

Listening to Lives

Lessons Learned from American Indian Youth¹

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Almost 30 years ago I put on a pair of black nylon break-dancing pants with ten sets of zippers and joined a group of young Navajo and Ute students in solidarity at San Juan High School, as my friend Diane said, “To show those Whites.” I was nervous then—a new Assistant Professor from the University of Utah (untenured) showing up at the high school she was studying in breaker pants—but I felt compelled to support my new friends. No one seemed to notice me, or the Navajo and Ute break-dancers I was with. Years later, I showed pictures of these break-dancers to the principal who exclaimed, “In my school? I don’t even recognize this as my school.” I would come to learn that most American Indian students were invisible or “unseen” by teachers and school personnel. Academic courses opening a path to college were also invisible in most schools. Many teachers were indifferent to the lives of their students. Teachers’ knowledge of the Navajo community was framed by negative and limited expectations constrained by racism (Deyhle, 1995). Over the years I watched and listened to the educational encounters Navajo youth were experiencing and talking about. In this chapter I would like to share some visions and desires—framed as lessons—I learned from the remarkable Navajos who graciously shared their knowledge and lives.²

Beyond damage-centered research

Before I move into talking about these lessons, I’d like to say a little about the research path of many researcher’ studying Native communities, with suggestions for future research studies. My earlier work, starting in 1984, focused on high school dropouts and racial warfare (Deyhle, 1986, 1991, 1992). The picture I painted was not a pretty one. This is what Aleut scholar Dr. Eve Tuck called “damage-centered research,” which

looks to historical exploitation, domination, and colonization to explain contemporary brokenness, such as poverty, poor health, and low literacy.

¹ Adapted from Dr. Deyhle’s keynote speech at the Third American Indian Teacher Education Conference given on July 13, 2012 in Flagstaff, Arizona.

² In this article I move between using Native, Native American, Indian, American Indian, Indigenous and tribal or Nation terms, such as Navajo or Ute, to reflect the terms each scholar, parent, student, or teacher used in the research I present. I make no claims about which “label” is more appropriate, but suggest that scholars not impose, but rather respect and use the names Native peoples choose for themselves.

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Common sense tells us this is a good thing, but the danger in damage-centered research is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community. (Tuck, 2009, p. 413)

As Tuck also points out within “damage-centered research” oppressed people, as bell hooks said, are allowed to “only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain” (hooks, 1990, p. 152). Although it is important to expose racism and oppression, which many researcher have done, this can work against the understanding of the beauty, power, wisdom, and humanity of Indigenous communities.

Dr. Tuck (2009) urges us rethink our research to capture a desire-centered research—reflecting wisdom, humor, and hope—instead of damage, “desired-based frameworks are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (p. 416) and “desire is about longing, about a presence that is enriched by both the past and the future. It is integral to our humanness” (p. 417). A desire-center framework turns the lens toward wisdom and hope, as Dr. Tuck says, “so that people are seen as more than broken and conquered. This is to say that even when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that—so much more that this incomplete story is an act of aggression” (p. 416).

It is in this spirit that I want to affirm what I have come to know as the strength of the young Navajos I have meet who have endured racial and cultural struggles to remain connected to the Navajo landscape and place. They are what scholars are describing as “new warriors” (Alfred, 2009; Tuck & Yang, 2011; Lee, 2009, 2007; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011). As I now look back to the words a librarian used to described Navajo and Ute break-dancers in the mid-1980s, who resisted racism and schooling, “It’s like being a kind of warrior,” I see a hint of critical insight on her part. Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred described new young warriors as taking from their “heritages and translating them into ideas and practices to form frameworks for their own lives which will eventually become the intellectual, social and political landscapes of [their] nations as they become the leaders of [their] peoples” (Alfred, 2005, p. 257).

Clearly, cultures don’t represent a seamless whole. And identities are situational, contradictory, and divergently shaped by social, political, and economic forces. Identity is “always mobile and processual, partly self-construction, partly categorization by others, partly a condition, a status, a label, a weapon, a shield, a fund of memories, et cetera” (Malkki, 1992). Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall argues, “Cultural identity is not something that already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture... Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (cited in Verna St. Denis, 2007, p. 1070). Nagel also suggests, “cultures are not created at some prehistoric point in time to ‘survive’ or be ‘handed down’ unchanged through the generations” (Nagel, 1996, p. 63).

