

Native American Student Panel Summary

Jon Reyhner and Deborah House

The student panel was held May 5, 1995, in the evening and was presided over by Selena Manychildren, Kii yaa' áani clan, Todíh'í' ní, Nakai Diné, originally from Grey Mountain, 45 miles from Flagstaff, Arizona. Participating students were Sylvia Wadsworth from Navajo Community College (NCC) Shiprock Campus; Carlos Begay, Byron Charley, and Velma Hale from NCC-Tsaile Campus; and Malcolm Benally, Theresa Yazzie, Karen Andrews, Sharon Bitah, and Claudia Chischilly from Northern Arizona University.

Sylvia Wadsworth addressed the first question: "Is it worth your time to learn your language?" She answered "I appreciate my Navajo language. I'm glad I learned it and can understand, read and write it. My three kids speak Navajo; they were taught by my mom and dad." Sylvia was punished for speaking Navajo, and she first thought it would slow her kids down. But she changed her mind and concluded, "Our Navajo language is who we are." She has thought of ways to teach students in Navajo. She tells them to try to think about it and it will come to them. "As long as you can freely communicate in the classroom, it's OK. I'm glad I'm one of those who's helping them. I'm proud to be a Navajo, and speak, write, and understand."

Carlos Begay responded, "The way I think about traditional language, through it I respect my elders. I have spoken Navajo from birth. I appreciate it and these sessions. I truly believe it's good. It's worth it that you're doing it for our youth and the next generation. Maybe we'll get back to traditions. Now there's graffiti, baggy pants, and caps on backwards — that's not our people. We need to get back to tradition."

Byron Charley added, "I like maintaining my native language and the teachings in it, the songs and stories in it. It helps you understand who you are and where you come from. It gives you respect for yourself and others. You stand out in class." Malcolm Benally answered "I think the Navajo language is important. When you speak it, it creates a different reality. Language lets us seize the earth as a living vital force. We understand more. English is not that passionate and beautiful. In our prayers, it [Navajo language] directs us when we use it."

Theresa Yazzie is twenty years old and is not fluent in Navajo. She is in her second year of taking Navajo language courses. She explained that during the 1950s and 1960s, Navajos in parochial schools were forbidden to speak their language. To punish them, their hair was shaved, they were locked in closets, their mouths were washed out with soap, and they were made to hold books in their hands with their arms stretched out parallel with the floor. Her father was made to wear a gunny sack to the cafeteria. School personnel were trying to Americanize Navajos of her parents' generation. Now she thinks, "Why not be fluent in Navajo language?" She is learning that her native language is worthwhile; it is a conveyer of culture and ceremonies. She concluded, "Reading binds the world, shapes one's life and thought processes. Your Navajo language is your identity."

Karen Andrews is in her fourth semester of Navajo. She never heard her own Delaware language until the movie, "The Last of the Mohicans." The Delaware people were found on the East Coast and Oklahoma. The last speaker of Nanikok died in the 1880s, and only two people knew the creation stories. Nanikok lost all rights before there was a United States. It is recognized by the state, but not by the federal government.

She took Navajo and was excited to see people who know their language. She declared, "If you are going to teach on the Navajo reservation, you should be able to communicate. "When people are learning to speak Navajo, be patient." She concluded, "If you don't use it, you'll lose it."

Velma Hale said, "It's important to maintain your language. My language is me, my ancestors, the roots of my existence. . . . We are who we are through our maternal ancestors, our home, church, attitude, behavior, ancestral people, Talking God, etc. . . . I have learned a lot from Navajo Community College. Today's society is forgetting sacredness due to education by the dominant society. . . . Knowing your language is not a waste of time. We need to keep up with teaching and preserving our language. That's all I have to say."

Sharon Bitah is from Lower Greasewood and spoke Navajo up to the age of six. Because all of her friends were not fluent speakers, she stopped speaking Navajo. It also had a lot to do with teachers who made remarks about those who spoke lots of Navajo. She became Anglicized, became like Anglos, and disowned her language and culture. However, later she began to take pride in her language, and she is glad that Northern Arizona University has a Navajo language program. She said she uses Navajo with her family. She can understand, but not speak, all she wants to. She finished by stating, "We need to have the language when people come back and want to learn it."

