey (Penobscot/Passamaquoddy) partnered to create two new units for use in the classroom on issues of stereotyping and racism facing Maine's Native American communities today. The units are meant to build on each other, and can be used in combination with discussions of racism faced by other communities in the United States, or to stand alone, as a means of meeting LD 291 and Maine Learning Results. Each unit is written by Rhonda based on her experiences, and addresses tough issues, yet offers hope and guidance for students today.

The goals of these units is to 1) educate students that prejudice is real and ongoing 2) empower students to recognize their ability to change not only themselves, but our communities and society and 3) to provide materials for use as a guide to further conversations about stereotyping and racism in the classroom and beyond.

Each unit includes a narrative for students to read, along with a series of questions for discussion. At the end of each unit is an activity for the entire class to participate in together, so students can learn from each other, and make the information presented more personal, applying to each individual's life.

In February 2009, Rhonda passed on. Her dedication to Native issues, her strength, and her generosity will be sorely missed. A special thanks goes out to her son for allowing the Abbe Museum to continue Rhonda's work and publish these units.

Maine Learning Results:

A1 Social Studies Researching and Developing Positions on Current Social Studies Issues

A2 Social Studies Making Decisions Using Social Studies Knowledge and Skills

B1 English Language Arts Interconnected Elements

B3 English Language Arts Argument/Analysis

E1 English Language Arts Listening

E2 English Language Arts Speaking

I think it's great to start having these conversations about stereotypes and racism because sometimes it's so subtle, that I've had to point it out to other people. I was with a non-Native friend, talking to one of the guidance counselors at a Hampden school. I noticed she was talking to my friend a lot differently than she was talking to me. This woman knew I was Native and knew the other person was not. She would "speak with" the person I was with and would speak down to me. My friend didn't see it until I pointed out the differences. My friend was quite astounded. I wasn't, because I've been subjected to this sort of treatment many times, so I picked right up on it. But it is truly difficult for anyone to see the subtleties if they, personally, have not had to deal with prejudice. I am hoping my stories will begin your journey to a greater awareness and understanding, and will help you to become more attuned to it.

- Rhonda Frey (Penobscot/Passamaquoddy) 2008

There are many examples of stereotypes in our society, and no group of people is exempt from images and ideas that mock or mimic physical, cultural, or philosophical characteristics. Stereotypes can be funny, and are usually the subject of jokes. Jokes are supposed to make people laugh, but often they are hurtful. Jokes can be hurtful to the person who is the butt of the joke; hurtful because it infuses a belief, a false truth about an ethnic group or certain culture, hurtful because they perpetuate racism. Jokes have a way of dehumanizing people, making them objects – "the others."

Books, magazines, movies, TV shows, and other media, are another way that stereotypes are conveyed. Some newspapers in the past were involved with "yellow journalism." Custer's last stand is one example– the local newspapers reported the Indians were trying to take over, taking lives as well as property. Actually, they were trying to protect their lands. Custer was really trying to annihilate them and take their lands, but the newspapers depicted the tribes as the perpetrators and that is the way it was recorded in the history books.

This has happened to our tribe, especially during the Maine Indian Land Claims. The stories and the claims by the state were exaggerated and full of half-truths. Our tribe was reactive during that time and wasn't proactive in the newspapers, so the state was able to get a lot of the people of Maine against us. I know because I was a child going to school in Old Town. I attended St. Ann's School from kindergarten through fifth grade, however, my first encounter with racism, that I can recall, was when I entered the sixth grade in Old Town.

Growing up, I don't recall hearing we were of a different culture. As a child I would dance in the summers at Chief Poolaw's teepee for the tourists, but even then I thought "Everyone does this sort of thing in their communities;" this was just a way for me to earn money. Bruce Poolaw claimed to be a Chief but wasn't. He would provide us with regalia so we could dance. We would take around a basket for donations. He would try to take half and give us the other half, but whenever his wife "Princess Watahwaso" (also known as Aunt Lu) would find out, she'd give us the other half and tell him, "You make your money on the store, let the children have theirs." We loved Aunt Lu.