As I write about these young Navajos I have found the concept of survivance, influenced by Gerald Vizenor and inscribed by Native voices at the National

Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C., helpful to deepen my understandings. “Survivance . . . is more than survival. Survivance means redefining ourselves. It means raising our social and political consciousness. It means holding on to ancient principles while eagerly embracing change. It means doing what is necessary to keep our cultures alive.” Survivance is a positive, resistant standpoint embedded with actions meant to assert and claim one’s Native identity and place in the world by rejecting the images of Indians created by whites. Although not the same as their grandparents or parents, youth are consistently able to show me events that differed in beliefs and practices from their white peers. To speak of only “survival” is to ignore this Native presence. The good energy of the survivance of “new warriors” can be seen in the break-dancers I saw performing competitively before their Navajo and white peers; in young Navajo writers and poets claiming space for their voices; in Native college students graduating with every career and profession the university has to offer, and in elementary schoolchildren dancing the Yeibicheii, in and out of school, while listening to hip-hop music with their older siblings (Deyhle, 1995, 2009)

The young Navajo men and women I write about are using their Indigenous knowledge, emerging from family and community, to address the inequalities of colonization and their schooling. They spoke clearly about what helped, and didn’t help them, to excel in school. In this article I will discuss what mattered in their experiences—cultural and linguistic reaffirmation, the desire for an appreciation of who they are, high teacher skills and performance, and highly engaging curriculum. What are youth saying, and what does this mean for us as educators? What lessons framed by “desired-centered research” have we learned that will enhance the educational experiences of Indigenous, Native, and American Indian youth?

Lesson #1: “Know who I am!”

In order to know, one must first “see.” As I started out this chapter, Navajo youth were often “unseen” by their teachers and school administrators because the mirror they looked through reflected an uninformed and distorted image of these young men and women’s lives. Part of this distortion is framed by a view that these youth move through life with one foot in the “white world” and the other in the “Navajo world.” This blurs the contemporary landscape in which youth live.

The metaphor, walking between two worlds—based on a modern/premodern dichotomy—is frequently used to describe the struggles faced by Native students. I’ve used it in my research, and many of the Navajo educator I’ve worked with also used this term. In insightful critiques, scholars have begun to argue this metaphor masks the complexity of lived situations and multiple loyalties, and may work to limit the options of these youth (Henze & Vanett, 1993, Lee, 2009). The white world is often only marginally available as a choice for Indigenous youth because of poverty, racism, discrimination, and lowered teacher expectations of their potential for success. And the idealized or stereotypical traditional world of their elders is a thing of the past. This metaphor is also problematic because it centers the “problem” with Native peoples themselves. What is needed is a third

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space that reflects Indigenous youths' contemporary lives. As Dr. Tiffany Lee (2009) argued, "All people negotiate multiple realities, but the two-world notion makes problematic Native peoples' abilities to adapt to (or resist) the dominant society, when in fact Native peoples have been adapting to (and resisting) other peoples' cultures, values, and worldviews for hundreds of years" (p. 310). She urges us to "focus on how Native youth negotiate the one world in which they live, a negotiation that encompasses varied, and often oppositional expectations from sources in their homes, schools, and communities" (p. 310).

One of my Navajo graduate students recently exclaimed it was refreshing to see scholarship that finally acknowledge what he knew as his lived experience, "I thought, as an 8th grader, it is way messier than that. It is not just two worlds. It's multiple layered situations and experiences." This is what youth are asking us to see. When youth are asking us to "know who they are" this also, I think, means to not judge them for what they don't know yet, for they are daily learning what it means to be Navajo. I failed to understand this message.

Early in my fieldwork I systematically asked youth what they knew about Navajo ceremonies, and deities, such as Changing Woman, First Woman, Spider Woman, and Salt Woman. I remembered being disappointed when youth responded vaguely about the importance of Navajo culture, but with little detailed knowledge. In my notes from 1984 I wrote, "Oh, no! They know so little. It is true that much of Navajo culture is being lost. They say they don't talk much with their grandparents because they don't speak Navajo. They seem to have lost so much." My (mis)perspective represents a consistent stereotype and misunderstanding of what being Navajo is all about when I had frozen their images in an unchanged frame of history, to then be judged authentic or real. I also had ignored what I knew intuitively had been my own experiences growing up. As one travels complex and messy life paths, one is always learning and becoming—one never completely "arrives."

Lesson #2: "I am not the same as my grandparents, and don't use this against me."

