

RADICAL TEACHER

a socialist, feminist and anti-racist journal on the theory and practice of teaching

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Front cover: classroom photo courtesy of Berta Rosa Berriz; drawing of Ron Unz, millionaire leader and benefactor of "English-Only" movement, by Nick Thorkelson. Please check out our web site at www.radicalteacher.org.

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**PUSHING SOME BUTTONS:
HELPING STUDENTS
UNDERSTAND THE AMERICAN
INDIAN MASCOT ISSUE**

The exercise described below is available at the American Indian Movement website at www.aimovement.org/ncrsm/index.html through the generous support of Vernon Bellecourt.

The American Indian mascot issue has taken center stage in the fight for indigenous rights and respect for cultural and historical identity since August of 2005, when the National Collegiate Athletic Association announced its new policy regarding American Indian mascots, logos, and

nicknames. The NCAA named 18 member institutions that would be banned from hosting post-season play because the schools have "hostile or abusive" American Indian nicknames or mascots. St. Cloud State University president Roy Saigo, in his presentation on the inherent racism in the use of American Indian mascots before the NCAA's Division II chief executive officers meeting on January 13, 2002, asked for a policy addressing the use of these mascots.

The NCAA could not have been surprised by Saigo's request in 2002, in that the National Congress of American Indians, U.S. Civil Rights Commission, Native American Journalists' Association, National Indian Education Association, NAACP, and Southern Poverty Law Center, among others, have condemned the use of Indigenous mascots. Their critique has been consistent, clear, and impassioned. The use of American Indians as mascots, they argue, reinforces cultural stereotypes, perpetuates violent war-like icons, and denigrates Native spirituality. Schools have fought back with every alumni and corporate dollar they can find to counter these arguments with claims of "honoring" Indigenous people through the use of mascots and nicknames.

A more accurate account of why schools use American Indian mascots is that they chose *Indians*, *Chiefs*, or *Savages* as school nicknames decades ago when *Bears*, *Wolves*, or *Bisons* just weren't quite exciting or aggressive enough for the school community. Objections were not heard at the time, or they were not loud enough to force schools to find another name, and thus a tradition was begun. In attempts to hold on to these traditions in the face of strong opposition, many strategies are currently being used to address the critics. At the collegiate level, financial incentives are given to Native students in the form of scholarships, and American Indian history courses are being quickly added to curricular offerings.

The NCAA, in response to Saigo's 2002 presentation, directed its Minority Opportunities and Interests Committee (MOIC) to conduct a three-year study on the mascot issue that ultimately resulted in the 2005 policy. The NCAA is currently reviewing appeals made by some of the 18 affected institutions.

In an effort to help my students understand the complexities of the mascot issue, I developed a simulation exercise that has exposed many of the problems created when sports teams

use American Indians for mascots, logos, and nicknames. The exercise is a simulation that takes about thirty minutes and contrasts the very real use of American Indian mascots by schools with a hypothetical case using a Catholic bishop for a school nickname and mascot. A mock town meeting is set up in which students are asked to generate possible nicknames or mascots for the new high school nearing completion. The teacher pretends to get sidetracked before starting the meeting and proceeds to poke fun at the Catholics who live within the community. Catholic traditions and ceremonies are mocked and trivialized and church teachings are misrepresented. A short script is provided for this part of the exercise. (See the web site listed above.)

The teacher then returns to the agenda and asks a few students who are planted in the class to suggest possible nicknames. They suggest animals such as wolves or bison, and the teacher promptly rejects those choices. Then the *planted* students suggest *Priests*, *Bishops*, and *Popes*. They speculate that nuns could be used as cheerleaders, fans could put crosses on their foreheads at games, and the sign of the cross could be made after the team scores or makes a touch down. After considering the deeply offensive suggestion that the Catholic faith would be used by fans for entertainment, students make the parallel to Indigenous spirituality and are easily able to engage in dialogue about the mascot issue after the exercise.

Students have reacted favorably to this exercise and have often asked for a copy of the script so they can try the simulation in other classes. I was recently approached by a student who informed me that she was a "sister." I asked if she was offended by the exercise and the reference to nuns as cheerleaders. She said, "Absolutely. I wouldn't make much of a cheerleader." We had a good laugh because her feminist principles were apparent.

The simulation exercise is appropriate for college and upper division high school classes.

Sudie Hofmann
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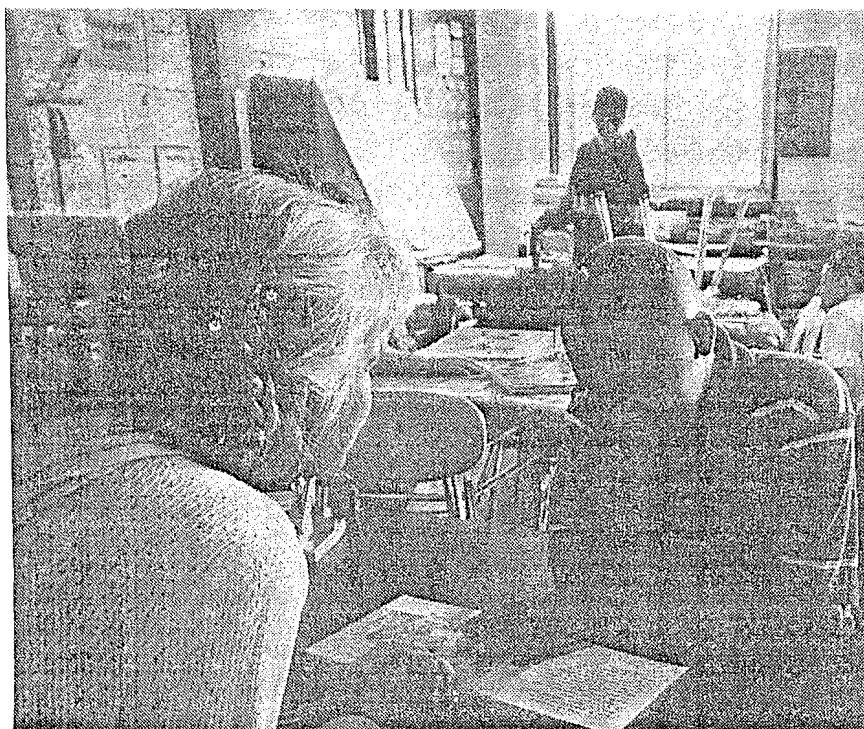


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