

Navajo Communication and The University Classroom

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The problems Native Indian students encounter when they go to primarily Anglo schools has been well documented (c.f., Brandt, 1992; Dehyle, 1992; Thompson, 1978; Van Otten & Tsutsui, 1984). However, students have had a much greater degree of success when they start their education at Native Indian colleges where they are taught by members of their own tribe, and live in a educational context that adapts to their unique cultural background. Tribally controlled colleges have been very successful in their overall education of Native Indians, more so than Anglo colleges and universities (McNulty, 1992; Oppelt, 1990; Reyhner, 1994; Stein, 1992). One such college is Diné College, located in Tsaile, Navajo Nation (Arizona). [NOTE: Until recently, Diné College was called Navajo Community College. Because of this recent change, the documents from Diné College cited in this article still refer to Navajo Community College]. The students that come to Diné College are the success stories on the reservation. They have overcome the difficulties faced by Native Indians and worked their way up to the highest level of education available on the reservation.

In order to understand why and how students attending tribally controlled colleges such as Diné College are successful, and to help determine what can be done to assist those students who wish to continue their education by transferring to predominately Anglo universities, I spent eight months working with administrators, faculty, staff and students at Diné College (c.f., Braithwaite, 1997). I observed over 100 hours of classroom interaction in numerous classes, such as Navajo Oral History, Navajo Astronomy, and Speech Communication. I participated in administrative and faculty meetings, lived in the dormitories with Navajo students, and attended many campus and off-campus activities, such as hikes and Pow-Wows. Additionally, I developed, prepared, and delivered a course for Navajo students entitled "Successful Transfer to 4-Year Universities," where I provided students some of the skills that would help them have a more positive experience once they transferred off the reservation.

I believe that college and university educators can significantly help transfer students from tribally controlled colleges, and other Native Indian students, by

understanding: (1) the advantages for Native Indian students educated at tribal colleges, (2) the barriers facing some Native Indian students when attending colleges off the reservation, and (3) what educators can do to help Native Indian students once they arrive on campus. Although my perspective is presented as applying to Diné College students, I believe that my findings and suggestions will prove to be applicable to a larger cross-section of students because Native Indians encounter considerable problems regardless of where they attend college.

Advantages for Navajo Students

There are at least three areas in which Navajo students have the potential to succeed at colleges and universities off the reservation once they have completed coursework at Diné College.

Culturally Integrated Community College Education

If the education at other tribally controlled colleges is anything like what occurs at Diné College, then we can be sure that these Native Indian students get a solid community college education. The students are required to take courses in the usual general areas of education: communications, humanities/fine arts, mathematics, physical education, science, and social science. These courses are as rigorous as any I have seen at any other community college or university. Additionally, an important component of the general education requirements includes courses on Navajo language, Navajo history, Navajo philosophy, and Navajo culture. The purpose of this requirement is to teach the students about Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhóón, which is the Navajo traditional living system). This educational philosophy of NCC places human life in harmony with the natural world and the universe. In his history of NCC, Denny (1996) states:

Navajo Community College is established to create educational programs that meaningfully connect Western education to the Navajo experience and knowledge of the traditional and contemporary worlds. Sa'ah Naaghái Bik'eh Hózhóón (SNBH) places the human on a balanced and harmonious path to old age. This sacred path protects, and brings in well-being and blessings in all aspects of one's thought (nitsáhákees), action (nahat'á), living (iiná), and sense of security and stability (sihasin). SNBH teaches that it is one's responsibility to be successful and productive in life. (p. 6)

I have seen how SNBH is incorporated in the Navajo language and culture classes, as well as throughout the curriculum at Diné College. This consistent, and

very positive philosophy gives Navajo students attending Diné College a strength of purpose and an understanding of their unique place in the world. The additional courses on Navajo language and culture students at Diné College take, above and beyond what students take at "traditional" community colleges, gives the students a strong background that can only help them when they move on.

