



Teaching LGBTQ History

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Native Americans, Gender Roles, and Two-Spirit People

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Topics: Integrated; Native Americans and Early America, Westward Movement

Grade Levels: Elementary School: 5th Grade; Middle School 8th Grade

Overview

This lesson plan can be adapted for use in 5th or 8th grade.

This lesson plan explores two-spirit traditions in some Native American cultures. Students will learn different perspectives on gender roles and gender expectations. They will contrast the beliefs and values within these traditions with those of early European immigrants.

Time: 50 minutes

Lesson Objectives:

- Explain and discuss the Native American two-spirit tradition
- Understand why the two-spirit tradition almost ended
- Complete the handout about two-spirit tradition

Essential Questions:

1. What are two-spirit traditions?
2. How have gender roles and expectations shifted across time and cultures?
3. What are the differences in gender understandings between certain Native American traditions and traditions brought from Europe?
4. Have these different gender understandings caused inequity to occur? If so, how?

Standards:

HSS 5.3: Students describe the cooperation and conflict that existed among the American Indians and between the Indian nations and the new settlers.

HSS 8.8: Students analyze the divergent paths of the American people in the West from 1800 to the mid-1800s and the challenges they faced.

HISTORY FRAMEWORK: CH 8 P 98: Students may explore the social and cultural diversity of American Indians by addressing this question: How were family and community structures of North American Indians similar to and different from one another? Students learn how American Indians expressed their culture in art, music, dance, religion, and storytelling. They also gain a fuller understanding of how gender roles and family life varied between different tribes by examining the multiple roles and influence of women in American Indian



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communities. Students are introduced to the rich legends and literature of American Indian cultures and spiritual traditions about people's relationship to the earth. Finally, students should appreciate the diversity of Native American communities and connect this national story of diverse natives to their fourth-grade studies of California Indians.

HISTORY FRAMEWORK: CH 12 P 274: The American Indian wars, the creation of the reservation system, the development of federal Indian boarding schools, and the re-allotment of Native lands profoundly altered Native American social systems related to governance, family diversity, and gender diversity.... Re-allotment entailed breaking up Native lands into privately held units (largely based on the Anglo-American model of the male-headed nuclear family), displacing elements of female and two-spirit authority traditionally respected in many tribal societies. Boarding schools in the late 19th and early 20th centuries took Native children from their parents for years at a time, imposing Christianity, U.S. gender binaries and social roles, and English-only education in an attempt to make them into what school administrators viewed as proper U.S. citizens.

Vocabulary:

Gender Binary: A system of belief in and categorization of only two complementary genders: male/female or man/woman. The gender binary conflates sex with gender, and assumes that sex/gender and heterosexuality are always aligned (ie: women are inherently and always feminine and are only sexually attracted to men and vice versa). The gender binary perpetuates heteronormativity, enforces stereotypical gender roles, and denies the experiences of non-binary identities, such as intersex or transgender. Gender binarism is dominant in most western cultures with the exception of some indigenous North American cultures.

Two-Spirit: Many indigenous communities recognize at least four genders (feminine female, masculine female, feminine male, masculine male) as well as transgender, and most indigenous communities and tribes have specific terms for gender fluid members. Two-Spirit is generally recognized as a positive umbrella term to describe these identities. As this word is specific to indigenous culture it would be considered an inappropriate appropriation for non-native folks to self-identify as Two-Spirit.

Teacher Background:

(Web Links for this lesson:queerhistory.pbworks.com/LessonLinks8th)

On the land we know as North America, there were approximately 400 distinct indigenous Nations. Of that number, 155 have documented multiple gender traditions. Two-spirit is a contemporary term that refers to those traditions where some individuals' spirits are a blending of male and female spirit. Two-Spirit is a culturally distinct gender that describes Indigenous North Americans who fulfill one of many mixed gender roles found traditionally among many Native Americans and Canadian First Nations indigenous groups.

The positive umbrella term was first adopted in 1990 during the third annual Intertribal Native/First Nations gay and lesbian conference to describe gay, lesbian, bisexual, and non-binary genders within the indigenous communities. The Two-Spirit person is recognized as a spiritual role, in which the individual's spirit or soul is both masculine and feminine. The mixed



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gender roles encompassed by the term historically included wearing the clothing and performing the work associated with both men and women. The term can also be used more abstractly, to indicate presence of two contrasting human spirits (such as Warrior and Clan Mother) or two contrasting animal spirits (which, depending on the culture, might be Eagle and Coyote). The term Two-Spirit was created by LGBT indigenous people to replace the term berdache (pronounced: burr-dash) which had historically been used to describe indigenous people who fulfilled multiple gender roles. Many indigenous communities recognize at least four genders (feminine female, masculine female, feminine male, masculine male), and most indigenous communities and tribes have specific terms for sexual and gender fluid members. The two-spirit tradition is primarily a question of gender, not sexual orientation.

