"In School I Learn from A to H, but the World is A to Z": Promoting Educational Relevance, Equity and Sovereignty through Community-engaged Learning

Tiffany S. Lee

I open this conversation about community-engaged learning with a story I heard from Dr. Joseph Suina, University of New Mexico Professor Emeritus and former Governor of Cochiti Pueblo. He shared a story about his observations of the youth in his community in a presentation he was doing with several educators. When his community prepares for a traditional event that involves learning and singing original songs created by community members, several men and boys of the community will meet at their ceremonial house in the village about two weeks prior to the event to listen and practice the songs. He noticed that the young boys who have been doing this type of activity as they grew up in the village would display tremendous patience, discipline and respect for the two or more hours that they have to sit in one place, listen, and eventually sing the songs. One time, he noticed a young boy about age eleven or twelve who was new to the activity and who was having a difficult time sitting still, showing patience, and learning to listen respectfully. It made him notice how much the youth of his community who attended these activities regularly were engaged in their learning and displaying culturally appropriate behavior. It made him ask himself how such learning could take place in our school systems if it can take place in these type of ceremonial settings.

I have observed this with many young children and youth in traditional Navajo ceremonies as well. They are focused and attentive to the context, which requires sitting and listening for long periods. This is community-based and culturally-relevant learning. It is cultural, valued, and communal. The youth are engaged in the experience and actively listening, learning, and participating. Their learning is rooted in the community context and relevant to the culture.

Contrary to this type of learning, the schooling contexts in the United States primarily takes on a Western cultural experience, from the schooling structure, the curriculum, the pedagogy, and the overall school climate. This type of schooling experience in the U.S. has not changed for the last 100 years (Mondale & Patton, 2001).

Teachers in these schools today have the hard job of creating engaging lessons, assessing learning, and being held accountable to state tests, school leaders, and families and communities. That pressure from the state has grown since the time I was a high school teacher. But I remember learning as a high school teacher that students needed to be engaged in active ways if we want them to connect and learn. One particular learning experience for me happened when I was teaching U.S. History at a high school on the Navajo Nation. I remember giving a lecture in my class about Native people's resistance to settler colonialism and land theft in the late 19th century. I felt the students would really resonate

with this content since it was about their own people. As I was finishing up my inspirational, informative, and meaningful lecture that had my students on the edge of their seats (so I thought), I was elated to see one student raise his hand to ask a question. Excitedly I called on him and he said, "Can we go now?" I realized at that moment that while some of the students were attentive and listening, some were not. It also prompted me to wonder how many were learning the material? The content was fascinating but my delivery did not engage all the students in ways I had hoped. While I believe students do need to own their education and be responsible for their own learning, as teachers, we are their conduits to learning; we provide the tools for their construction of knowledge; and we are their coaches, their facilitators, and their motivators. So after hearing Dr. Suina's story about engagement of youth in his community, I continue to ask how, as teachers, can we create in our classrooms the level of engagement described by Dr. Suina? One that students value, find relevant to their lives, and that treats them as equal participants in learning.

Understanding Community-Engaged Learning as Indigenous education

Based on my experience as a teacher and from what I have learned through research, I have found that Community Engaged Learning (CEL) is an effective way to stimulate student excitement in their education and thus their learning. CEL places the community in the center of the learning experience and builds curriculum based on community priorities and interests making education, whether in or outside the classroom, relevant to students and making their learning applicable in community contexts. It moves education away from being individualistic and from dominant societal goals of serving American needs, but instead, it moves education toward serving our communities' needs and goals. CEL is similar to many other approaches that focus on community, culture, and students' lived experiences. For example, such approaches include community-based learning, place-based learning, experiential learning, culturally relevant learning, and culturally sustaining pedagogy. Mostly, CEL is aligned with philosophies of Indigenous education as articulated by many scholars. They explain that Indigenous education outside of western schooling structures, like the education one learns at home or in the community about their heritage, is rooted in place and experience. Indigenous education is how children learn who they are, and the roles they can play in their community (Cajete, 1994, Kawagley & Barnhardt, 2004, Deloria & Wildcat, 2001).

I have heard many Indigenous folks talk about the purpose of life is to become a complete human being – meaning a well-rounded, balanced, and connected human (Lester, 1995; Trudell, 2001). Our stories, traditions, and ceremonies shape our people toward achieving this holistic goal. This philosophy of our purpose in becoming a complete human being is also a state of hózhǫ́, which in Navajo refers to a state all Diné aim to achieve. It is a state of balance and harmony, where you know you are related to everything in your natural environment and your daily life is to remain in congruence with the environment, family, community, self, and all of life (Haskie, 2013).

