

Hearing Native Voices

Analyzing Differing Tribal Perspectives in the Oratory of Sitting Bull and Plenty Coups

Grade level

7th–12th grade

Time needed

One to three days

Standards correlation

The activity that follows reflects the Essential Understandings regarding Montana Indians and the Montana Social Studies Content Standards as developed by the Montana Office of Public Instruction. The exercise will align with Essential Understandings 1, 2, and 6 and with Social Studies Content Standards 4.1, 4.3, 4.4, 6.1, and 6.3.

Approach and purpose

This flexible one- to three-day activity is intended to supplement topics addressed in Chapter 7 of the Montana Historical Society’s middle school Montana History textbook, *Montana: Stories of the Land*. It has been designed to be adapted to a variety of lengths and approaches in order to maximize its usefulness for the classroom teacher. If you do not have copies of the textbook, you can download a pdf version of Chapter 7 from the *Montana: Stories of the Land* website: <http://mhs.mt.gov/education/textbook/Chapter7/Chapter7.asp>.

The activity focuses on excerpts from a number of speeches and addresses given by two well-known leaders of native peoples closely associated with the story of Montana’s past: Sitting Bull, of the Hunkpapa Sioux, and Plenty Coups, of the Crow. In comparing and contrasting these brief excerpts, students will come to appreciate that great diversity existed among

individual American Indian leaders and the ways they responded to changing circumstances during the late nineteenth century. While some leaders, such as Sitting Bull, violently resisted the growing presence of Euro-Americans in their lives, others, such as Plenty Coups, chose an adaptive strategy that emphasized greater cooperation with the Euro-Americans. All tribal members acted in what they perceived to be their best interest depending on the circumstances they faced; as those circumstances changed, so did the members’ attitudes and strategies.

This lesson seeks to challenge students’ preconceived stereotypes of American Indians as one-dimensional, inflexible caricatures who were merely acted upon by outside forces. Through this exercise, students will grapple with historical evidence, develop higher-level thinking skills, and better recognize the complexity of native-white encounters in the second half of the nineteenth century. After this activity, students will better appreciate the many ways in which Montana’s native peoples actively determined their own destinies.

[Note: Prior to undertaking this lesson in their classrooms, teachers should note that the speeches included here have been translated into English from Crow and Sioux. English was not the first language of the speechmakers, and non-Indian translators often struggled to accurately convey what was said by native speakers. In some instances, translators edited, summarized, or in other ways intentionally or unintentionally modified what was said by native speakers. In other instances, the same speech has been translated in slightly different ways over the years. The speeches

presented here are likely close approximations of what was actually said, nothing more and nothing less.]

Activity description

The following is a lesson that could work equally well in history or English classes. In this activity, students will read the words and ideas of two tribal leaders from two different tribal groups, listen to their speeches, and compare and contrast the two speeches. Students will then select a quote of their liking, evaluate its content, and develop three reasons why they agree or disagree with the ideas and strategies voiced. They will also have an opportunity to raise questions and draw meaningful conclusions about the various and sometimes conflicting manners in which different tribal leaders and their followers viewed Euro-Americans and adapted to a Euro-American presence in their midst. Summary questions will facilitate a wrap-up discussion that centers on the challenges of considering a multidimensional approach to the past. Through this activity, students will:

- ▶ demonstrate comprehension of class readings
- ▶ compare and contrast historic documents
- ▶ analyze the use of style, tone, rhetoric, and methods of persuasion in historical speeches
- ▶ create interpretive presentations of historical characters
- ▶ articulate persuasive arguments
- ▶ demonstrate effective oral presentation skills.

■ Day 1 (Background)

[Note: It is assumed that, before undertaking this activity, students will have general background information concerning the various tribal groups that lived in Montana during the nineteenth century as well as the manners in which the Plains Indian wars affected these groups.] The instructor will set the stage for the comparison activity

that follows by asking students to brainstorm what they remember about the Plains Indian wars and how they affected Montana's Indians. Teachers should record student responses on the board as they are provided. Rather than giving the information freely to the students, the teacher should draw it out of their students with a series of probing questions aimed at reviewing the causes, effects, and general circumstances surrounding Euro-American and Native American tensions in Montana during the later decades of the nineteenth century. Facilitating questions for the discussion might include the following:

- ▶ What factors attracted Euro-Americans to Montana during the 1800s?
- ▶ How were the lives of Montana's Indians affected?
- ▶ Were all natives affected in the same way?
- ▶ In what ways did Montana's native peoples respond to these rapid changes?
- ▶ Did all natives respond in the same way?
- ▶ What factors may have caused different peoples to respond differently?
- ▶ Did native attitudes change over time? If so, how?
- ▶ If your homeland was invaded by a foreign people, how might you respond? Why?