Dedication to the Diné

The introduction to each general catalog at Diné College states:

The educational philosophy of Navajo Community College is Sa'ah Naagháí Bik'eh Hózhóón, the Diné traditional living system, which places human life in harmony with the natural world and the universe. The philosophy provides principles both for protection from the imperfections in life and for the development of well-being. (Navajo Community College, 1995, p. 6)

Unlike most Anglo colleges that deliberately steer clear of making explicit claims of imposing a particular overarching philosophy for their classrooms, Diné College embraces and celebrates the fact that all aspects of their educational system is guided by the Diné traditional living system. Aronilth (1992), emphasizes this commitment when he presents to new students one of the central goals of the college:

Our educational leaders, our past grandfolks and Navajo Community College leaders and members strongly believe that Diné cultural studies should be taught to youths. The goals and mission of Navajo Community College required that Diné cultural studies would be created, implemented and presented to the young people. This would be done in the simplest way.

Here are seven areas of Diné learning that are important today.

1. Foundation of Diné Clan System
2. Creation of the Four Worlds
3. Recreation of the Four Clans
4. History and story of the Navajo Tribe
5. Twelve most important areas to understand as Diné
6. Four things that make Diné live a positive life
7. Story and foundation of Diné art work

One of main ideas of this course, the contents and stories, is to help understand the basic Diné principles of education and learning process, because we are told that we need a positive education. A positive Diné education is necessary in order for each individual youth to feel the power

of the sense of worth, not only in himself, but also in his/her education, values, belief, community and land (p. 7).

This commitment to helping students understand the foundations of their cultural identity is one important reason why students from Diné College have a high degree of awareness of their strengths and their weaknesses. They are taught how to be proud of their heritage, and are taught how much more needs to be done for their people (Braithwaite, in press).

Knowledge of Difficulties

Navajo administrators, faculty, staff, and especially students are well aware that students will encounter many difficulties when they leave the reservation to attend primarily Anglo schools. This is precisely one of the reasons Diné College was created. According to Aronilth (1992), who writes and teaches about Navajo culture and philosophy at Diné College:

Our leaders recognized that off-Reservation educational institutions were geared toward the students of the dominant society, with little consideration and provision for our Indian students. Our leaders began to perceive the need to plant a seed of learning, which is really a need for a bridging institution for our people, bridging the cultural gap between the Navajo world and the non-Indian world. (p. 10).

The Navajo students are highly cognizant of the problems they will encounter off-reservation: the economic difficulties, the social and cultural differences in living in an Anglo community, the educational differences at Anglo schools, the prejudice and bias experienced by all minorities in the U.S., etc. However, this does not prevent the students from having a high commitment to furthering their education. Almost all of the students I talked to at Diné College talked about a need to "go on (to higher education) to help our people." This awareness and commitment gives the students a significant advantage when they do encounter the world outside the reservation.

Barriers Facing Navajo Students

Although I am convinced the Navajo students have the tremendous potential to succeed at colleges and universities off the reservation, and the administrators, staff and faculty at NCC prepare the students very well, many students still have

concerns about what will happen when they transfer.

Stereotyping

Stereotyping is a fact of life for all persons. However, Navajo and other Native Indian students endure many stereotypical images that students fear will interfere with their education. The Navajo students that I talked to at NCC identified three of the most significant stereotypes:

All Indians are Plains Indian (and still living in the 18th & 19th century): This stereotype is evidenced by the way Anglo parents and teachers will dress their children up as "Indians" by giving them feather bonnets and clothes that look like buckskins. No one would dress their child up as a "European" because they would have to know which European country. But "Indian" creates an image in the mind of most Anglos that is associated with certain Indian tribes at a certain time in history. No other ethnic group appears to be stereotyped in this way, and it is troublesome for many Navajo students.

All Indians are spiritual and/or medicine men: Although this may seem like a "positive" stereotype at first glance, the Navajo students expressed dismay that so many Anglos expected them to be familiar with and able to practice traditional Native Indian religion and healing. This is a problem for many Navajo students who were raised and practice Christianity. This stereotype is also a problem for Navajos that believe only certain people are qualified to share traditional Navajo wisdom and powers, and are very uncomfortable when confronted with Anglos that expect them to be more "in touch" with the natural and supernatural world.

