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Making It Real: An Engaged Approach for Native American Students in Higher Education

Philip M. Klasky

This essay responds to two questions: What barriers do Native American and Alaska Native students face in higher education? How are these barriers to student success being addressed theoretically and practically? I address these challenges with recommendations for a critical pedagogy applied to the classroom, and with a description of learning experiences outside of the classroom that I have found to be engaging and empowering for Native American students.

One of the first lessons in my American Indian studies classes is Pablo Freire's "banking concept of education," which I use to encourage student participation and agency in the class. At first I soberly pose the following pedagological approach to the student/teacher relationship:

- the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
- the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
- the teacher talks and the students listen—meekly;
- the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;

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- the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply;
- the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher;
- the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it;
- the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;
- the teacher is the subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects.[1]

Younger (and/or less experienced) students are initially shocked by or resigned to this bold statement of absolute institutional authority, while more experienced and critically thinking students are relieved by a forthright exposition of some of their worst experiences in the academy. By the end of the lesson, my students understand that I am using Freire's criticism of an authoritarian approach to their education to encourage them to participate fully in the learning experience and determine (within certain limits) the focus of class content and discussion. Some students welcome the opportunity, while others, more comfortable with a passive participation in the classroom after years of indoctrination, are intimidated by the challenge and responsibility associated with taking an active role in their education.

Freire emphasizes dialogue as an essential element of popular education in a manner that promotes respect for all participants and serves as a model for collaboration. His focus on *praxis*, described as theory in practice and informed action, makes education especially relevant for Native students whose lives are directly affected by social justice concerns and political and social/cultural disenfranchisement.[2] Freire's pedagogy also reflects indigenous methods of education that promote reciprocity between the teacher and the student, and a concentration on an exchange of knowledge, rather than a hierarchy that equates the position of the teacher with the authority of the educational institution and with knowledge itself. This kind of pedagogy creates the opportunity to expand the discourse and invites those who have not been designated as teachers to contribute. Native students are often lost within a system found in many Western educational institutions that promotes obedience rather than shared responsibility, individualism as opposed to community, and judgment rather than inspiration and encouragement. Decolonizing methodologies help to counter what Linda Tuhiwai Smith describes as "the complex ways in which the pursuit of knowledge is deeply embedded in the multiple layers of imperial and colonial practices."[3]

Native students often feel as though they are outsiders in an educational system that promotes dominant social, cultural, and political perspectives. They are accustomed to academic content that excludes their experiences and viewpoints. Yet the position of the outsider provides an opportunity to criticize what is considered normal or expected. On one hand, outsiders feel as though they have been denied entry into the exclusive club of "normal" or expected behavior and perspectives. Native students often feel invisible in regard to historical recognition. In their academic experience, the influence of indigenous contributions to society, which are manifold, the history of genocide and ethnocide in the formation of the United States, and the ways and means of denying Native peoples the same rights as others are all ignored. One example is the contribution of the Iroquois Confederacy to the formation of the United States federal government. The writings of many of the country's founders clearly acknowledge the influence of the Iroquois Confederacy on the formation of the US Constitution, including our system of checks and balances and concepts of natural rights. This contribution has been officially recognized by a congressional resolution, yet few textbooks or history or government classes recognize this historical fact.[4]

On the other hand, the outsider's point of view can subvert many assumptions, ranging from accepted historical narratives to the importance of relationships within and without cultural groups, to the consideration of the nonhuman world in indigenous spiritual, practical, and scientific philosophies. My job as a teacher of Native students is to acknowledge and accommodate these views and nurture them within the academic experience. In order to engage Native American students in the classroom, I offer opportunities for them to contribute to the class on issues of interest and relevance to their lives. Based on personal experience and areas of study and interest, Native students have presented on issues such as disenrollment, federal recognition, blood quantum, religious freedom, legal/jurisdictional barriers to the prosecution of crimes against Native peoples, health disparities, and toxic colonialism.

