

Confronting Stereotypes

Carol Buswell

We all confront stereotypes every day, both in and out of the classroom. Some ideas have been carried in the collective memory and classroom textbooks for so long they are generally recognized as fact. Many are constantly being reinforced by personal experiences, family discussions, and Hollywood productions as well.

Years ago, as a graduate student of American Indian Studies, I quickly learned that stereotypes have always existed everywhere and at every time. We all carry them around with us every day. Often, they are impossible for us even to detect ourselves.

Like most generalizations, stereotypes usually originate from emotionally charged events or experiences. I often try to circumvent the closely held opinions that result by using related historic primary sources. Original documents have a certain degree of anonymity and speak with historic voice. They also bring us closer to understanding the concerns and complexities of unique situations, helping to overcome the human tendency to generalize.

In the classroom, I like to use primary sources relating to the root cause of a long-standing stereotype. Something wonderful happens when fascinating documents inspire student-directed questions and debates, almost by magic. Perhaps, this is because the realities they reveal are often so completely contrary to what is believed by the general population.

I try to always present documents from more than one point of view. This may seem an impossible task, since I use National Archives documents and these documents were created by U.S. government agencies. But the truth is that individuals often write letters to agencies expressing their own “take” on government actions. Also, agencies and agents often disagree on issues in writing, and these documents are saved in the Archives.

Example

An example of the formation of a series of negative stereotypes in the West originates in disputes over the ongoing rights of reservation Indians for land, water, fish, timber, and other commodities and services. These rights were gained by treaty many years ago. Emotions between Indians and non-Indians in adjacent communities over these issues often run high, and court cases continue to occur. People stereotype each other or continue to believe long-held stereotypes as a result.

Actually, when we speak of Native Americans or American Indians or Native Peoples or even Alaska Villages, we are automatically being somewhat stereotypic. These people were not historically united by one central government before the existence of the United States, nor are they today. Neither did they necessarily subscribe to the same culture or religion. There are still hundreds of separate tribes and bands spread across the United States and beyond. Each tribe had and still has experiences, values, and cultures differing widely from other tribal groups, even in the same areas of the country.

Because of this, I am going to focus on one particular reservation as an example, The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, Oregon, even though the same generalizations about the unfairness of Indian rights exists in other specific areas across the country.

Warm Springs consists of several different tribes and bands from all over central

Oregon that were moved to a single reservation following a massive treaty-making effort on the part of the government around 1855. They were subject to a second treaty 10 years later that greatly altered the conditions of the first. Since we are trying to get to the root cause of a particular stereotype (the unfair use of resources), the documents included here are from those two specific time periods.

Classroom Approach

A good approach in the classroom for student self-discovery starts with a review of several primary-source documents relating to the issue at hand. I begin by giving the entire class a very brief introduction to an issue, in this case “treaty rights.” You don’t even have to identify “stereotyping” (unless you want to) because the documents will do that for themselves.

Divide the class into four groups, one for each primary-source document. I hand out one copy of the document for every two students. More discussion seems to happen if two students have to share the document in question. The students from each group then analyze the document and discuss it with their partners and among other members of their group. The teacher can then either simply discuss what each group has found or debate the issue in a court-like setting.

Documents

1. Originally, the Warm Springs Reservation was created by the *Treaty of Wasco, Columbia River, Oregon Territory with the Taih, Wyam, Tenino, & Dock-Spus Bands of the Walla-Walla, and the Dalles, Ki-Gal-Twal-La, and*

Lucy Mitchell being first duly sworn deposes and says: That she is a full blooded belonging on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation, in Oregon; that she is about 72 years of age; that she was present when one Huntington came to the Warm Springs Reservation in 1865 with a paper for the Indians to sign; that Huntington told the Indians that they were in danger when off the reservation because of the war with the Paiutes; that ~~he~~ they were not to leave the reservation for more than two weeks at a time nor without a pass; that this pass would let the white men know where they came from and would be a protection to them; that if they signed this he had some presents which he would bring them the following year; that neither Huntington nor any of the Indians mentioned the matter of fisheries; that the Indians had no intention of now giving up the fisheries over which they had had such a struggle at the making of the original treaty with the Government and that they did not know that they had done so until about a year later when there was a notice of some kind in the newspapers; that she has since she was a small girl been familiar with the fishing places along the river from the point which the Indians called "Little Pine to Celilo; that from her earliest recollection Wasco Charlie had been accustomed to fish ~~along~~ at the point called Little Pine where Sam Williams has been fishing of late years; that to her knowledge Sam Williams has been fishing at that point for about seven years; that at first Sam fished there with a gill net; that about five years ago Sam and Peter Jackson fished at this point with a scow wheel; that since that time she has no personal knowledge of the fishing at that point but has heard that Sam Williams has continued to fish there; that to her knowledge no white man has ever fished at that point; that it has always been regarded among the Indians that a man's fishing point was like his home and it was his until he openly abandoned same or willed it to another at the time of his death; that it has always been customary for the Warm Springs and Yakima Indians to visit back and forth across the Columbia River and fish together.