All poverty stricken and/or alcoholics: No Native Indian person would every deny that economic hardships and the devastating effects of alcohol are not a problem on all reservations in the U.S. and Canada. However, the expectations that this is endemic to all persons living on reservations, and that all Native Indian students have experience and opinions as to how to cope with these problems is a stereotype that bothers many Navajo students. It is most problematic because the stereotype concentrates on the most negative images of Native cultures, and fails to take into account the role played by Anglo culture and the U.S. government in perpetuating these conditions.

Navajo students are aware that there are many opportunities off the reservation that will be of benefit to them and their people. However, they are also aware that it will not be easy to make the adjustment to a school off the reservation. This is because they know they will be leaving an environment that provides them with both social and academic support. Native Indian students are highly conscious of what it will

be like when they go to Anglo universities.

The traditional Navajo way of relating to one another is based on identifying oneself within a clan system (Navajo Curriculum Center, 1993). There are approximately 30 Navajo clans, which emerged from the four original clans created by Changing Woman (one of the Holy People of the Navajo): Near the Water Clan (To'ahani), Tower House Clan (Kinyaa'aanii), Bitter Water Clan (Todich'iinii), and Mud Clan (Hastlishnii). Navajos introduce themselves by referring to the mother's clan, the father's clan, the maternal grandfather's clan, and the paternal grandfather's clan. At places like Diné College, students could count on encountering many clan relatives among the other students, faculty and staff. This means they know there are "family" members they can trust to help and guide them through problems. However, when leaving the reservation, this ability to rely on the presence of clan members is lost.

Students I talked with at Diné College all had stories of the problems they expect to encounter when attending universities off the reservation. They either had personal experiences with the difficulty of trying to get information and assistance from Anglo universities, or they heard stories from other family members about the challenges they would face. For example, I was trying to help one student get information about financial aid from the University of New Mexico, and we spent more than 30 minutes on the phone, going from one voice mail to another, before we ever got to speak to a "real" person. In another case, a student trying to get information from Arizona State University West about housing was told when they called that, because there was no campus housing, the student would get no help from the university to find housing. Although I do not believe the majority of universities try to create difficulties for Native Indian students, a few bad experiences like the above can lead to very negative attitudes toward Anglo higher education because the students can contrast their experiences with the tremendous help and assistance they can count on from faculty, staff, and administrators at Diné College. This belief that large universities will have an adversarial relationship with Native Indian students is a major stumbling block for students who are considering transferring.

Implications for Higher Education

Transfer students from Tribal colleges will have many of the same problems that students from other colleges bring, e.g., housing, financial aid, and academic preparation. Most universities are well prepared to help students in these areas. However, it is the cultural differences Native Indian students bring that must be addressed by faculty and staff. Based on my experience working with students from Diné College, I have two general suggestions for assisting transfer students from

Tribal colleges: (1) focus on cultural differences, and (2) encourage communication.

Focus on Cultural Differences

There are two areas of cultural differences between Native Indian and Anglos I encountered which need to be respected and managed if Anglo faculty and staff are to be successful in helping transfer students. First, is a recognition that it will take a long time to establish the necessary credibility with Navajo students to the point where they will trust you enough to let you help them. My first five weeks at Diné College were marked by a great deal of reluctance on the part of students to speak to me. However, after I demonstrated ability to tolerate this silence until everyone got a chance to see what I was up to, then many students came to me to ask for advice on transferring, help with housing, financial aid, etc. Faculty and staff at Anglo universities need to develop a high degree of patience and appreciation, both in and out of the classroom, with the silence of Native Indian students (c.f., Dumont, 1972; Lujan, Hill, Kennan, & Long, 1987). That respect will pay off, because once they can observe you and see that you are there to help, the students will readily take your assistance.

A second suggestion related to cultural differences concerns dealing with conflict. Much of the research concerning Native Indians has shown that conflict situations often appear muted or even avoided when compared with Anglo standards. For example, the Navajo desire for harmony in all aspects of life means that many disagreements and arguments will not be conducted as overtly as Anglos would expect. What this means for faculty and staff who work with Native Indian students is the fact that just because a student may not openly state their opinion does not mean they are in agreement. Direct questions which ask Native Indian student to disclose whether or not they understand an assignment or instructions may elicit a response that, from an Anglo perspective, can be taken as an affirmative answer. What I have learned to do is try various and repeated ways of looking for signs of comprehension and agreement so I don't mistake silence for lack of conflict. As indicated above, with time and continuously working on credibility, faculty and staff will eventually learn to be sensitive to this aspect of Native Indian communication.