I really didn't know color, other than I saw a black person once and told my grandmother. She said "tourists," that was her only explanation of colored people. I also danced traditional dances in the Indian Pageant – again thinking this sort of thing happened in every community. We were trying to raise money for our church. Thousands of people would attend and watch the pageant.

Then there was John Wayne. We used to watch some of the old movies on television. I knew that cowboys and Indians were different, but I didn't see color. I recall at times I would have a weird feeling at the end of the show, as if something just wasn't right, but I could never put my finger on it. Funny though, when we played cowboys and Indians as children, nobody wanted to be the Indian, because they always lost; everyone wanted to be cowboys. I watched the Lone Ranger a few times too, and felt that same weird feeling.

My rather rude introduction to the Non-native world occurred in the 6th grade, and I began to see the differences. Luckily for me, I used to walk over to the Herbert Gray School in Old Town for about three summers prior to starting 6th grade to swim at their pool and spend the day with the local children. They knew me as Rhonda. When I entered St. Mary's School in Old Town there were several of my friends in the same grade and they were good to me. I began to see they didn't treat the other children from Indian Island as nice as they treated me.

After the first two months of school I really encountered my first slap in the face. One of the boys in my grade said that I stole something from him. I looked at him so surprised and said, "No I didn't, why do you say that?" I had always been an honest person and certainly didn't steal. He kept insisting that I did, I told the nuns I didn't. The nuns seemed to believe me, but it bothered me that he said that. I went to him later and asked him why he did that and he said, "Because you were trying to be somebody, I had to show you you're not, I had to put you in your place." I just couldn't understand. I went home and told my mother. She said, "The people over there don't like us." I then began to hear and see the differences; I found out that I was no good, that I was dirty – even though I showered everyday or took baths, I was still dirty. I was trash. We were "The Others." I began to watch the "Cowboy and Indian Shows" with a more critical eye and realized the shows were trying to put us down. I began to resent John Wayne and any other show that depicted Indians. I learned all about the dirty word "prejudice" at a very young age.

Of course, what didn't help was that the Maine Indian Land Claims was at its peak and the banners in the Bangor Daily News screamed, "Hey Old Town start packing, the Indians are taking your land." Every time a banner of this sort, or a story came out that was filled with half-truths and exaggerations, we as students in the Old Town school system would pay for it.

In junior high, some of the teachers were mean to us. There seemed to be a double standard; one which was used to grade non-Native work and those standards used to grade Native work. Even the way we were approached, the teachers weren't as nice to us as they were with non-Native students. We were the unwanted children in Old Town. I was one of the best students at Indian Island, and within two years, I went down to the lowest division in the eighth grade because it was so difficult to deal with hormones and the horror shows I saw whenever prejudice reared its ugly head. I escaped a lot of the problems by studying. By high school I was back on the honor roll, except if I had one of the teachers who didn't like Natives. I got into the habit of asking older children from the Island what the teachers were like and tried to avoid "the bad ones." Bad ones were always trying to put us on the spot, would critically correct our work. We would nearly flunk a test because of a small error and they always managed to try to make us the example in their classrooms. I definitely tried to avoid those teachers.

I couldn't get away from stereotypes, even at summer camp. I attended a camp when I was about 13. My mother insisted I go because my younger sister was going and she wanted to make sure she was safe and not alone. I barely saw my sister during the entire two weeks. It was nice because there weren't any remarks made about color so I

actually relaxed and had fun. When I attended the archery class, however, the instructor told everyone “Rhonda doesn’t need to be told how to shoot a bow and arrow, she already knows because she’s Indian.” All the other campers who attended the class were in awe of me because I could shoot a bow and arrow. I had never picked one up. What could I say? Luckily I hit the target, not a bull’s eye, but it was near. I didn’t attend another archery class.