Claudia Chischilly is now from Tuba City, but originally came from Shadow Mountain, where her father's family is from. "When I was growing up, I spoke the Navajo language for four years. I was taught by my nalis [paternal grandparents]. Then I went to my grandmother's and was raised in Christianity and English all the way into high school. Now I'm in college and I'm back in Navajo language. It's hard if you don't use it every day. I'm raising my children and teaching them Navajo every day. My husband speaks only Navajo and he explains what they don't understand. Two are here with me. I teach them what I learned from my grandparents and pass it on to them. Women are taught how to dress and wear their hair so the Holy People will recognize them. I appreciate knowing and learning our language. Be patient. People jump down your throat; be patient with us; don't give up on us. Be proud to be a Navajo and show it!"

Selena Manychildren confessed, "We get lots of criticism while we're on the radio. We do much of our speaking spontaneously. People call up and say, 'You said that word wrong.' We post those words on the wall. We Navajos need to clean up our language. We use English in Navajo and say *éi ya'* and *áádóó* too much. We use too many extra words. Many young people don't speak their language. Even if you don't speak your language, don't feel that you aren't a part of your culture."

The next question she posed was, "Do you believe that if you do not speak your language, you are not part of your culture? Sylvia Wadsworth answered, "Being Navajo to me doesn't mean you have to speak Navajo. I tell my students that they're as Navajo as an older person, but that they can learn to be more Navajo if they speak Navajo." Carlos Begay added, "You don't have to speak Navajo to be a Navajo or Native American. You are already Native American; your skin is brown. It's in your blood; you've suffered. There's prejudice if even Native Americans say that you're not Navajo."

Byron Charley responded "I think you would be still Navajo even if you're not a Navajo language speaker. You represent your family, ancestors, clan. The Holy People know you by your clan. Being Navajo depends on how you conduct yourself and go about your life." Malcolm Benally felt "There are lots of Navajos, but few Diné. KTNN sold out to corporate people; they sell cars. They don't show enough interest in stimulating what culture's about." He said he was bored in his Navajo language class where they only wrote simple sentences. It was the Bureau of Indian Affairs mentality. He continued, "In Navajo culture, you are directed to know certain things. If the tribe said to use the Navajo language to teach about the earth, environment, health, etc., the language would survive."

Selena Manychildren responded "We are a commercial radio station, very different from public radio. We sell ads to generate money. We generate money to run businesses. All our Navajo money goes off reservation. Navajo businesses need to keep business on the reservation. Without commercials, there wouldn't be a radio station. People come and help with programming. The responsibility is on public shoulders if you want to help. Navajo night is on Sunday night. It's done by a Hopi woman, Laurie Lee, who takes the time to stay late and do it."

Theresa Yazzie answered, "You are still a part of your culture. You still feel Navajo. . . . You are expected to know who you are and where you're from. I go to Squaw Dances and Yeibiches and attend what I can. Part of me is missing." Karen Andrews added, "This shows you what division and strife will do to a people. My mother said it used to be that you couldn't be 'Indian' on your birth certificate; you had to be white or colored. We grew up [the way we did] because the younger generation laughed at the old people who said they were Indian. The young people said, 'You're just colored.' You need to have a respect for each other or you'll lose it."

Velma Hale continued "I think as Anna Walters says: The spoken word is alive; it reproduces. To be an entity, created by thought and sound, created by voice. Language created by all life, all voices. We are that language whether we know it or not.

Sharon Bitah added, "I personally believe it's not a matter if you know your language or not. . . . There are people who are fluent, but don't participate. It's what you want, not what others think." Claudia Chischilly maintained, "If you know your mother and father, and family are Navajo, even if you don't speak your language, you're still connected to your culture."

The next question Selena Manychildren asked was, “How would you like to teach the Navajo language?” Sylvia Wadsworth declared, “Start from home; it’s the responsibility of parents because I learned from my parents. Read and write; it’s hard. I learned by reading the Bible and taking classes for that. That’s my feeling.” Carlos Begay concurred, “It should all start within the home. Parents and elders should be the ones to teach. Schools should keep it going; grow more; the tribe should do something, provide more funding.” Byron Charley agreed with Sylvia and Carlos. He said that he uses Navajo at home and English with his friends. Malcolm Benally also felt that Navajo language teaching should start in the home.

