

TWO SPIRIT

Native American and Canadian First Nations GLBT People



Among Native people of this land there have existed, for untold centuries, individuals whose gender identity, sexual expression, and societal roles varied fluidly from what many Westerners would presume to be a traditionally heterosexual “norm.” Constituting a multiplicity of masculine/feminine constructs, these profoundly socially aware individuals – known today as “Two Spirit” – share a mixed-gender consciousness that is said to result from being born with both a male and female spirit. First “discovered” by those who came to conquer and colonize North America, Two Spirit people have been documented in over 155 tribes in every region of the continent. Frequently taking wives or husbands of their own biological sex, they were treated with great respect in their communities (where same-sex marriage was commonplace) until the influence and prejudices of Western culture introduced the foreign concept of homophobia, tainting what had been a sacred tradition. Contemporary interest in Two Spirit first came to light prior to the modern “Gay Rights Movement,” and has been studied with growing interest as though it were a new phenomenon by succeeding generations. But in reality, Two Spirit people predate GLBT awareness as a cultural phenomenon by centuries. As the originators of communities with more than two gender identities in North America, their complex traditions represent a richer understanding of polymorphous human sexuality and gender expression than Western societies conventionally have today. Believed to be gifted with special insight and empathy, many Two Spirit people are respected as shaman, healers and teachers, yet remain misunderstood – even by those who are GLBT – and are often forgotten in the conversation about GLBT contributions and how they are represented and portrayed both in history and contemporary society. Two Spirit leaders continue working to undo the impact of colonization in an effort to reclaim and restore Two Spirit people to their rightful place of honor and respect within their communities.

Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: What role do Two Spirit People play in our culture? Read the biographical information.
2. Group Discussion: Investigate how Two Spirit People have their roots in Native American culture and now the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered movement.
3. Read the following background information at <http://www.nativeout.com/digital-library/ts-history.html> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Two_Spirit

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Examine Two Spirit societies in terms of their mission and history through the following links: <http://www.denvertwospirit.com/> and http://ne2ss.typepad.com/northeast_twospirit_socie/2006/08/the_twospirit_t.html
2. Connect the importance of building knowledge and advocacy on gender or sexual orientation between the Legacy Project’s exploration of Two Spirit People and the information found at this link: <http://www.dancingtoeaglespiritsociety.org/twospirit.php>

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. View the clips about Fred Martinez, one of the youngest individuals who exemplifies Two Spirit, in the following <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/two-spirits/>
2. Examine the map of gender-diverse cultures at <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/two-spirits/map.html>
3. Describe your understanding of how Two Spirit People have evolved and impacted our culture.

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Examine the type of services and supports for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Questioning or Intersex or Two Spirit in the following document, <http://nccc.georgetown.edu/documents/lgbtqi2s.pdf>
2. Assess how you would advocate for Two Spirit individuals in your professional setting or community?