In this respect, CEL fosters critical Indigenous consciousness (Lee, 2006), which is an awareness of how one's self, family, and community are situated in the larger political, social world, including how historical events shape our lives today. It is understanding how the events and situations like forced relocation, poor access to healthcare, inadequate schools, under and unemployment, and other oppressive policies that limit our self-determination have a direct impact on our lives and the social conditions of our communities. Gaining this critical consciousness helps one to understand they, their family, or community are not to blame for these conditions, but they are a result of this larger set of influences that have systematically oppressed our peoples. Critical consciousness becomes critical Indigenous consciousness when it motivates Native people to create positive change in their communities. Freire (1970) asserts that critical consciousness is liberating for individuals to see beyond their oppression; critical Indigenous consciousness extends that effect by inspiring individuals to contribute back to their communities in transformative ways.

CEL also teaches students academic content and important skills by the nature of working with communities – they learn communication and presentation skills, problem-solving skills, research skills, practical application skills, critical thinking skills, and they learn these skills as they are integrated with the academic content. This integration of experiential learning and academic content aligns well with the Aztec metaphor Cajete (1994) referred to, which is finding face, finding heart, and finding foundation. Finding face is finding your identity; finding heart is finding your passion; and finding foundation is where you are grounded – your community, home, place. This is Indigenous education

CEL Promotes Education Equity, Justice, and Self-determination

One-size-fits-all approaches in education, such as nationally promoted scripted curriculum or teaching methods, have permeated American public schools, particularly those serving underrepresented populations. Bartolome (1994) argues that the problem with such approaches is the belief that underachievement can be fixed by a particular teaching method and that schools are neutral apolitical sites that students should conform to in order to succeed. There is no interrogation that schools may be the problem in terms of their curriculum, structure, climate, teaching methods and how the schools continue to fail students and blame them for their failures. The quote in the title of this article is in reference to this lack of scrutiny of schools. I interviewed Bahii, a young male Navajo student, when I was working with a team of researchers conducting a study examining the state of education in New Mexico for Native students (Jojola, et.al., 2010). He recognized the limitations of schooling and how it was inadequate for preparing him for the world that he experienced on a daily basis. He saw the disconnect when he related school to the alphabet and said that school only teaches from A-H but he wants the whole alphabet from A-Z. In other words, he wants an education that addresses the whole picture as it is relevant to his life.

Kulago brings this perspective of making education relevant to students' entire lives to light when she argued that education should be conceptually

viewed through the Navajo concept of k'é (2016). K'é translates to mean kinship and family, but it also connotes how people relate to one another and their love, support, and responsibility to one another. K'é is a community working together for sustainability and cultural continuity. It is a "gathering of families" and ""enriching and deepening relationships of mutual support within the family and community" (Benally, 1994). Kulago asserts that when considering family, community, and school partnerships, family and community are one and the same when viewed through the conceptual framework of k'é and that for Indigenous communities, education and community are inseparable. Consequently, schools should view their role and partnerships with communities in this way, as a reciprocal relationship that supports the overall wellbeing of the students of that community. This framing promotes a true democratic education and educational equity and justice for students and families.

Kulago's work is especially significant for understanding the importance of CEL and for demonstrating how CEL is an exercise of self-determination in education. Self-determination in education is the practice of community control and the integration of knowledge, perspectives, and values important to the community, like the formation of partnerships rooted in relationships based on k'é. Achieving self-determination in education has been a goal that has been highly valued and sought out by Native communities. There are many early examples from the 1970s when the Indian self-determination in education act was passed and through this legislation, support was provided to communities to create community-controlled schools with more autonomy than typical public schools. Examples include Rough Rock Demonstration School, Rock Point Community School, and Santa Fe Indian School (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). Although more difficult today in this age of heightened national accountability based on the No Child Left Behind Act, and national standards such as the Common Core, we see the multiple ways in which Native people have enacted self-determination and control in education, many of whom utilize CEL practices to empower themselves. Educational self-determination necessitates community-control and through CEL, communities are partners and decision-makers who are enabled to exercise that control. This next section will highlight two models of CEL in practice, one at the high school level and another at the university level.

Community-Based Education Model

I was a high school Tribal Government and Language Arts (Communications) teacher in the Community-Based Education Model (CBEM) at Santa Fe Indian School (SFIS) from 1999 to 2001. The philosophy underlying CBEM was to impact learning in meaningful ways that responded not only to students' educational achievement and experiences, but also to the partnering Pueblo communities' needs and interests. Leading to "sustainable higher levels of academic performance, motivation, and interest in learning about, and contributing to, [students'] home communities is central to the approach" (CBEM, 1997, p. 1). SFIS recognized that many of the students' communities have environmental concerns that were tied to social, economic, and cultural traditions, which im-

pacted and influenced the quality of life in those communities for generations. Community leaders and educators at the school believed that involving students with community members in exploring and investigating these issues would be more meaningful for students than traditional core curriculum and would result in outcomes that benefit both the students and the communities. To support this approach, students had immediate and in-depth interaction with community members and learned about environmental issues that impacted the communities over the course of an academic year. In this way, the community sites become the learning environments through the involvement of community members as partners and mentors.