When I was in the ninth grade, a friend of mine from Indian Island talked me into going to an all girls academy, The Academy of St. Joseph’s in South Berwick. I really wasn’t keen on it, but I knew I was with someone from home so I thought I’d try. I thought it would be nice to get away. We met about forty-five young women who were our age from all over the world. It was so nice to be accepted for who we were as individuals, without any racism. The girls used to ask each other about what it was like where they lived. My friend, Adrian and I, were asked about being an Indian and what was it like living on an Indian reservation. They asked us first about the teepees. Adrian and I were a little surprised by the fact that they didn’t know much about Natives and Native life. When we heard this, we looked at each other as if we knew what we were going to say. We started telling them about reservation life. We told them we lived in teepees and that we only wore non-Native clothes whenever we left the reservation. We had an elaborate story about our teepees being two-story and that there were small teepees all around a big one. The smaller ones were the bedrooms, while the big one served the family as a dining and gathering area. We told them all the men in the village hunted together and would shoot buffalo and the women gathered berries and worked in the gardens.

We had them going for days, and then felt we had to tell the truth. So we did. All the girls took it in stride, they were disappointed but I think they were also relieved to hear we lived in houses, just like them! I went back home after two months; it was so hard to live there.

By the time I reached tenth grade, the problem teachers were nearly non-existent. I don’t know why, it wasn’t as if the Land Claims had gone away. Perhaps I was able to deal with it better. I would know what they were going to say before they said it and avoided the ones who would try to put me on the spot. I became very quiet and shy. I would choose what class I would participate in depending on the way the teacher approached me. I also started choosing what I would listen to and what I wouldn’t. My survival tactics must have helped because I graduated high school, but I was so emotionally exhausted. A lot of the children I grew up with on Indian Island dropped out of school because they couldn’t cope. I still wonder how I got through – although thoughts of certain teachers and my favorite guidance counselor, special friends and the books I loved to read come to mind whenever I wonder, and I smile because they were there to help.

My best friend, Paula, whom I met in the bathroom at Old Town High in my senior year, was a light in the dark tunnel, along with several other girlfriends who were not prejudiced, and some of the guys would talk to me and were my friends. Imagine, being happy because they were there for me? Not happy because of events in school, or the prom, or being involved in some of the clubs, all of which are a part of student life, a life I felt I could not participate in.

I just concentrated on my studies and in doing so, my grades improved. As I did better, I was accepted a little more, however even then, if I did as well or better than a non-Indian I was okay, the non-Indian student was still much better, but I was okay. During the times of the Land Claims, I was just glad to be accepted. I also heard that I was an “exceptional Indian.” I guess because I excelled. I never did understand what that

meant. Someone else said I was an Indian of a different breed – I guess I was salvageable – I never asked what it meant, perhaps I didn't want to hear the answer. I would go away from these situations feeling weird, thinking "Yeah I'm different alright, - I just put up with you."

Where I could, outside of school, I would hide the fact I was Native. Luckily we are like chameleons; many of us have light enough skin to hide in plain view. I was afraid of the reaction. I found, if someone got to know me first for who I was and then I told them I was Native, they would see me as Rhonda, who happens to be Native. If I didn't wait, chances were good they would see me as an "Indian" whose name happens to be Rhonda.

It wasn't just the Maine Indian Land Claims that contributed to the prejudice. I decided that since I knew children in the Old Town School system before I went to school there, and it really helped cushion the blow of prejudice when I attended the schools, I would enter my son on a local hockey team before he left the Island school. To me, it would serve two purposes; one, he would get to know local area students and two, he was such a loving child, I was afraid he wasn't tough enough. I thought hockey would bring out a little more male aggressiveness. Little did I know, I was exposing my son to his first experience with racism.