For students who describe in detail the impacts on their family when faced with disenrollment from their tribe, or express feelings of dislocation and invisibility when their history teacher talks about the civilizing impacts of the mission system, the classroom environment becomes less abstract and one-dimensional, and the lessons of colonial hegemony become much more tangible for everyone. It can be crazy-making for Native students to listen to a simplistic perspective they know not to be true, or at the very least, feel as though there is no room for an alternative view. When prevailing narratives about great American heroes such as Christopher Columbus, Andrew Jackson, Kit Carson, and others implicated in the genocide against Native American peoples serve to elevate these figures to the status of American historical

legend, Native students experience a range of sensations including confusion, self-doubt, anger, disengagement, and disenfranchisement.

The idea is to provide Native students with a safe and supportive opportunity to offer alternative interpretations of historical narratives. We should not expect them to be experts in all things Indian, but rather enable them to offer their perspectives on topics they are uniquely qualified to share. This approach is very valuable for both class content and student empowerment. The experience of taking on the authority/responsibility of educating others is transformative for Native students whose history and position in society have been marginalized and rendered invisible in much of their educational experiences.

It is difficult to change large educational institutions such as the California State University and University of California systems, and subvert institutional frameworks which reflect Western approaches to education in maintaining hierarchies and centralizing power. "One size fits all" pedagogy limits student agency, interferes with the teacher's ability to respond to students' cultural differences, and limits the art of teaching and the use of a diversity of learning modalities. The academy maintains a tenure-track caste system that bars Native culture keepers, activists, and scholars from teaching positions unless they possess an advanced degree. There is much more flexibility within individual departments and programs. At San Francisco State University, the Department of American Indian Studies is located within the first and only College of Ethnic Studies in the nation. The establishment of the College and its departments of American Indian Studies, Asian American Studies, Africana Studies, and Latina/o Studies was the result of direct action by students and faculty in 1969 demanding that their education include a critical analysis from the perspectives of people of color. As a full-fledged department, instead of an emphasis or minor within another discipline, American Indian studies at SFSU has the stature, expertise, and relative autonomy to respond to the particular needs of our Native students.

At conferences and workshops I have observed dynamic learning circles composed of indigenous elders, scholars, artists, activists, and students in Native communities. Melissa Nelson, my colleague and executive director of The Cultural Conservancy, an indigenous rights organization dedicated to the preservation and revitalization of endangered languages, stories, and songs, as well as the defense of ancestral lands, is also on the board of directors of Bioneers, described as a group of "social and scientific innovators from all walks of life and disciplines who have peered deep into the heart of living systems to understand how nature operates . . . to serve human needs without harming the web of life" for the purpose of "organizing an equitable, compassionate and democratic society."[5] Nelson has organized a segment of the annual Bioneers conference entitled "Traditional Ecological

Knowledge" featuring indigenous scholars from around the country and across the world. The 2012 Indigenous Forum included presentations by Dune Lankard (Eyak Athabaskan) and Pamela Smith on "Traditional Eyak Ecological Salmon Preservation and Revitalization"; Nick Tipon (Coastal Miwok), Corrina Gould (Ohlone) and Sage Tauhindali LaPena (Nomtipom Wintu) on "California Bay Area Cultural Resource Protection"; indigenous ecologist Dennis Martinez (Tohono O'odham/Chicano/Swedish) on "Native Perspectives on Sustainability"; and Enrique Salmon on "American Indian Stories and Methods of Food Resilience."[6]

This is a partial list of the indigenous scholars and activists on the cutting edge of efforts to incorporate traditional knowledge into the discourse surrounding some of the most important issues we face as a world community. Native students are provided scholarships to attend these workshops and work directly with these Native leaders. This exposure and engagement is invaluable and constitutes more than what institutionalized education can provide these students. The experience is part of traditional indigenous methods of direct exposure, hands-on learning, and personal relationship. Our students gain immeasurably from these role models as they study issues that are contemporary, relevant to their lives, and essential for human survival. This opportunity takes Native students out of the classroom and into the real world, and they respond with great interest and enthusiasm.