Students who enrolled to participate in CBEM primarily did so to fulfill their science and language arts requirements. There were no academic standards a student needed to meet to enter the program and thus, their choice to participate was more a consequence of scheduling convenience. As the students across the school learned more about the program, students who were attracted to the idea of weekly field trips and use of technology also selected to participate.

Participating students attended CBEM every afternoon of the school week in which their community work was integrated with their classroom-based work. Their classroom work and academic credit was based on an interdisciplinary curriculum in which the students took four courses in environmental science, tribal government, math modeling, and communications. Three teachers taught the courses and facilitated the core experiences of the program, which were the community visits the students took each week with one of the four Pueblo communities who participated in the program and who worked with CBEM students and staff throughout the year. Once a week, a group of students visited their assigned Pueblo and worked directly with the environmental departments in the Pueblo. The department administrators along with the Pueblo leadership identified themes of study related to their own work and concerns in the Pueblo for the students to learn about. The teachers then designed curriculum around those themes. The teachers developed the specifics of the curriculum organized around these thematic issues so that the field experiences and classroom learning supported and complemented one another. For example, in one community, the leadership and people were concerned with the effects of the Cerro Grande fire on their community. This fire impacted much of Los Alamos, New Mexico in May of 2000, and it reached the Pueblo's tribal land. The Pueblo asked the CBEM students to help with determining the impact of this fire on their natural environment with particular attention to contamination from Los Alamos National Labs where nuclear technology is used and toxic substances are produced. The teachers developed curriculum around this theme so that students could learn about and perform such tasks as taking water samples to determine the water quality, testing air quality, and taking soil samples to test for contamination from spring run-off. In addition, the students learned about the social and cultural impacts of the fire on the Pueblo and the associated legal rights of the Pueblo in rehabilitating their tribal land.

Technology was heavily incorporated into both field experiences and classroom-based learning. Students learned how to utilize such equipment at geographic positioning satellite systems and associated mapping software programs. They communicated their findings in writing using word processing software and orally through powerpoint presentations on the computer. Students enjoyed the use of this technology, and it motivated their participation. In turn, the Pueblos benefited from what the students produced using such state of the art equipment. The Pueblos often did not have such technology to study these issues of concern. In the end, the students presented highly organized and sophisticated information to the tribal members and the general public. The relationship between the students, CBEM staff, and the communities was reciprocal with each educating one another and becoming a resource for one another. It also resulted in human capacity building where the CBEM students now had skills in research, critical thinking, problem-solving, writing, technology, and oratory presentation that could be applied in many contexts within the Pueblo.

Native American Studies

When I became a professor in Native American Studies (NAS) after teaching at SFIS, I aimed to integrate much of the CEL practices I learned from the CBEM program into my courses at NAS. Teaching in a university setting allows for more flexibility than teaching high school where protocols such as obtaining permission slips and liability insurance are less of an issue at the university level. However, the university system is structured in a rigid way to present its own obstacles to doing site-based, service work. Additionally, many NAS students have their own obligations to work, family, and community making time for CEL outside of class time more limited. So in this section, I will discuss how I was able to integrate CEL within the classroom setting through primarily project-based activities that were still community driven.

First, I would like to explain the context and goals of NAS. In the 1950s, the Native American students involved in the student organization the Kiva Club at the University of New Mexico (UNM) mobilized and organized to demand more inclusion of Native perspectives and knowledge in their courses. Their activism set into motion the evolution of NAS – one of the oldest NAS programs in the country. Today, we offer a Bachelor of Arts Degree, a Minor Degree, and we have a Masters Degree proposal working its way through the channels of the approval process. The majority (90-95%) of our students are Native American from Southwest Native communities, and all of our faculty and staff is Native also from Southwest regions. The mission of our department is to support Native nations' sustainability and growth into the 21st century. We integrate Indigenous knowledge systems and interdisciplinary research into our courses and are building our focus on CEL to strengthen the connections and applications of knowledge and skills our students can take with them into community contexts. We also draw heavily on our students' prior knowledge and experiences when in class to create experiential learning within classroom settings.