Encourage Communication

There are two suggestions related to communication that can enhance the relationship between Native Indian students and Anglo faculty and staff. First, it is essential that faculty and staff take the responsibility for initiating communication

between themselves and the Native Indian student. Most Anglo students go through school learning to take the initiative when it comes to contacting teachers and other educational professionals for help with problems. It would be a mistake to wait for Native Indian students to come to you with a problem, or assume that they have no problems because they don't make use of office hours or other student services. Although this can be a burden to those of us that have large classes and many students to advise, taking the time to go out of your way to encourage communication between yourself and Native Indian students can go a long way toward establishing the kind of relationship and credibility that will help both parties cope with cultural differences.

My second general suggestion is to make extensive use of new communication technologies, both in and out of the classroom. The students I taught at Diné College were very willing to use electronic mail to communicate. This willingness could be related to the fact that electronic communication reduced need for the kind of "small talk" most Anglos expect during office visits. Electronic mail also provides a record for the student and the faculty or staff which can be useful in tracking whether the right questions are being addressed by both parties. Additionally, the Native Indian students I have worked with have been extremely excited about using the Internet. Diné College has developed an extensive web page (<http://crystal.ncc.cc.nm.us>) that provides their students with much useful information. Web pages such as this, which usually provide some sort of "chat rooms," are also an important way Native Indian students can stay in touch with people from home, which helps maintain important social support. There are also many Internet resources that can help Native Indian students cope with the problems associated with being away from their homes by helping them connect with other Native peoples, e.g., the Index of Native American Resources on the Internet (<http://hanksville.phast.umass.edu/misc/NAresources.html>). One reason many Native Indian students respond so positively to Internet resources could be the non-linear nature of the medium. Whatever the reason, encouraging faculty, staff, and students to make more use of the new communication technologies can enhance the learning experience for all.

My focus in this article has been on helping faculty and other educators understand what strengths and concerns Native Indian students bring with them when they transfer to primarily Anglo colleges after attending Tribal colleges. However, many Native Indian students come to Anglo colleges without the benefit of attending a Tribal college. These are the students who make up the bulk of the attrition rate for Native Indian students, which can run as high as 50-75% at some institutions. I contrast this with the retention rate at Diné College, which was recently as high as 88% (McCombs, 1995). What this tells me is that faculty and other educators have much to learn from Native Indian students transferring from Tribal colleges because

these students have demonstrated some measure of success in coping with the difficulties of college life. Additionally, the fact that a Native Indian student has not attended a Tribal college prior to coming to a primarily Anglo college probably means they have all of the concerns I have previously discussed, but may not have many of the strengths that Native Indian students obtain from Tribal colleges. Therefore, the suggestions I offered above take on even more urgency when dealing with Native Indian students who have no Tribal college experiences.

Finally, faculty and other educators can take some specific steps to help all Native Indian students (c.f., Braithwaite, in press). First, strongly encourage the formation of Native Indian Student Associations. These associations give all Native Indian students additional resources to draw on, both academically and personally, to assist them in their college experience. Groups such as these can provide the much needed social support that many Native Indians lose when they leave the reservation to attend Anglo colleges. Second, I suggest colleges develop culturally specific "survival" classes for Native Indian students to assist them in the transition to college life. Although many colleges provide some sort of "early start" experiences for freshmen, classes are needed that address some of the concerns specific to certain populations. The class I taught at Diné College "Successful Transfer to the Four-Year University," focused on public speaking skills that Native Indian students need to develop to be successful in Anglo classrooms, how to cope with and respond to the stereotyping Native Indians encounter, and other topics geared toward the uniqueness of Native Indians on college campuses.

I hope that this report will have an impact in helping educators who work with the Navajo and other Native Indian students. By recognizing the strengths that many Native Indian students have when they transfer to Anglo universities, and by being aware of the potential difficulties these students face, everyone in higher education should be able to find ways to overcome the traditional barriers that have interfered with Native Indians opportunity to succeed. If we are to have the kind of multicultural society we all desire, then these issues must be addressed.

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[IS THERE SOMETHING MISSING ?]

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