There were mostly non-Natives on the team. My son said one kid in particular would give war hoops. The coaches didn't correct the kid, nor did they talk about respecting others. My son suffered for two years. He did manage to get the kid back. My son said they had a scrimmage and he went after the other boy because they were on opposing teams that day. He slammed the boy into the walls and then tripped him. How do you correct the behavior of a child after he's taken so much abuse from another? He knows it wasn't nice and he wasn't a mean child; there aren't too many instances where he would outwardly display such feelings, but being 10 and abused by this kid with adults watching was more than he could take– I am actually proud of him. He stuck with hockey for two years despite this kid, and for this I am so proud.

My son experienced a stereotype just recently. He is a Case Manager for a private non-profit agency in Augusta and works with children at risk from age zero to five. He attended a workshop recently and was told Indian children, both infants and toddlers, head the top of the list of "at-risk" children. My son has two children who are toddlers and he's the best father any child could ever have; he was quite appalled because it states all parents of Indian children are not capable of caring for their children. I'm upset as well; a true slap in the face.

I have found that Indian people are expected to know everything about being Indian. I went on an eight-day fellowship with other journalists. It was an environmental immersion program discussing issues from Maine to Canada. One presenter was from Bangor, Maine. He was talking about all these Native place names. When he found out I was a member of the Penobscot Tribe, he expected me to know what all those place names were. When I told him I didn't, he said, "What kind of Indian are you? You're supposed to know what all these names mean!" Wow – talk about being put on the spot and stereotyped. How am I supposed to know all the place names if I haven't studied them? I didn't respond to him, that was my way of handling it, but perhaps I should have put him in his place. I guess I'm supposed to know everything there is to know about our language and other Wabanaki languages. I've had conversations with others who expected me to know every tribe in existence in the United States- there are over 500!

My mother was Passamaquoddy, and spoke only Passamaquoddy until age five. My father, who was Penobscot, heard Penobscot spoken as a child, but could not speak

the language other than a lot of words or phrases. How am I supposed to know Penobscot?

I know some Passamaquoddy but my mother refused to teach us because she had such a rough transition into English. She was five years old, spoke only Passamaquoddy, but when she entered school, she was not allowed to speak her language. Whenever she did, she would be punished. She was forced to learn English, a second language, -right on the spot – she was barely out of the toddler stage, still just a baby – but it was as if her Native language was wrong, and bad. The sad part is that most Passamaquoddy children went through this, and as adults, didn't want their children to be put through the same cruel immersion program, so many of us have had to learn our language on our own. When I was older, she did begin to teach me some of the words, and I always managed to figure out what she was saying when she spoke in her language with her sisters.

An elder told me that what you do today can affect generations to come. The pain has come down with the generations. In life, I walk two roads, the red and the white. The red, with all the rich culture and the old ways, and white with the ever-changing technology and mainstream ways. I lived my first eighteen years on Indian Island. When I moved into the white lands, it was different and it was a transition. One of the first things I noticed, people in the more mainstream cultures don't have large families. Growing up, I knew who my fifth cousins were and they were family. In the mainstream, a lot of people I spoke to didn't know who their first cousins once removed were, let alone could call them family.

Growing up on Indian Island did have its funny moments. By the time I was a teenager, the shows for tourists stopped and the tribe no longer wanted to continue the pageants. Everyone, including myself, felt it was time to dance and celebrate our own culture for ourselves, not for tourists. When tourists came to Indian Island sometimes they would roll down their windows and ask, "Where are the Indians?" Once I remember my friends and I telling them we were Native, we were right there. The guy responded, "Oh," and then drove away. There was such disappointment in his voice and in his face, I thought, next time I'll handle it differently.

The next time, just the next week, I told some other people who were looking for the Indians, they missed them; they went up river to hunt. They were disappointed and said, "Oh, we missed them," They asked when they would be back; I told them I didn't know. It could be weeks before they return. I couldn't believe they bought it. I heard the same "Oh," but it wasn't the same disappointment. I did this only once, feeling guilty about the lie.