I created the course NATV 461: Community-based learning in Indigenous contexts to offer students an opportunity at CEL and to integrate what I had learned from working in CBEM. We begin the course by examining theories of service-learning and philosophies of Indigenous education. Then we learn about the topic or theme the community partner has identified. In my most recent course, we worked with the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), which is a federal agency, and not a community, but we worked through the BIE on projects to support students who attend BIE schools located on tribal lands. The issue the BIE identified was locating resources for the approximately 2000 houseless or inadequately housed Native American students who attend BIE schools across the nation. My NAS students met with school leaders who work with these students and their families to learn about their specific needs and interests with regard to resources. The students shared their experiences and knowledge that they could apply and connect to the work, and in this sense, drawing on the strengths of their experiential knowledge to support the project.

After these discussions, the school leaders and students determined that their project would involve identifying resources for the BIE students to access higher education, such as financial aid, scholarships, the application process, and based on the NAS students' own experiences, suggestions for how to succeed and seek out support. Seeking support was framed as a strength, not a weakness, and the project's overarching message was to promote students taking ownership over their own education.

In this first semester's work on this project, the students developed a video sharing their own stories of their pursuit of higher education and in some cases, their stories of houselessness. In their research about the demographics of the BIE students identified as houseless or inadequately housed, they found they could relate to the students' circumstances as many of them or their families had been in similar situations. Thus they wanted to share their stories through video, which they titled Coming full circle: From assimilation to self-determination. Their message in the video was about empowerment and deriving strength from difficult situations.[1]

A second component to the project the students undertook that semester was the creation of a college success guide in the forms of a brochure and newsletter. The brochure was developed to distribute to the schools across the nation and thus, includes information on resources that are typical at any university. It also encompasses strong statements of encouragement and advice. For example, one statement reads, "Make your voice heard. The faculty and staff of your college are there to support you as you get your college education. You have a right to learn in an environment that's safe, engaging, and where you feel like you belong. If you have questions, comments, or complaints about your school, voice them! One great way to do this is through student government. Otherwise, you can talk to a professor, a department head, or the Dean of Students. You have a right to be heard."

This message in a section about making the most of college energizes students to think beyond resources and pushes them to think about and assert their

rights as students. Other parts to the brochure share messages around academic success and financial support, such as advice on locating emergency scholarships and shopping around to find affordable textbooks, tools, and supplies for classes. The figure below is the college success guide created by the students.

Figure 1: College Success Guide for Native Youth, 2014

The newsletter that was created by the students was specific to the University of New Mexico's resources and support for Native students and houseless students. Many of the BIE schools are located in the Southwest so the students felt it was important to create a guide that was specific to one university in the Southwest and the one they had the most experience and knowledge about. Our BIE administrator partner distributed the brochures and newsletters to the BIE schools and posted them along with a link to the video on their website.

The following semester, the students enrolled in the course extended the project work by creating websites specific to each BIE region across the nation.[2] They also incorporated a broader array of resources for schools, families, and students to access. For example, they researched and shared information on foundations (for schools to seek grants), local community services, community gardens, personal services, and foster/run away resources. They also shared their own stories as well as a way to connect with the BIE students and families.

The students and I still engaged with the local community around Albuquerque to reinforce our learning while working on the projects. We did this through community gardening at several local sites. A large concern we learned about from the school leaders was their students' access to healthy foods. The students incorporated this focus in their websites and participated in community gardening to gain knowledge in hands on ways. At the end of the semester, the students were able to continue their work under the auspices of the Tribal Service Corps in UNM's Community Engagement Center, where they undertake such projects throughout the year and the Tribal Service Corps is able to pay the students for their work.

Conclusion: CEL, Relationships, and Academic Skills

CEL in CBEM and NAS connected students to prominent community issues as determined by those communities. There were direct benefits to the communities with the knowledge shared and projects delivered back to them. The students benefited by developing meaningful relationships with the community partners, and they gained important academic skills. Their work strengthened their research, communication, problem-solving, writing, and computer technology skills. The CBEM students learned at an advanced scientific and sociocultural level about the impact of various environmental conditions on the community. The NAS students gained important knowledge about houseless Native students and the significance of framing the students in ways that did not label them for their living conditions. Both groups of students connected their topics and projects to health, environment, land, politics, economics, social justice and many other areas through interdisciplinary means contextualized by their communities' circumstances. In the end, CEL partnerships with students and communities supports a practice of K'é (our responsibility, love, and support for one another) and Hózhǫ́ (balance and harmony) in school settings. CEL promotes the goals of Indigenous education by creating a learning environment that provides relevancy, that values community knowledge and experiences, that connects students to communities in meaningful and powerful ways, and that shows students how to apply their knowledge and contribute to their communities' growth and sustainability.

Notes

[1] The video is publicly available on youtube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6k5sMaYrBM.

[2] Houseless Youth Project websites: http://tslee44.wix.com/navajo-houseless, http://bieeastguide.weebly.com/ and http://ftp.communityresourceguide.altervista.org/

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