Theresa Yazzie felt that the way she had been taught was good. “Begin with the sound system, put things together, vocabulary words, make labels for things in the room. See and hear: practice. Build a strong foundation and slowly put things together in sentences.” Karen Andrews also suggested starting with young children. “Teach through drill. Make it fun, a game. Do it on their own. Don’t teach slang; speak clearly; don’t slur; have high expectations. Immersion would be good; kids could live with grandma for the summer. Don’t let the old words die. Formal Navajo literacy: language will never die. Teach diacritic marks. . . . Teach how valuable Native American culture is.”

Velma Hale stated that she believed in bilingual maintenance programs which use Navajo and English equally. “We are created equal. Teach the four parts of the day, four colors, alphabets, self-image, identity, sentence structure, differences from Anglo society. Learn about yourself in a more intimate closer way, read and write, interview elders like on KTNN, and learn different units, alphabet, directions, calendar, numbers, and what your name means. Lastly, teach sentence structure to know and accept self. English is a tool for survival, not a way of life.”

Sharon Bitah felt that there should be a lot of conversation. In addition she called upon Navajos to, “Promote literacy. Using the sound system is really important. Learn to read more; it’s important. There is a problem with the textbook we are using. ‘See Dick run.’ I wanted more technical words. It’s no different from first to last. There should be more in the textbooks. Talk more Navajo in classrooms. Speed up things. If you don’t practice, you lose it.” Claudia Chischilly stated, “My husband and I say that it should be in the home. It will look bad on us parents if our child learns Navajo from that teacher. I think it should be from the home.”

Selena Manychildren then opened up the discussion to the audience. Ben Barney, director of the elementary teacher education program at Navajo Community College-Tsaile, commented, “When I switch to English, there’s no hesitation about what I’m saying or thinking. It’s very simple and straightforward. What’s the problem? Why are you making it such a big issue?” Malcolm Benally responded, “I think it was only yesterday that our ancestors were in Fort Sumner. I feel sorry for you. I wrote a short poem in Navajo and a long one in English. I come from Big Mountain where people are persecuted for trying to live their way of life. I can read it for you.”

Big Mountain

Malcolm Benally

In Big Mountain begins a corn pollen path;
in her home an old grandma has begun weaving a rug many times
and many times her rug was finished in song.

Many times a grandfather has gone
to water his horses and to tend his sheep;
into the distance his figure disappeared
only to return singing a new song.

Under Big Mountain, inside a hogan,
many stories have been told by the fire,
in this way much is remembered.

In Big Mountain
grandfathers and grandmothers and ancestors before
with freezing hands and feet and failing eyesight
walked into the howling snow storms
to pick up new born lambs
wet and cold from the womb
into this world;
held the lambs close to their hearts all the way home to comfort,
to rest only a few hours before they join the flock;
beside the fire their stories have been told,
in this way
much is remembered.

In Big Mountain,
the first sounds of a newborn child have been heard many times;
this child walked and grew
and learned the language of the People
to pray for his people
and left from the people again
into the wind, into the sun.
Yet, these stories are still heard
in the calm winds and the dancing of the harvests
and so this path is still followed on the corn pollen path
and in this way all is done in beauty.

Today in Big Mountain
grandfathers and grandmothers sit by the fire
at this moment with their children under this sun
waving their weathered hands above the crackling fire,
fire dancing in the aging eyes and on the faces of children,
gesturing slowly at their soft spoken words of peace

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praying and handing down
the stories of the journey to the sun,
passing on traditions and speaking
longing of a world gone by;
a newborn day is coming
in Big Mountain.

So here in Big Mountain the women sit before their looms
to weave a new story
to come closer to the silence;
stories
brought forth from the silent winds and female rains
wide ruins and gray hills told to all who can hear
the stories being told
in this way
all things on corn pollen path are done in beauty.

In Big Mountain
the children learn to walk in the two worlds
of the west;
grandpa stands under the new dawn within the four sacred mountains
to pray to the east,
to offer pollen to the Gods
dawn breaks another day, Father Sun
in beauty, corn pollen path,
all is done in beauty.

Grandfather and Grandma,
thank you for this life this day
for those stories
that I have just heard from you for the first time
for you have journeyed further in the sun
like looking from the highest mountains;
you have seen further than youthful eyes.
So here I stand in this life under this sun at this time
till the day I truly do see the break of dawn to which you pray
Grandfather, bring the path which is made of corn pollen and
I will no longer walk in two worlds
but in your path
in this way in beauty it is done.
Paah!