By constructing representations of Indian people that are frozen in an historic past we do not "see" the extraordinarily rich cultural practices of Native people today. An example of this ignorance appeared in the Wednesday, March 9, 2005 *Salt Lake Tribune* in an article titled, "Bennett: Oil rigs won't hurt wildlife." After visiting the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to examine what impact oil drilling would have in this refuge, Utah Senator Bob Bennett met with Alaskan Natives, saying most were in favor of oil development. In a critique of Alaskan Natives opposed to oil drilling he said, "But when you ask how they live off the caribou, you find out they get on snowmobiles and go out and shoot them with rifles. Somehow, I don't think that's the culture of their great-grandparents that they talk of preserving." To have an authentic Native Alaskan voice, leave the snowmobiles and rifles at home, and pull out great-grandfather's harpoons and spears. Now, how silly is this! "The more traditional Navajos wake up to the sunrise with prayers every morning," a counselor told me the first year of my

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research. He had sighed and leaned back in his chair. “Maybe our Anglo way is wrong, we should not be pushing them towards it. We have too much strain in our Anglo world. Look how calm the Indians are. They have such a simple and pure life. I sometimes think that Navajos in this traditional environment might have been better off.” In this discourse, Indian people are not Indian unless they look like the popular white constructions of Native peoples living serenely, without technology, close to animals and the land. Indians become a cultural category that must remain true to that historic portrait to be “real.” And, with a twist, this “authentic” Indian is best served by limited contact with “corrupting” Western values in economic, educational, and social institutions, increasing the likelihood of economic struggles during their lives.

The attempt to capture and frame “real Indians” as relics of the past continues at universities. Here at the University of Utah, a story circulated around the Anthropology Department in the 1990s. A professor had sent several white students to visit another professor who taught courses on American Indians. “We are looking for examples of pure Indians,” said one. Another interjected, “We want to visit real Indians. We were told that the Utes are an example of a hunting and gathering Indian tribe.” My colleague sighed and explained, “Yes, the Utes are hunters and gatherers. The Utes hunt at Safeway and gather at the 7-11.” Frozen in time, “real” Indians cannot possibly be shopping alongside everyone else at the local store. Inequality is the outcome of this refusal to accept Indians as equal partners on the same landscape.

Youth told me how unfair this was! On the one hand they are criticized for not knowing their language and traditions, at the same time the “authentic Navajo” cannot be connected to technology, wealth, and be professionally employed. What a bind! They wanted it all—a good job, exciting opportunities, strong families and an identity that is still grounded within the landscape of the Navajo Nation.

Lesson #3: “Believe in me and appreciate me.”

There is a large body of research that speaks to the importance of teachers “caring” and “respecting” students (Valenzuela, 1999; Valdez, 2001; Noddings, 1984; Nieto, 1999). Teachers are taught to show respect for students’ heritage cultures and languages. Multicultural education courses are often required in teacher education programs. But as I have reflected on how Navajo youth have described what they need in school, “caring” and “respect” do not go far enough. You can care and respect someone, without having any idea who they are. To appreciate someone, however, you must be open to learning from, and affirming what you learn. This means that teachers are the ones who need to reach out to Navajo students’ homes, family, and communities. And students know when teachers fail at “appreciation.” As a Navajo woman explained, “When I think back on it and think about schools, I wish those teachers had helped us Native American kids with our work. Not to ignore us. Not to be ignorant. And what I hear now, from relatives, is that it is still going on! It is so sad.” The word “ignorant” is key here. Teachers ignorant of their students’ lives in a Navajo

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community rich with family and relations, are weak teachers; teacher that do not care, respect, or appreciate Native students. Appreciation paints an entirely different picture.

Lesson #4: “We want a rich and exciting schooling experience.”

The Navajo and Pueblo students in Lee and Quijada Cerecer’s 2010 article, “(Re) Claiming Native Youth Knowledge: Engaging in Socio-culturally Responsive Teaching and Relationships,” could not have been clearer about what they expected from schools. These “new warriors” provided a powerful critique of the false history their teachers taught, demanding, for example, equal treatment of the Long Walk, side by side with the Civil War—after all, they did occur at the same time. They, like the Navajo students I have known, desired high quality teachers who are knowledgeable about their history, current political, educational, social issues, and who support a path to excellence in areas of their students own choosing. As one young Navajo student asserted, “I’m more of like a Native pride person a little. I think my whole family and I are like that. I like the idea of coming into the school and seeing a lot of things that have to do with who I am” (Lee & Quijada Cerecer, 2010, p. 201).