At a forum of indigenous speakers during the 2012 Bioneers conference, Native scholar, educator, and author Greg Cajete (Tewa/Santa Clara Pueblo) spoke about promoting education for Native students using culturally relevant methods. [7] His pioneering work in education includes integrating traditional Native pedagogy within Western science and wellness curricula. Cajete has identified four kinds of knowledge that Native people practice:

- Traditional knowledge—handed down from elders and wisdom keepers based on stories and experiences of a people through time.
- Empirical knowledge—gained through careful observation and practice over time.
- Revealed knowledge—gained through ceremony, ritual, intuition, and the direct relationship with mentors.
- Contemporary knowledge—gained through study and research based on contemporary science, advanced methods of analysis, and critical thinking skills.

These perspectives reflect values that resonate with a Native student's experience and cultural background and can provide the foundation to awaken spiritual understandings and confront barriers to their education. This is

especially important as Native students face institutions that fail to incorporate teaching methods that are based on traditional values and ways of learning.

As a consultant to The Cultural Conservancy, I work with a team of indigenous educators, Native culture keepers, professional filmmakers, and sound technicians to provide hands-on workshops for students, cultural workers, and indigenous community members to assist them in conducting their own ethnographic recordings projects.[8] Groups of young Native students learn how to record and film their tribe's languages, stories, and songs to use in cultural preservation programs. We demystify the technology and provide information on how Native peoples can maintain control over ethnographic recordings and secure intellectual property rights. At one such workshop with a number of tribes in the San Diego area, after two days of instruction and practice a group of Cahuilla Bird Singers was recorded for use in the tribes' Head Start, Elder Care, and cultural programs. The singers felt appreciated and validated and the workshop participants knew that their work was contributing directly to the preservation of their culture. The experience of using these acquired skills for cultural revitalization is empowering, exciting, and relevant to the youth in Native communities. Native students learn skills that they can apply not only to making a contribution to their tribe, but also to their employment and personal development in the communication arts.

This model of engagement can be adapted to our courses, especially when combined with learning experiences outside of the classroom. In the San Francisco Bay Area, there are ample opportunities for Native American students to observe and participate in educational, cultural, and political events including powwows, workshops, public ceremonies, protest actions and political campaigns, conferences, readings, talks, and hands-on experiences. These activities help to connect Native students with other Native people so that they can participate in an indigenous analysis of history, culture, and current events within an indigenous learning circle.

Indian Canyon

> *Dreams have come true and have been fulfilled here, I believe, because of the Canyon and its natural elements. We still carry on our traditions and ceremonies. Indian Canyon serves as a place of healing and renewal.*
>
> —Ann Marie Sayers (Mutsun Ohlone)[9]

Each semester, our classes from the Department of American Indian Studies have the privilege of visiting Indian Canyon, the only sovereign land for the Mutsun Ohlone people in California. Although the Ohlone predated the Spanish, Mexicans, Californios, Russians, and Americans, they have been

denied federal recognition and therefore a reservation of their own. Indian Canyon is located fifteen miles southwest of the town of Hollister in a beautiful setting of oak, pine, sycamore, and bay trees in manzanita chaparral and a riparian habitat that reflects the seasons. Ann Marie Sayers (Mutsun Ohlone), tribal chair of the Mutsun Ohlone, has created a "Living Indian Heritage Area" where Native peoples from all over the country can practice their ceremonies in a safe and supportive environment. Sayers hosts students from local community colleges, high schools, and San Francisco State University.

The Dawes Allotment Act of 1887 was one of the most assimilative laws forced upon American Indians, mandating the division of communally held tribal lands into individual private property parcels. The result was the loss of two-thirds of Native territory and 80 percent of the value of those lands, in addition to the disruption of centuries of traditional Native American land use.[10] But by navigating through the maddening bureaucracy of federal policies and procedures—a feat of strong-willed perseverance—Sayers managed to use the Act to obtain her family's ancestral land at Indian Canyon through a trust patent for the property. Chairwoman Sayers describes Indian Canyon as an "educational, cultural and spiritual environment" for use by "Native people who do not have traditional land for their own ceremonies."[11] The canyon hosts sweat lodges, vision quests, storytelling festivals, and dances, and there are plans for a round house/assembly house, or Tupen-Tah-Ruk, for tribal meetings, gatherings, guest speakers, cultural demonstrations, and ceremonies.[12]

