**Teaching Notes**

***Whose story should be told: Representations of Native Americans in Public Art***

By

Barbara Leigh Smith

**Learning Outcomes:**

* Gain an understanding of the National Historic Preservation Act and the Section 106 process
* Understand the history of the dispute surrounding the murals and paintings in a historic property, now known as the William Jefferson Clinton Federal Building and the headquarters of the Environmental Protection Agency
* Become familiar with the difficult questions the case raises about public art, historical integrity, cultural identity, stereotypes and censorship
* Gain a deeper understanding of the role of leaders and what constitutes “good leadership” in a conflict like this
* Develop insight into intergovernmental decision making
* Learn how conflicts are resolved or not resolved and the factors that influence effective resolution
* Consider the factors that promote democratic decision making and effective public participation in the decision making process
* Think deeply about the complex questions around whose story should be told in changing times

**Audience and disciplines**

This case is suitable for upper level high school classes and college classes at all levels. The case is particularly relevant to study in the arts, communication, history, political science, management, public administration, Native American studies, law, and sociology.

**Teaching implementation suggestions**

Two approaches to teach this case are described below: first, using small groups around thematic, preset questions on various aspects of the case, and second, role playing. Depending on instructor goals and the time allowed, both of these approaches could be used. Additional research projects might also be assigned.

**Approach # 1: Small group problem solving around thematic questions**.

Have the students read the case in advance. Randomly divide the class into small groups of 4-7 students. Each group is given a different set of questions to discuss. Give them about 45 minutes to discuss their questions and record their conclusions on butcher paper. Then have each group report their conclusions to the whole group. All of the students in each group should be part of the formal presentation. Depending on the class, the teacher may want to introduce the case and summarize at the end. We recommend asking each student to write answers to 2 or 3 reflection questions at the end of the class, which are then handed in. This gives the instructor a good sense of each student’s understanding of the overall lessons of the case.

**Group 1 – History and changing times**

1. Should art be subject to the same rules as “factual” history? Why or why not? Is there such a thing as “factual history?” What about artistic license? Explain and justify your answers.
2. What are the important considerations in deciding whose story should be told and how it is told?
3. Identify the various views expressed by stakeholders in this case about history, the role of government in supporting the arts, and the tensions that exist between different values.
4. In several places in the case the suggestion is made that prevailing views differ about what is appropriate in terms of portrayals of black-white history vs Native American history. Do you agree? If yes, why and in what ways? If no, what is your counter argument?

**Group 2 – Conflict resolution**

1. In what ways is this an example of the relationship between the “national good” and Native concerns? How can these be weighed?
2. Some might argue that this is a dispute about rights vs interests. What rights? What interests? How might this influence the conflict resolution process?
3. How are conflicts like this best resolved?
4. What were the major turning points in the case where a different scenario or choice might have been made?
5. Was this issue effectively resolved? Why or why not?

**Group 3 – Democratic decision making and participatory management**

1. Policy making usually requires some kind of balancing different points of view. What views do you see at stake here and how did the structure of the decision making reflect these diverse views?
2. In what ways did the process used in addressing the mural dispute reflect democratic decision making and participatory management? In what ways did the process not reflect best practices?
3. What lessons can you draw from this case about governmental decision making?

**Group 4 – Exploring diverse alternatives**

1. Identify each of the important players in this case and indicate what the goals were of each player and what was at stake for each of them.
2. The GSA said it considered four alternatives. Were there more possible alternatives? What were they?
3. What does “screening” convey and accomplish? Why was this a major alternative?
4. What were the best arguments that could be made for each of the alternatives?
5. Why do you think they decided on the specific alternative they adopted?

**Group 5 – Leadership**

1. What is good leadership?
2. Was good leadership exercised here? If so, by whom? Give specific reasons for your conclusion with examples from the case.
3. What are the various roles of the leader you see in this case?
4. What makes a leader act in a certain way? Where are the influences, constraints, challenges, and opportunities?

**Group 6 – Organizations**

1. The structure and culture of organizations often influence how they do things and the outcomes. What are some of the key features of the following organizations that influenced their behavior and viewpoints in this case: art experts, SAIGE, GSA, EPA, Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, other civil rights groups?

**Group 7— Activism and advocacy**

1. What were the various strategies used by the Native activists to pursue their goals in this case? Which were most effective and ineffective? Why?
2. Looking at this as an issue over time, where were the critical turning points? What else could the parties involved have done at different points in time?
3. What larger lessons did you learn about Indian activism and advocacy from this case?
4. Why do you think it turned out the way it did?

**Approach #2: Role playing**

Role playing can promote a deeper understanding of the views of others. So another way to use this case is to assign small groups of students to assume the following roles: SAIGE, Robert Smith and Roland Cyr, lawyers group, GSA, EPA, sons and daughter of artist, and art/museum experts. Some of these roles may be eliminated if the class is small. The groups should each discuss how the situation appears to each of them, what their position is, what values they stand for, what the options are as well as the costs and benefits of each alternative, and what they believe is the best outcome. The teacher and several students might play the role of a mediating group that has been brought in to hear about the issue and give advice.

**Assessment of student learning and case discussion**

To assess student learning from this case, the teacher might suggest that the students write responses to several reflection questions after the case discussion such as 1) what are the four major lessons you learned from this case, 2) what does the case tell you about balancing different values and perspectives, 3) in what ways does this case illustrate effective and ineffective avenues of resolving conflicts and provide examples of how conflicts are best settled?

The instructor may also ask students to assess the effectiveness of their group’s discussion using a grid like the following:

**SAMPLE**

**Student Self Reflection on Group Process**

In effective groups, participants

* Listen to one another carefully
* Include all members in the discussion
* Stay on task
* Self correct when needed
* Learn from one another
* Include multiple points of view

Try to do these things today as you work together, and at the end of the session, we’ll ask you to assess how you worked together.

**How did your group function today?**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Group Collaboration Tasks | Strongly Agree 1 | Somewhat Agree 2 | Neutral: Neither Agree nor Disagree 3 | Somewhat Disagree  4 | Strongly Disagree 5 |
| I was satisfied with the way we worked together. |  |  |  |  |  |
| Everyone contributed to the discussion. |  |  |  |  |  |
| I contributed to the discussion. |  |  |  |  |  |
| We communicated well as a group. |  |  |  |  |  |
| I learned new points of view from others in the group. |  |  |  |  |  |
| We stayed on task and/or self corrected when needed. |  |  |  |  |  |
| I was satisfied with the final outcome. |  |  |  |  |  |

What are your strengths and weakness as a group member? What aspects do you want to improve?

**Additional Resources**

Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian online exhibit, “Indians at the Post Office: Native Themes in New Deal-Era Murals,” at <http://npm.si.edu/indiansatthepostoffice/>

Barehand, Shana and Bob Haozous. (2009, September 25) “Censorship: Who Should Say What Art is?” Native American Calling at [www.nativeamericancalling.com/nac\_past2009.shtml](http://www.nativeamericancalling.com/nac_past2009.shtml)

See the following website for pictures of the work of Frank Mechau: [www.frankmechau.com/artwork](http://www.frankmechau.com/artwork)