**Teaching Notes for A Tale of Two Totem Poles – the challenge and complexity of Native art acquisition and stewardship**

By Katie Jensen[[1]](#footnote-1)

## **Learning Objectives**

1. To identify and evaluate the conflict between governmental processes and Native philosophy involved in the commission of public art.
2. To analyze the tensions surrounding public space on traditionally tribal land.
3. To critique the role of dominant culture art narratives when considering Native art.
4. To explore the history of Everett Community College’s experience with two totem poles

**Intended Audience**:

This case could be scaffolded for use by students from the Basic Skills level at a community college through graduate level coursework in the areas of the arts, history, political science, sociology, public administration, law, Native Studies, and equity/social justice, among other fields. It could also be used in community-based or non-credit workshops of a similar nature.

**Implementation:**

At a Basic Skills level, Reading Apprenticeship strategies should be used to examine the text deeply, including activating prior knowledge, skimming/scanning, and talking to the text. If immigrant or international students are present, it would be important to provide scaffolding in the area of local/national tribal relations.

For all levels, the class could be broken up into different groups. Each group would become a stakeholder in the case: the artist, tribal leadership, the campus Art Committee, college administration, and state administration. Each group could discuss their role in the process, and the pros, cons, and rationale behind the decision that was made. They could then explore how they might have acted differently, and what they think each stakeholder should do going forward.

The results of these discussions could be a presentation, or even a dramatic interpretation of the events as they unfolded, and/or could unfold.

In an arts environment, there could also be further research on tribal and indigenous art throughout the world and how it is portrayed in public spaces.

For students in public administration, administrators, or community members, this would be a case study to review when coming together as an advisory or governing body.

**Discussion Questions**

**Discussion questions are another approach to teach this case by dividing the class into small groups of 3-6 people and assigning the groups different questions such as the ones below. Each group would then report out to the whole class after talking through their questions.**

1. Create a timeline of events. What are the points of significance on this timeline?
2. Everett Community College is located on the site of a former Hibulb village; yet, the totem pole was created by a T’Lingit tribal member. Going forward, should there be considerations regarding the tribal affiliation of the artist in relation to the land?
3. What qualifications should be in place for artists commissioned for Native art? Who should determine these qualifications?
4. At what points were Native voices brought into the process of creating the two totem poles? How might things have gone differently if the voices had been brought in earlier in the process?
5. Discuss the issue of apology in this case. Were apologies issued, either directly or indirectly?
6. The case ends *in medias res,* “in the middle of things*.”* What do you think will happen with the remaining totem pole in five years? What should happen?
7. Ultimately, what should have been the responsibility of the artist, the trib(es), the EvCC Art Collections committee, and the College President when commissioning art? What should be the process and who should be involved when commissioning Native art?
8. Totem poles are inherently works of art, and also have deep cultural significance. What should take precedence when making decisions?
9. The case study describes the rapid deterioration of the totem pole. What process should the college take in the care, maintenance, and eventual disposal?

**Suggestions for Additional Research:**

1. Do research to determine if there are similar cases at other colleges or public spaces involving Native art. What are the lessons from these other examples.
2. Where are there examples of totem poles or other Native art in your area? How are these art pieces managed?
3. How is indigenous art treated in other countries?
1. Katie Jensen is the Dean of Transitional Studies at Everett Community College. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)