Our field trips to Indian Canyon begin with a visit to the Mission San Bautista, one of the twenty-one Franciscan Missions in California. On the front lawn of the picturesque mission my colleagues and I provide our students with a perspective on the impact of the Mission system on California Indians not generally found in history books or covered in their fourth grade segment on Native California history. The effects of the mission system included the confiscation of indigenous lands, forced labor, physical and sexual abuse, and religious indoctrination.[13] We invite the students to tour the Mission and, using critical thinking skills, analyze the exhibits and interpretation for their balance and veracity. What they find is a glaring absence of an objective historical account of the interaction between the missionaries and the local Indian tribes as part of what C. Richard King refers to as a "colonial discourse" and "imperial recollection" from the perspective of the Catholic Church.[14] There is little or no mention of the indigenous peoples of the area except for a wooden plaque outside the chapel that identifies a mass unmarked grave of 4,300 "Indians and pioneers."

Inside the thick adobe walls, one display case features Native baskets in a tableau that includes a rattlesnake hide and deer skull, a grouping that, to my mind, equates American Indian cultural arts with animal specimens. There

is no interpretation on the case, no mention at all of those who created the basketry, the style of the baskets, the materials harvested to create them, or the time period in which they were produced. There is no mention of the fact that the Native peoples of the area actually built the mission brick by brick while captive against their will in cramped unsanitary conditions on the mission grounds.[15] My colleague Kathy Wallace (Karuk/Yurok/Mohawk), a well-known California Native basket weaver, educator, and cultural activist, tells the story of how some of the Native children who were excavated from mission cemeteries were found to have terribly deformed tibia and fibula (forearm) bones from carrying the heavy bricks for the construction of the mission.[16] On the Mission San Juan Bautista website, the visitor learns that construction of the church was made possible by the "friendly and cooperative indigenous people."[17] Without a critical analysis that exposes the problems associated with such subjective statements, Native students feel cast out from reality and buried by fallacy.

The next stop on our field trip is Indian Canyon, a safe haven for the Native people who escaped from the oppressive conditions at Mission San Juan Bautista, a fact that Ann Marie Sayers shares with the students who visit the Canyon. As part of her talk, Sayers loudly exclaims, "We are still here!" to declare living evidence of the existence of Native California peoples. When the students witness this elder proclaim her presence, it makes classroom discussion about American Indian history literally come alive and Native American students feel acknowledged, visible, and evident. Sayers' college-age daughter Kanyon Sayers Roods (Ohlone/Chumash) offers her beautiful and solemn grandmother's song, and explains that she honors her ancestors through this special offering. While at Indian Canyon, Native students participate in work parties on the land including stream restoration projects, the planting and collection of plant materials for basket making, and the preparation of interpretive materials for the Canyon's visitor center. Native students attend the Indian Canyon field trip every semester whether they are currently enrolled in our classes or not, because they value the experience as potent evidence of their own presence. They are inspired by the determination of a Native leader who has created a refuge for Native spirituality and the revitalization of culture. Perhaps most importantly, they feel a sense of belonging at this special sanctuary, a place where they can explore and be who they are.

Sayers and her daughter Kanyon serve as role models for our students. In my experience, traditional indigenous learning methodologies depend upon exposure, opportunity, and example, often within the context of ceremony. Knowledge is imparted through relationship with the culture keepers who embody the lessons and their meanings. By "making it real" we can facilitate the opportunity for Native students who participate in engaged learning to

feel their history come alive as they arrive in the present. They are able to move from being objects of curiosity, shame, and generalization by others, and gain permission to weave their own unique identities as individuals into their relationships with their Native backgrounds and communities. It is valuable to leave the classroom environment to gain new perspectives and create an opening for new understandings.