Witnesses to mark:

James L. Hall
 Warm Spring, Oregon.

Her
 Lucy Mitchell
 mark.

Geo. W. Robbins
 Warm Spring, Oregon.

Subscribed and sworn to before me this 8th day of April, 1915, at Warm Springs Indian Agency, Oregon.

L. A. Darrington
 Special Agent.

1915
 72
 1840
 1912

61346-15 DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
OFFICE OF INDIAN AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON

JUN 28 1915

Mr. L. A. Dorrington,
Special Indian Agent.

My dear Mr. Dorrington:

I have your letter of May 25 with regard to the contention of the Indians of the Warm Springs Reservation that they were defrauded of their fishing rights in the Columbia River by having been deceived into signing the Treaty of Nov. 15, 1865 by the then Superintendent, J. W. Perit Huntington.

Since the receipt of your letter, this matter has been the subject of extensive research, but, because of the inability, so far, to find all the files, I am unable to arrive at a conclusion in the premises. However, I find that Superintendent Huntington represented to the Office, as early as 1863, that the Indians were spending practically all their time at the fisheries, by reason of which they were becoming the victims of whiskey and prostitution. At that time he said:

"I am confident that for a moderate sum invested in clothing, agricultural implements, teams, etc., they would be willing to give up the right and consent to be confined to the reservation. This, if accomplished, will relieve the white settlement of a very great nuisance and very much better the condition of the Indians."

the Dog River Bands of the Wasco (June 25, 1855). [For a copy, see the Warm Springs Confederated Tribes website at <http://pelton.warmsprings.com/docs/pg/10200>]

2. Ten years later a second treaty, *Treaty With the Middle Oregon Tribes*, altered the provisions of the first. [For a copy of the second treaty, see the United States Fish and Wildlife Service website at www.fws.gov/pacific/ea/tribal/treaties/Middle_OR_Tribes1865.pdf]
3. The *Affidavit of Lucy Mitchell* (see p. 311) regarding the Treaty of 1865 is one of many that might be used to show an individual Native American's response to the second treaty. It comes from Record Group 75: Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1793–1999. The original is held at the National Archives at San Francisco; it is available online from the National Archives in the ARC database at www.archives.gov/research/arc/ArcIdentifier296358.
4. The *Letter from Office of Indian Affairs Assistant Commissioner E.B. Meritt to Special Indian Agent L.A. Dorrington*, June 28, 1915, offers several views by several different Indian agents (see p. 312 for page 1 of the 7-page document). It also comes from Record Group 75: Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1793–1999, and the original is held at the National Archives at San Francisco. All seven pages of the letter are available online from the National Archives in the ARC database at www.archives.gov/research/arc, ARC Identifier 296346 or from www.DocsTeach.org.

The following are just a few questions you might want to include.

What were the treaty-makers trying to accomplish?

Do you think they had the well being of the Native people in mind? Why or

why not?

Why was the woman concerned about the loss of fishing rights in the second treaty?

How did she say the rights were lost?

Was she concerned about more than one thing?

How long do the treaties say the rights should last?

How would you react if you lost a similar right, such as the right to buy beef in your hometown?

Would people around you all feel the same way?

What if you were a vegetarian?

What do you think Native people believed fishing was for?

Did they fish for food or for sport?

What did the Indian agents think?

Were certain Indian agents better able to understand the Native point of view than others?

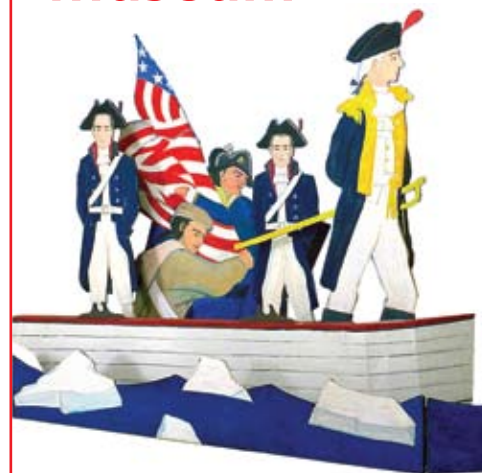
Why do you think this did or did not happen?

Conclusion

The distinct advantage to confronting stereotypes through primary documents is that the stereotype itself is not addressed directly. Instead, students confront and reevaluate original issues and interpersonal differences, avoiding the emotions that usually shape preconceived ideas. Primary-source documents can, when examined by curious students and guided by thoughtful teachers, provide a fresh and often surprising view of what we have always believed to be true, especially when we are wrong. 📖

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Alex Katz, *Washington Crossing the Delaware: American Flag, Boat, and Soldiers* (detail), 1961. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David K. Anderson, Martha Jackson Memorial Collection