■ Day 2 (Comparing Speeches)

The class will silently read each of the document readings. **[Documents 1 and 2]** Once the documents have been read, the teacher will ask for seven volunteers and will assign one excerpt to each student. Each student will stand before the class and read the document excerpts from each individual. *[Note: Because the Plenty Coups excerpt 1 is divided into two paragraphs, two different students will read this particular statement. The purposes of reading the document excerpts aloud are (1) to practice public speaking and listening skills, (2) to better understand the content*

contained in the documents, and, most important, (3) to better appreciate the power of oral delivery and that these historical statements are part of a proud oral tradition.]

When the documents/excerpts have been read, the class will be divided into small groups of three to five students. Each group will select a group leader and discuss the documents, considering and recording their responses to some or all of the following questions:

- 1) Describe and list the emotions expressed by the speaker in the reading(s). What is the general tone of the document(s)?
- 2) Summarize the speaker's view of Euro-Americans? What specific words does he select to describe them?
- 3) How does the speaker characterize his own people? What specific words does he select to describe them?
- 4) Did the speaker's general attitudes change over time?
- 5) How persuasive is the speaker, in your opinion? Why?
- 6) Try to summarize the speaker's overall strategy with respect to Euro-Americans. Does his approach seem understandable, wise, and/or effective? Can you imagine a better approach?
- 7) What, if anything, surprised you about the speaker's words, attitudes, and strategies?

Following the group reading and discussion, the class will reassemble as a whole. The instructor will divide the board into two sections—one for each of the tribal leaders—and record student observations while the group leaders report their group's findings to the rest of the class.

HOMEWORK

Students will select one speech excerpt from either Sitting Bull or Plenty Coups. Students will write a one- to two-page reaction to the

quotation, providing three reasons why they agree or disagree with the statement and the general attitudes or strategy it conveys. The writing assignment will be due the day after it is assigned.

■ Day 3 (Wrap-up)

The class will reassemble as a whole to consider the overall significance of the lesson via a few teacher-generated essential questions (see the suggestions below). Rather than merely engaging in open discussion, however, today's wrap-up will use a technique known as "chalk talk." The instructor will write an essential question on the board and then instruct his or her students to silently respond by writing their comments on the same board. The instructor must provide students with chalk or board markers so that five to ten students are writing on the board at any one time. *[Note: If there is a shortage of markers, have the students who have finished their response hand off the marker to someone who has yet to reply.]* It is important that this part of the activity be done in silence and that the teacher work to keep the pace active. Students should be coming and going from the board until all have answered. By clustering students at the board and having them write their answers simultaneously, a general anonymity exists as to the ownership of the answer. This makes it "safe" for reticent students to respond. Students can even reply to someone else's comment. Once this has been accomplished, a full discussion can follow. Students can give voice to their opinions or those of others seen on the board. Trends can be explored. Information can be aggregated. Everyone contributes. Everyone participates.

- ▶ Even though Montana's Indians experienced essentially the same set of troubling circumstances during the late 1800s, they responded to these circumstances in different ways. Why?
- ▶ Aside from the methods expressed by Sitting Bull and Plenty Coups, what other strategies

could have been adopted by Montana's Indians during the late 1800s?

- ▶ Using the seemingly contradictory words and ideas of Sitting Bull and Plenty Coups as evidence, what broad conclusions can be made regarding Montana Indians and their approaches to Euro-Americans in the late 1800s?

Assessments

Assessments for the activity and discussions above can be formal or informal. Teachers wishing all students to process the information individually can easily convert the suggested discussion questions into a written assignment. Additional fact-based questions can be added, if desired. Instructors can then follow up with an in-class discussion, if time permits. Written questions and/or the discussion can be based on the thoroughness and accuracy of the responses. The formal writing assignment can be graded with a standard 6+1 writing rubric.