Desired Results

Central Historical Question: What is the two-spirit tradition of Native Americans and what caused it to be discontinued?

Essential Question(s):

- What is the two-spirit tradition and why is it important in the study of American history?
- What caused the two-spirit tradition to end and then start again?

Enduring Understandings: (The “big ideas” we’ll discuss)

- The two-spirit tradition existed in over 400 Native American tribes in North America (U.S. and Canada First Nations people) prior to colonization and suggested a gender spectrum including: feminine female, masculine female, feminine male, masculine male, and transgender; these current terms had different names in early Native American cultures.
- It was believed that two-spirit people had special spiritual powers, were honored, and were a natural part of most Native American tribes.
- The early colonists and missionaries, based on the religion they practiced, believed in the gender binary – male and female and marriage between a man and woman only.
- The two-spirit tradition was not consistent with the colonial and early American beliefs, so it gradually disappeared until the tradition was revived in 1990 using the term two-spirit and how it fits with gender and family during the westward movement.
- The two-spirit tradition began to be celebrated again in 1990 when a Native American organization agreed that two-spirit was a general term to use that identifies a person who has both male and female characteristics.

Materials:

- One of the following:
 - [Two-Spirit Slideshow](#)
 - [Two-Spirit Video](#)
- [Native American Perspectives of Gender Worksheet](#)

Instruction:

Background (8 minutes)

Share the background information on Two-Spirit individuals with the class and allow students to discuss.



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Slideshow or Video (22 minutes)

Have students watch the [Two-Spirit Slideshow](#) or the [Two-Spirit Video](#).

Discussion Questions (10 minutes)

1. What is the two-spirit tradition?
2. What does it say about gender?
3. What caused the two-spirit tradition to end? And then start again?
4. What other Native American or other traditions ended because of the settling of America or the movement west and the resettlement of Native Americans?
5. What does this tell us about current American history?

Assessment (10 minutes)

Complete the handout and participate in class discussion. Teachers may want to include questions on a unit test or an essay question related to this topic.

Relevant Resources:

Two-Spirit Presentation / PowerPoint: Pruden, Harlan.

www.ncai.org/policy-research-center/initiatives/Pruden-Edmo_TwoSpiritPeople.pdf

“Two-Spirit: Past, Present & Future.” Prudent, Harlan. (Written in document, “The Gender Spectrum: What Educators Need to Know.”)

www.nlta.nl.ca/wp-content/uploads/public/documents/resources/gender_spectrum.pdf

“Who are the Native American Two Spirits?” Roscoe, Will. 2010.

<http://www.willsworld.org/twospiritq-a.html>

“The ‘Two-Spirit’ People of Indigenous North Americans.” Williams, Walter. The Guardian. October 2010.

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/oct/11/two-spirit-people-north-america>

5 Genders, The Story of the Native American Two-Spirits (2016).

<https://the-numinous.com/native-american-two-spirits/>

PBS Two Spirit Movie and Resources (2011).

<http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/films/two-spirits/>

YouTube Videos about Two Spirit People:

- Two-Spirit People Voices. Frameline Films. (22 Minutes).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8JcmAoderl4>
An overview of historical and contemporary Native American concepts of gender, sexuality and sexual orientation and two-spirit tradition.
- As They Are: Two-Spirit People in the Modern World – USC Department of Anthropology. (18 minutes).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYGxZL870ZE>

Reference for teachers. Provides a first person account from several individuals about two-spirit people as well as the insights from gay two-spirit people.

Books:

- Jacobs, Sue-Ellen, Sabine Lang, and Wesley Thomas, Eds. Two-Spirit People. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1997.
- Lang, Sabine. Men as Women, Women as Men . Texas: University of Texas Press, 1998.

Author(s) Information:

Dr. Rob Darrow is a lifelong Californian who works as an educational consultant in LGBT history, safe and inclusive schools, curriculum development, college and career planning, and digital learning. In addition, he works as Director of Research and Professional Learning with the Safe Schools Project Santa Cruz County and teaches a course titled “LGBT History in Schools” at CSU Monterey Bay. He has worked as an online school principal, adjunct professor, school librarian, and teacher in K-12 schools. His research interests include safe and inclusive environments for LGBT youth, LGBT history, blended and online learning, professional learning, creating a social presence in online courses, and school libraries.



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Worksheet: Native American/First Nations Perspectives of Gender

After reading articles or viewing videos about two-spirit identities, compare and contrast the beliefs about gender traditionally held by some Native American people with those traditionally held in 'Western' or colonial cultures.

Native American Perspective	Western/Colonial Perspective

Summarize the two-spirit tradition and why it was discontinued in early America.

One article states: "The existence of two-spirit people challenges the rigid binary worldview of the North American colonizers and missionaries." What do you think this means?