NOTE: It is important to make time to discuss the issues brought up in the narrative, as much of what Rhonda shares can bring up strong feelings in students.

Activity:

Many Native American communities today use something called a “talking stick” as a courtesy, to help designate whose turn it is to speak. The stick represents respect for each other’s opinion and the importance of allowing everyone have a say. Rhonda says that “Native people believe that the wood is a living being with its own spirit, and each time it’s passed from one person to the next, a little part of his or her essence and intentions flow into that living object, making it more empowering.” Outside of Native communities this concept has been incorporated by many groups, especially groups of children or adults who need help preventing discussions from degenerating into cacophonies. The stick helps to make sure that people listen to what is being said and can help keep an interesting discussion focussed.

As a class, design and create a talking stick that reflects the values and personalities of the class as a whole. The stick should be easy to hold and pass, durable so it wont break as students pass it between hands, and large enough so that it can be seen in the arms of the person talking. To start: make a list of the values and personality traits that are known to exist in the class (honestly, humor, strength, etc.). From this list, identify the traits you think best fit the concept of the talking stick (honesty, strength, etc.). From this narrower list, brainstorm ideas of images, objects, or colors that represent those values and traits. Once this list has been agreed upon, create a poster to hang in the classroom to remind students what the items on the talking stick stand for. Finally, create the stick and try using it for the following discussion, asking questions about the text students have read. Teachers are encouraged to continue use of the talking stick for other conversations in the classroom.

Questions:

After reading the narrative to themselves, ask the class to sit in a circle, so everyone can see each other. Use the following questions to help get the discussion going, however, please feel free to follow up on students comments and let the conversation move freely. Teachers should act as a modirator, and ask the following questions when there is a lull in conversation, however students should be encouraged to share and respond to each other. Plan on at least one hour for the reading and activity.

Please ask students to follow these rules to ensure a safe and productive dialogue:

- 1) The person holding the stick is the only person in the room allowed to speak.
- 2) The stick must be passed to the next person in the circle, not to the next person who wishes to speak.
- 3) No one is right or wrong, everyone’s opinions are important and based on their personal experiences.
- 4) Students should feel free to disagree, however, disagreements must not be personal, heated, or make the students feel attacked or uncomfortable.
- 5) Always listen and speak with respect.
- 6) No student should feel forced to share. This is a very personal and often times painful topic, and students may opt to listen without sharing and know their decision is respected.

However, teachers should encourage each person to participate (for example, ask everyone to share something at least the first time).

Questions:

- ❑ How did this narrative make you feel?
- ❑ Were you aware that such issues of prejudice still existed in Maine?
- ❑ Can you think of a time in your life when you have felt alienated or attacked for your race, gender, religion, or other lifestyle? How did it make you feel? What did you do about it?
- ❑ Will stereotypes, racism, and/or prejudice always be a problem in our society, or can you think of solutions for these problems?
- ❑ Can you cite other examples of stereotypes, racism, or prejudice you've seen in media, heard from adults/friends?

Activity:

Review articles in the newspaper to find evidence of stereotypes, either from Maine, or across the country. How are the different races of people discussed- is race identified only when the person being discussed is not white? Can you find historic examples of stereotypes in newspaper articles? Note that often times in the "comments" section of on-line articles, racist comments come from readers, even if nothing is evident in the article.

Ask student to choose a movie, book, cartoon, television show, or other media that depicts Native Americans. Students will submit a two page written review of how Native Americans were portrayed in the media, addressing the following questions: was it accurate or stereotypical? How were you able to tell? How do you think Native Americans would feel about the way they were depicted? Hints- Native Americans prefer to be identified by their tribe- were you able to tell which tribe was being represented? Was it a contemporary or historic piece? How were women vs. men depicted? Please cite any outside sources used to help determine stereotypes or accuracies/inaccuracies in the media.