Extension ideas/alternative assessments

- ▶ Evaluate Plenty Coups' and Sitting Bull's attitudes and methods and write a persuasive essay that argues why one strategy was better than the other.
- ▶ Research the lives of Plenty Coups and Sitting Bull and make presentations to the class.
- ▶ Investigate other tribal leaders associated with Montana's history, such as Charlot (Salish), Stone Child, aka Rocky Boy (Chippewa), Little Bear (Cree), Little Wolf (Northern Cheyenne), Dull Knife (Northern Cheyenne), Lame Bull (Blackfeet), Red Cloud (Sioux), and Chief Joseph (Nez Perce). How did their strategies for dealing with Euro-Americans compare with those of the leaders featured in this activity?
- ▶ Create a R.A.F.T. writing assignment in which students imagine that they are the leader of a tribal group in Montana that lived

during the later 1800s. Students can write and/or perform a speech based on historical realities in which they express their own feelings and strategies for dealing with changes wrought by Euro-Americans.

Further information

- Armstrong, Virginia I., ed. *I Have Spoken: American History through the Voices of the Indians*. Chicago: Swallow Press, 1971.
- Calloway, Collin G., ed. *Our Hearts Fell to the Ground: Plains Indian Views on How the West Was Lost*. Boston: Bedford, 1996.
- Linderman, Frank Bird. *Plenty-Coups, Chief of the Crows*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962.
- Mintz, Steven, ed. *Native American Voices: A History and Anthology*. St. James, NY: Brandywine, 1995.
- Moquin, Wayne, and Charles Van Doren, eds. *Great Documents in American Indian History*. New York: Praeger, 1973.
- Nabokov, Peter, ed. *Native American Testimony: A Chronicle of Indian-White Relations from Prophecy to the Present, 1492-2000*. New York: Penguin, 1999.
- Rosentiel, Annette, ed. *Red and White: Indian Views of the White Man*. New York: Universe, 1983.
- Utley, Robert M. *The Lance and the Shield: The Life and Times of Sitting Bull*. New York: Henry Holt, 1993.
- Vanderwerth, W. C. *Indian Oratory: Famous Speeches by Noted Indian Chieftains*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971.

About this activity

Derek Strahn, a high school teacher in Bozeman, Montana, developed this activity in 2006. It was reviewed by Dr. Walter Fleming, Chair of the Department of Native American Studies at Montana State University. Funding for this project was provided by the Indian Education Division of the Montana Office of Public Instruction.

Document 1: Sitting Bull quotations

Excerpt 1: On Making Peace with the U.S. Government (1867)

“I have killed, robbed and injured too many white men to believe in a good peace. They are bad medicine; I would rather have my skin pierced with bullet holes. I don’t want anything to do with a people who makes a brave carry water on his shoulders, or haul manure.”¹

Excerpt 2: On Why He Didn’t Surrender and Live on the Reservation (winter 1876–77)

“If the Great Spirit had desired me to be a white man he would have made me so in the first place. He put in your heart certain wishes and plans, in my heart he put other and different desires. Each man is good in his sight. It is not necessary for eagles to be crows. Now we are poor but we are free. No white man controls our footsteps. If we must die we die defending our rights.”²

Excerpt 3: On His Surrender and Return from Canada (1881)

“I do not come in anger toward the white soldiers. I am very sad . . . I will fight no more. I do not love war. I was never the aggressor. I fought only to defend my women and children. Now all my people want to return to their native land. Therefore I submit . . . [Later] I do not wish to be shut up in a corral. It is bad for young men to be fed by an agent. It makes them lazy and drunken. All agency Indians I have seen are worthless. They are neither red warriors nor white farmers. They are neither wolf nor dog. But my followers are weary of cold and hunger. They wish to see their brothers and their old home, therefore I bow my head.”³

Excerpt 4: On Keeping Treaties (1891)