Native youth are in need of positive role models, creative means of self-expression, and vocational skills. In the San Francisco Bay Area, due in great part to 1950s relocation policy that brought together a diverse group of Native people and led to a pan-Indian civil rights movement, we are fortunate to have a variety of social, cultural, artistic, political, and academic resources provided by the larger Native community. For example, each fall the American Indian Film Institute (AIFI) sponsors its annual American Indian Film Festival that features diverse feature and documentary films that come from "the heart of Indian Country."[18] The AIFI's Tribal Touring Program engages at-risk Native youth by providing them with the technology and training to create their own short films. The program brings professional artists and a traveling film festival to rural reservations and rancherias. The participants' short films are screened in their communities and some are selected for the film festival. The program emphasizes teamwork, responsibility, and the importance of making contributions to the community. In addition, the training that they receive provides students with the tools to pursue meaningful employment in the broadcast communications and media industry.

As a member of the de Young Museum American Indian Art Advisory Board, I have had the opportunity to assist in planning programs and exhibits with local and visiting scholars and artists.[19] Native students become engaged both as participants and volunteers in programs such as Native interpretations of cultural artifacts, an indigenous fashion show, readings by Native poets and authors, traditional song and dance, and exhibits that explore the nexus of traditional and modern art.

When these kinds of opportunities become part of the curriculum, either as specific assignments, extra credit opportunities, or field trips, educators can envelop the experience within the content of the academic curriculum and a context that considers issues of visibility and representation. Engagement with the community is one of most valuable and culturally relevant learning experiences we can facilitate, and contributes to an education that is exciting, relevant, and encouraging for Native students.

NOTES

1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1993), 54–56.

2. Ibid., 56–62.

3. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies* (New York: Zed Books, 1999), 19.

4. Donald Grinde, "Iroquois Political Theory and the Roots of American Democracy," in *Exiled in the Land of the Free: Democracy, Indian Nations and the U.S. Constitution*, ed. Oren Lyons (Santa Fe: Clear Light Publications, 1992): 227–80. House Concurrent Resolution 331 refers to the Select Committee of Indian Affairs on October 5, 1988, and resolves that "the Congress, on the occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of the signing of the United States Constitution, acknowledges the contribution made by the Iroquois Confederacy and other Indian Nations to the formation and development of the United States."

5. For more information on both the Cultural Conservancy and Bioneers, see www.nativeland.org and www.bioneers.org.

6. For more information on the Bioneers 2012 conference, see www.bioneers.org/conference/2012-schedule/intensives/traditional-ecological-knowledge-intensive.

7. Greg Cajete, "Re-creating Sustainable Indigenous Community in a 21st Century World," Bioneers Conference Indigenous Forum, Mill Valley, CA, October 19, 2012. Cajete (Tewa/Santa Clara Pueblo) is the director of Native American Studies and associate professor in the Division of Language, Literacy and Socio-Cultural Studies in the College of Education at the University of New Mexico. Contact: gcajete@unm.edu. Faculty in the Department of American Indian Studies at San Francisco State University use Cajete's and Leroy Little Bear's *Native Science: Natural Laws of Independence* (1999) for classes in Native science and wellness.

8. http://www.nativeland.org/storyscape.html.

9. Ann Marie Sayers, "*NOSO-N*: In Breath So It Is In Spirit—The Story of Indian Canyon," in *The Ohlone Past and Present: Native Americans of the San Francisco Bay Region*, comp. and ed. Lowell John Bean (Menlo Park, CA: Ballena Press, 1994): 337–56.

10. Sharon O'Brien, "A Century of Confusion," in *American Indian Tribal Governments* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989): 71–91.

11. Sayers, "*NOSO-N*," 3.

12. Sayers, personal communication with the author, March 2012.

13. George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993).

14. C. Richard King, "Segregated Stories," in *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture*, ed. S. Elizabeth Bird (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996): 1–11.

15. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest*, 32.

16. Kathy Wallace, personal communication with the author, 2012. Wallace (Karuk/Yurok/Mohawk) teaches in the department of American Indian Studies at San Francisco State University and is the cultural liaison for the university on implementation of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. Contact katwall@sfsu.edu.

17. Old Mission San Juan Bautista, www.oldmissionsjb.org, 2012.

18. American Indian Film Institute website, www.aifisf.com, 2013.

19. For more information on the de Young Museum programs, see http://deyoung.famsf.org/blog/tags/tags/native-american-artists.