The Navajo version of the above poem by Malcolm Benally follows:

Dził Nitsaa

Díkwídi shíł Dził Nitsaa biyaa dóó binaagi
Nihimá dahiist'ó áyiilaa, ha'íft'ó dóó ni' nít'ó
Nihicheii ch'níníl, híł taah yiyíflóóz
Dził Nitsaa biyaagi, hooghan nímazí biyi' didooljéé', hóone'
Ts'aa' yaa nítá

Nahasdzáán Shimá,

Díkwídi shá' Dził Nitsaagi awéé' biinéí sidíníts'áá'
Ats'éé' dibéeghan biyi' leeh yitáago sodizin sidíníts'áá'
Ne'awéé' neeyá, kéyah yikáá' nideel'eez, dahdíiyá,
sodoolzin, neeshjool, *hááane'*, *páah!*

Shimá,

Haa néeláadi shá' níkéyah bikáa'gi nee yas yítso?
Díkwídi shá' chíł biyi' nila' dóó níkee' yistingo
dibé chíł t'áá díttéego
níjéł t'éiyá bee sidogo
hooghangi néfnítł
bá didífnítjéé'?

Shicheii,

Díkwídi shá' hayoolkááł biyaadóó nífníyá,
dééł nínááł eekai, ayeel ínilaa
Shimásání, shicheii shít hółne', didíłjeeh
deezhchxíł lá

Dził Nitsaagi

E'e'aahjigo, Dook'o'oostíł biyaagi, Dziłjiiin bikáa'gi
Hooghan nímazí sí'áago biyi'gi, e'e'aahjigo
ayaa azkaad bikáa'dóó
sodizin, sin, hane' hahat'ééhdóó
sí'ah naaghéí bik'eh hózhó
Díł ląą kwe'é níhee'fool'íłł

Wóshdęé' táchééh wohjeeh!

Dzil Nitsaagi
tsá'ásczi'
táláwosh
tádádín
da'ák'eh
tó
Hózhó bee k'é, éigi

Shitsíí, shinaaf, shádí
Ha'át'fshá' biniinaa jóhona'éf biyaadóó níníyáago ííníłzhiizh?
ti'hosínínií', dibáá' síníłíí', niyi' náhootsei
Háláane' nihikéyah, nihee'ool'ííí,
átchíní, iiná, tó, tádííín altaas'éf

Dził Nitsaagi, Dziłjiin Bikáa'gi
Shimá, shizhe'é, shimásání dóó shicheii
Shiláadi tádíínyá, shiláadi nitsísínkééz
Dził bikáa'gi hajgháago jídeé'íí' ígíí bilááhgóó hwiiniitsá
Shił hwíífnlne', shimásání dóó shicheii t'áá nínáshniih
Binahjí' hózhóogo nahasdzáán bikáa' naasháadoo
Ahéhee'
Nahasdzáán shimá náshíshchí, páah!

So that is what I thought, when I thought like you.

Ben Barney stated “I don’t see myself as different personalities in Navajo and English; I’m the same personality in both languages and cultures. Most Navajos say I don’t look like a Navajo. There is no conflict. I do totally have both sides. My father spoke Navajo, Spanish, and English. . . . My mother speaks Navajo only and understands English only when she wants to. There is no conflict; I speak English, and have no problem with it. I speak Navajo, but I’m the same person. That’s why I say there’s no problem, and I also speak and understand other languages, too.” Theresa Yazzie responded, “You’re very fortunate to be from such a family. I started in English and it’s hard to learn Navajo later. The reason you’re confident is you know who you are.”

Velma Hale thought it was important to be able to tap into both cultures and to integrate them. She sees education as a tool of survival, not as a way of life. “A lot of Navajos are caught; they can’t integrate or go into both sides. They turn to alcohol. Education teaches you to think, not feel. You have to go out in life, to seek and hunt. Take care of language and use it in the right way.” Sharon Bitah continued, “All I can say is there’s no conflict here. I commend you; I share it. We are walking in two worlds. As much as we might not like it, playing by their rules. It helps to think like them. Maybe one day they’ll play by our rules.” Claudia Chischilly concluded, “I have no conflict; I can switch. I can talk whatever language I use. As you grow older, you have experience.”

Selena Manychildren concluded the evening by thanking everyone for their participation.