“What treaty that the whites have kept has the red man broken? Not one. What treaty that the whites ever made with us red men have they kept? Not one. When I was a boy the Sioux owned the world. The sun rose and the sun set in their lands. They sent 10,000 horsemen to battle. Where are the warriors today? Who slew them? Where are our lands? Who owns them? What white man can say I ever stole his lands or a penny of his money? Yet they say I am a thief. What white woman . . . was ever when a captive insulted by me? Yet they say that I am a bad Indian. What white man has ever seen me drunk? Who has ever come to me hungry and gone unfed? Who has ever seen me beat my wives or abuse my children? What law have I broken? Is it wrong for me to love my own? Is it wicked in me because my skin is red; because I am a Sioux; because I was born where my fathers lived; because I would die for my people and my country?”⁴

NOTES

1. Sitting Bull quoted in Charles Larpenteur, *Forty Years a Fur Trader* (Chicago: Donnelley, 1941), 359, as quoted in Virginia Irving Armstrong, ed., *I Have Spoken: American History through the Voices of the Indians* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1971), 83.
2. Sitting Bull quoted in Homer W. Wheeler, *Buffalo Days*, 253, as quoted in Virginia Irving Armstrong, ed., *I Have Spoken: American History through the Voices of the Indians* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1971), 112.
3. Sitting Bull quoted in Hamlin Garland, *The Book of the American Indian* (New York: Harper, 1923), 254, as quoted in Virginia Irving Armstrong, ed., *I Have Spoken: American History through the Voices of the Indians* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1971), 126.
4. Sitting Bull quoted in W. Fletcher Johnson, *Life of Sitting Bull* (1891), 201, as quoted in Wayne Moquin and Charles Van Doren, eds., *Great Documents in American Indian History* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 262.

Document 2: Plenty Coups quotations

Excerpt 1: On Alliance with the United States

“The Absarokees are red men . . . and so are their enemies, the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe, three tribes of people, speaking three different languages, who always combined against us and who greatly outnumbered the Crows. When I was young they had better weapons too. But in spite of all of this we have held our beautiful country to this day. War was always with us until the white man came; then because we were not against him he became our friend. Our lands are ours by treaty and not by chance gift. I have been told that I am the only living chief who signed a treaty with the United States.

I was a chief when I was twenty-eight [1875], and well remember that when white men found gold in the Black Hills the Sioux and Cheyenne made war on them. The Crow were wiser. We knew the white men were strong, without number in their own country, and that there was no good in fighting them; so that when other tribes wished us to fight them we refused. Our leading chiefs saw that to help the white men fight their enemies and ours would make them [the whites] our friends. We had always fought the three tribes, Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe, anyway, and might as well do so now. The complete destruction of our old enemies would please us. Our decision was reached, not because we loved the white man who was already crowding other tribes into our country, or because we hated the Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe, but because we plainly saw that this course was the only one which might save our beautiful country for us. When I think back my heart sings because we acted as we did. It was the only way open to us.”¹

Excerpt 2: Speech to His Followers, March 27, 1890

“These are my people here today, I am their chief, and I will talk for them. I would like to see all of them supplied with wagons, plows, mowing machines, and such farming implements as they may need. I understand that the money obtained by [grazing] leases is used toward purchasing these things. That is a good plan. Let the cattlemen stay who pay; those who don’t put them off. Don’t let any more come on, don’t let those who are on now bring any more stock and put them with theirs. I want the men who have cattle here to employ half Crow and half white men to work their cattle. I want them to pay the Crows as much as they pay white men. I want [the whites] to make [the Crows] work and teach them the white man’s ways so that they may learn. We may have stock of our own some day, if we don’t our children will. I don’t want any white man to cut hay on Crow lands. The Great Father has given us mowing machines to cut hay with, we want to cut our own hay; we want the white man to buy hay from us, we don’t want too beg and buy our hay from them. This is our land and not the white men’s . . . I don’t like sheep on Crow lands. I don’t like horses on Crow lands, if they won’t employ Crows to work, put them off entirely. I have spoken, if my people are not satisfied, let them get up and come here and talk, I am ready to listen”²

NOTES

1. Plenty Coups quoted in Frank B Linderman, *Plenty Coups: Chief of the Crows* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 153–54.
2. *Billings Gazette*, March 27, 1890, quoted in Fred C. Krieg, “Plenty Coups: The Final Dignity,” *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 16, no. 4 (October 1966): 28–39.