
self-images: alberta's native peoples

by bernard dichek

Reaction is a weekly public affairs program, produced by the University of Calgary. Last December, it screened Education for Native Peoples, a film which captures the present Albertan experience. Bernard Dichek shares the experience of making the film...



These students of the Stoney People are developing language skills in both Stoney and English in a class taught by Rod Mark, the first Native person to teach at their Reserve.



Albert Lightning, an Elder of the Hobbema Indian Reserve, is interviewed

Albert Lightning is an Elder of the Hobbema Indian Reserve in Western Canada. His weathered skin and braided hair combine with the white, cowboy hat and thick-lens glasses that he wears to give the appearance of a man who is at home in two worlds. His manner of speaking in Cree is as loquacious, I am told, as his English. We wanted to film him telling a legend from Cree folklore as a demonstration of an innovative method his band is using to preserve their own language and oral traditions; through the use of videotape the band is recording as much of its ancient folklore as it possibly can.

As it is the usual procedure for an Elder to speak in Cree while another member of the band translates into English for the benefit of the younger generation who no longer know the language, we asked Albert to provide us with a sample story with young Bruce Cut Knife acting as translator. Our camera started rolling and at first things seemed to be going well. Albert would say a sentence in Cree and then Bruce would repeat it in English. But at one point Albert's vocabulary seemed to get the best of Bruce who looked quizzically at his Elder. Albert, in turn, tried to surreptitiously whisper the correct English word. All this with the camera still rolling of course.

I was not too concerned because I knew that if we wanted to keep things looking authentic we could later on edit out this segment. What began to really worry me though, was the fact that Albert was talking *about* legends — he wasn't actually *telling* one. At first I thought this was just an introduction but finding it indiscreet to interrupt, I waited as the introduction continued and continued. Later I was to find out that Plains Indians consider it bad luck to tell stories before "the snow flies." It was October and we were a few weeks too early. That oversight cost us a full magazine-load of film.

Our slip-up with Albert was not the first time during the production of the film **Education for Native Peoples** when we were confronted with the awkward difficulties involved with filming within a culture so different from our own.

At the very outset there was the problem of names. As the film was based on an idea provided by Native Students Services of the University of Calgary, the Reaction TV series producers chose to use the term "native peoples." However at the Hobbema Reserve in central Alberta, we found a preference for the word "Indian," while to the south in Lethbridge, "native American" was in common use. And then what to call ourselves? Personally, I found "white" or "anglo-saxon" or "European," inaccurate or discomfoting while being called a "non-Indian" or "non-native" seemed to be avoiding the issue altogether.

Aside from these somewhat minor issues, which remain to be resolved, there was the far greater challenge of what approach to choose. "Don't show a lot of Indians who are failures and blame the white man for it," said Nancy Lewis, a student counselor who grew up on the Hobbema Reserve. That was the approach used by the CBC in a recent Quarterly Report on the state of the Canadian Indian. "Because people, including Indians themselves, need to be told that they can succeed and, in any case, it was a white person who helped me to get to where I am."

Bernard Dichek is the Development Officer with the Department of Communications Media, University of Calgary.



Children in a class at the Ermineskin Primary School participate in a "Special Person" lesson designed to improve their feelings of self-worth.

Nancy's view was shared by Terry Lusty, a Metis student at the University of Calgary. Lusty pointed out that in its own well-intentioned way, the media has often caused considerable harm to Indians and Metis by reinforcing negative self-images. Instead, Lusty and other people involved in Indian educational programs in Alberta expressed a need for more exposure to "success models" within Indian society.

A school lesson of this kind was in session the day we filmed at the Ermineskin Primary School which is attended by students from four different prairie bands. A different "Special Person" is chosen by the class every day. The teacher then designs an entire lesson around that "Special Person," and part of the lesson includes the rest of the children mentioning nice things that they know about that person.

While at the Morley Reserve Primary School, near the foothills of the Rockies, we met Rod Mark who returned to the Reserve after completing his university education in the city and became the first Indian to ever serve as a teacher on the Reserve. Rod uses his fluency in both Stoney and English to help develop his students' language skills and to ensure that they feel good about speaking in both languages.

At the university level, a similar attempt to instill positive attitudes could be observed in a developmental drama workshop taught by the University of Calgary Outreach program at Lesser Slave Lake. The course was aimed at developing the student's image of self-identity. One student, Archie Cunningham, recalled how the course helped him to change the way he had been conditioned to view himself. As a result, he found himself able to improve the way he related to other people.

At the University of Lethbridge, we found North American history being taught, perhaps for the first time, from the point of view of the North American Indian. "When the Indian won the battle it was known as a massacre," said Roy Cunningham, a member of the all-Indian teaching staff of the Native American Studies Program. "But when the white man won it was always called a victory."

The documentary film, like the Hollywood movie and the history textbook, has a significant role to play in the way that people view themselves and others. In dealing with the problems of Canada's Native Peoples, the televised exposé of disparity and inequality serves an obvious and much-needed purpose. However, as we found in producing **Education for Native Peoples**, the impact of the program on the very people concerned must be given careful consideration. □