And, most importantly, they wanted a close transformative learning relationship with their teachers. I think this is critical. They are claiming, not rejecting, educators in their lives. As one Navajo student said, “I don’t know, it just seems like there are all these boundaries between students and teachers and administration... I think if we all worked together it would be better because we would know more about each other and learn more.” Youth are challenging educators to create a school environment that “appreciates, respects, and honors their Native heritage and language” (Lee & Quijada Cerecer, 2010, p. 204).

In my own research and observations in classrooms I have seen white teachers endure the profound silence of a group of Navajo youth who felt disrespected in the classroom. The practices of playing against teachers with the use of silence or shout-downs, blocking teachers’ interactions and effectiveness as instructors in classrooms, and dismissing criticisms of themselves by employers in low-paying jobs, all work to assert a Native gaze on a racially contested landscape. By a Native gaze I am describing the practices that Native peoples use to “push back” against injustices and assert their rights. A Native gaze of survivance judges the practices of whites—unlike themselves—as undeserving, uncompassionate, uniformed, and wrong. And, sometimes, the practices of a Native gaze are done with humor and irony. A vivid example of this occurred one day in a high school biology class. Facing a poorly qualified teacher who repeatedly mocked Navajo students with, “Navajos don’t know how to learn difficult ideas,” students walked out, returned with padlocks from their lockers, bolted the door hinges, securely imprisoning their teacher, and left school.

There is a body of research developed over the past several decades that urges teachers to use culturally appropriate, culturally responsive, and culturally relevant practices in their teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1997; Nieto, 1999). While it is an important and admirable goal to be relevant and responsive to cultural

differences, this alone does not assure the appreciation and continuity of students heritage language and home community. This is a different educational project. In his essay, “Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice,” Django Paris (2012) offers us an alternative concept for educators. At the center of “culturally sustaining pedagogy” are students’ experiences and practices, with the explicit goal of sustaining and supporting these. As Paris described this pedagogy, “it requires that they [teachers] support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence.... That is, culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (p. 95). This could result in a “rich and exciting” schooling experience for Native youth.

Lesson #5: I want to learn my language and culture

“Our language is real important to us,” Elizabeth said during a visit with her family in Salt Lake City. “That is why we fought for that to be in the schools, in that lawsuit [Sinajini v. Board of Education litigations in the 1990s]. Navajo language and culture is what we want in school. They say you do better in school with both languages. They said they would teach it, but they never did.” She shook her head and frowned. “I had to learn English in boarding school and so I never got to learn Navajo in school. But Ernie speaks it real good. And my kids, too. It was hard bringing them back because they didn’t know Navajo very well.” Her daughter Jan joined in, “Gosh, I didn’t know what was going on, I had lived in Moab since I could remember. I had to learn Navajo by the people in the community. I speak it real good now. But my kids don’t speak Navajo. They were brought up in the city. And they don’t teach it in the schools.” Our conversation turned to the recent English Only bill passed by the Utah State Legislature. Jan was angry. “Look at those whites. They don’t want anyone else to have their own language. Like, maybe they will outlaw us speaking Navajo!” Her sister added, “And it takes smarter people to speak more than just English.” The family smiled and nodded in agreement. I was painfully reminded of my mono-English limitations.

Navajo students have spoken to me about their concerns of their lack of fluency in their heritage language, and of embarrassment when they had difficulty speaking to their grandparents and elders, expressing what McCarty, Romero, and Zepeda (2006) have called “feelings of linguistic shame.” One of the first conversations I had with the young break-dancers I met in 1984 was about a visit to their grandparents home:

We went to hunt for porcupines. They were eating her watermelons. We found one, a real big fat one and killed it. We saved it for the quills. Our grandma is going to teach us how to make things with it. Like they used to do. But it’s kinda hard, because she doesn’t speak English. And I don’t know much Navajo. But I do know a couple of words.

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Several of the others nodded. Mary, with a shy smile, added: "We want to learn. But Navajo is real hard. And our grandma makes fun of us when we don't talk right." Heads throughout the group nodded, as the children grew silent.

Educators too often misunderstood and mislabeled youths' struggles and silences as evidence of an "apathy" to learn Navajo. Previous research has found this understanding to be superficial (Lee, 2007, 2009; McCarty, Romero-Little, Warhol, & Zepeda, 2009). Lee's article (2009), "Language, Identity, and Power: Navajo and Pueblo Young Adults' Perspectives and Experiences with Competing Language Ideologies," paints this very different picture. The students she spoke to expressed deep concern over their language vanishing, at the same time they worked to develop of sense of their Native selves with or without their language. Arguing for Navajo language classes in school, a Navajo teenager said to Lee, "Why? Because that's who we are, so they can talk with elderly; they were here before us and they know more than us. Some of them have passed on and that's why we're losing our language" (p. 313). Some youth expressed shame over not speaking their heritage language, "I wish I knew Navajo so I could talk to older people. I feel bad when I can't talk to an older person. It's not my fault. I wish someone had taught me" (p. 313). At the same time, students in her study spoke assertively about being Navajo, with or without heritage language skills. As one woman argued, "Sure, language is like the back bone of a culture but just because I cannot speak my language does not entirely mean that I am not a good Navajo" (p. 317).

Lee (2009) shows that Native youth clearly see the dilemma they face: on one hand they see the critical necessity of Native languages for cultural continuity, on the other hand they hear a discourse of the superiority of English surrounding academic and economic success. Nevertheless, "when students were confronted with challenges or opposition to their expressions of the Native sense of self through their language, they expressed resistance to those confrontations and reaffirmed their identity, heritage, and language, regardless of their level of Native-language fluency" (p. 317). One woman expressed this powerfully to Lee, "Our miseducation, and even the loss of many of our Indigenous languages, painful and unjust as these things are inform who we are now as Indian people, and provide the energy necessary to regroup, revitalize and even, in some respects, reinvent who we are" (p. 318).

Perhaps the most important finding from Lee's research, unidentified in previous research, was the picture that emerged of "new warriors"—youth who expressed desires to reclaim their language and identity for themselves and their community. As Lee (2009) concluded,

Throughout the college students' narratives, the youth described experiences of awakening to these issues of language shift and change in their communities. They became conscious of the denial they and their families have felt regarding language loss. With the awareness of the threat of language loss now more present, they demonstrated a sense of agency and proactive motivation to transform their families and communities toward language maintenance and language revitalization. (p. 316)

Lesson #6: “I’ll never give up who I am.”

Throughout my conversations with youth, there has been an insistence and desirability of being Indian (what ever this might look like), rather than wanting to become white. In 1987 when Mary Sam spoke of her children’s future, her words echoed the desires of many of the Navajo youth I had come to know:

I want to have a nice home, furniture. Nice vehicle. Have the best for my kids. Let them come up with nice things, go to a good school, live in a good area. I want my kids to know about Navajo stories and ceremonies. That is who they are. I would like that. Not only for my kids, but for all Native American kids to know who they are. (Deyhle, 2009, p. 198)

Fifteen years later, in 2004, Mary’s 18 year-old son spoke with strength about being Navajo. Mary beamed with pride when he told me, “In the past, some Navajo were ignoring who they were. They were pretending to be like other minorities. They were like into gangs like some minorities are into. We are more into like ‘Native Pride,’ ‘Be Native.’ They sell those kind of tee shirts in that magazine, *Native Peoples*. We are into being proud of who we are like other Indian people around the country.”

The young people I met 25 years ago have grown strongly into their lives as mothers and fathers, enriched with sons, daughters and lots and lots of grandchildren. And this growth insists on the right to remain Indian, and this determination rest firmly on the foundations of tribal sovereignty, on and off the Navajo Nation. In my book *Reflections in Place: Connected Lives of Navajo Women* (Deyhle, 2009) Vangie Tsosie as “Changing Woman at Taco Bell” challenged me to understand and accept what this means. In 1999, at 28 she told me,

I never really did give up my traditional ways, even though I was baptized in the LDS church.... I went to high school, and they told me I had a bad ear infection, and my mom and dad took me to a medicine man, and I had a ceremony done for my ears. They [whites] think it is just hocus pocus, but it is what I believe. I didn’t feel like I was breaking the law or anything because I always think we are praying to the same God, anyway. This God knows how to speak Navajo and all different kinds of languages. If it wasn’t for him we wouldn’t have our own language and stuff. I’m sure he understands. It is just one person. It’s not like there is an LDS God and a Navajo God. Just think how bad they’d be fighting up there! [laughs] I’m sure he understands what I’m going through. So I never really felt obligated to give up being Navajo. (p. 126)

And in her concluding reflections ten years later she said simply, “The one thing we know is that we are Navajo. That will never change” (p. 126).

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