

**First Nation Student Reticence:
Sorting out Positive Traditional Ways
from a Negative Boarding School Legacy**
John Peacock

I would first like to acknowledge the Blackfoot Confederacy, Treaty 7, and the Kainai and Piikani Nations, the last of which co-hosted the 2018 Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium at which this paper was delivered at the University of Lethbridge, on traditional Blackfoot lands.

Most who teach, as I do, in mainstream colleges and universities know that reticence in class is by no means unique to tribal college students. This paper argues that, in their particular case, reticence, stage fright, fear of public speaking, lack of self-confidence—call it what you will— may be cultural rather than just personal: some Native students feel it is inappropriate to ask too many questions of Elders and/or to appear to compete with peers in class; some come from families where grandparents and parents went to boarding schools and were punished so harshly for speaking their native languages that they were reluctant to speak in any language in classrooms and developed an antipathy for formal education. Both positive traditional customs and negative boarding school legacies need to be taken into account when educating Native American students, whether in tribal or mainstream colleges and universities. To acknowledge the cultural is to deny neither the personal nor the “universal.” Unique cultural reasons coexist with shared reasons for other problems common to Native and mainstream Americans, such as diabetes, rates of which, in both populations, are increased by obesity, but only among Native Americans is there the additional complicating historical cause of their communities’ shift from traditional to commodity foods, which are higher in sugar, fat, and carbohydrates. Medical models for preventing diabetes are often more effective in Native American communities when integrated with ceremonial practices unique to those communities. (The same could be said for preventing alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence, depression, or suicide.) Cultural practices unique to other ethnic groups enhance western medical treatments of those populations as well, though in different, equally specific ways related to their particular historical experiences.

Author’s Background

To explain the genesis of my own guiding principles when engaging with reticent Native American students, I have to go back past my own entirely mainstream education, to a trauma my uncle suffered while a student at the Fort Totten Indian School on the Devils Lake Sioux reservation, a trauma that left him (as well as my mother) so reticent about being Native American that I did not learn they were, until I was forty-seven years old.

In 1915 (thirty-four years before I was born), when Uncle was in the 6th grade, he was sexually assaulted by a priest at the Fort Totten School. In reaction, the entire family—parents and seven children—left North Dakota and moved to Hampton, Virginia, site of an off-reservation boarding school, which my grandparents did not want any of their children to attend, but around which lived a small community of Native American alumni, some from Devils Lake. Once in Virginia, my grandparents forbade their children to acknowledge being Dakota. Uncle never spoke about being raped until the very end of his life while dying of cancer. One of Mother’s earliest memories was of being slapped by her mother for asking about some photographs taken of family members dressed

Sustaining Indigenous Languages

in ceremonial regalia before the move off-reservation. Worse than a slap in the face, her mother told her, was to be Dakota in the Jim Crow South, where only two races were recognized, black and white. A “half-blood,” my mother grew up passing as white, became a nurse, joined the army in World War II, met my white father overseas during the war, returned with him to his hometown of Washington, DC, married, and raised my two brothers and me in the 1950s and 60s in Chevy Chase, Maryland, where we never encountered any American Indians. The whole time I was growing up, Mother never once spoke of being Dakota. My two brothers and I were raised in complete ignorance of her Dakota identity and thus of part of our own.

When I say this family secret was the genesis of my guiding principles when engaging with reticent Native American students, I do not mean to suggest that I expect them all to have been abused in school or to have learned of such abuse in their family past, or that only Native Americans have had such traumatic school experiences (scandals are increasingly coming to light about priests abusing children of all races and nationalities). Nor do I propose that everyone with a repressed or suppressed personal or family history of school abuse ends up becoming a reticent student.

On the contrary, raised knowing nothing of the trauma in my own family history, I was the opposite of reticent at home or school. A child who asked more questions than my mother was willing to answer, I became a student eager to ask and answer questions in class. Years after discovering the family history my mother and her siblings had kept secret from me, working through in retrospect how their doing so may have affected me at home and at school, I began to become aware of what my great inquisitiveness and curiosity to find things out as a child was all about: a desperate intuitive sense that children sometimes have that something is wrong in the family, desperate because children—especially middle sons like me—sometimes feel it is their responsibility to set things right, perhaps out of a misbegotten sense that it was somehow their fault that things ever went wrong in the first place. Much as my need to know arose from and was part of my family’s suppressed history of abuse, when transferred from the context of the family to the context of school, my inquisitiveness and curiosity were harnessed to more realistic academic ends. But even this adaptation was partly motivated by the illusion that my academic success would solve family problems of depression and alcoholism. Not until long after my parents separated and my brother dropped out of college and became estranged from the family did it dawn on me how magical my thinking had been.

By then, it was 1986, my first year teaching at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), the year I encountered my first Native American student. Tony (I’ll call him), from Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico, fit the stereotype of the reticent Native American student. He had not said a word in class all semester. The first time he spoke to me at all was after a class discussion of a novel called *Ceremony*, set in his pueblo, written by another Laguna Indian. Tony approached me with something on his mind. He said his traditional Elders would object to the ceremonial origin story described in the novel being discussed as literature. The Laguna origin story, he said, was sacred. Not sacred like Genesis in the Bible, which is simply an account of the origin of the world. The Laguna origin story was told only at the end of the harvest when the land was depleted; like a spark plug, the Laguna origin story jump-started creation for the next year; it was supposed to be told only at the end of the harvest, by a member of the clan responsible for passing the story down orally from generation to generation; to tell the Laguna origin story at any other time of year than at the end of harvest was to potentially start the seasons at the wrong time, in the wrong place.

Rather than just take Tony's word about his culture's reticence regarding when and where to tell the Laguna origin story, I passed on what he said to American Indian Elders both inside and outside academia. I wanted to find out not whether Tony was right, which he was, but what I should do about it, whether I should stop teaching the book in which the story was written down, or not. Obviously, there was some difference of opinion within the Laguna pueblo community about whether to tell the ceremonial origin story in a novel, since the author was Laguna.

Three Native American women Elders I met at a Native studies conference completely redirected me. Forget about stories some Indians don't want discussed in your class and teach stories some white people don't want discussed in your class—stories about white people's past and present relations to Indian people. And so as not to become sanctimonious or self-righteously critical about white people's often not-so-great relations to Indian people, start with your own family, the women Elders advised—the story of your own ancestors' relations to Indian people. When I said what I thought at the time to be true—that I didn't think my family ever had any relations to Indian people—the three women Elders reminded me that any white family that had been in this country for long (as mine had) probably had had relations with Native Americans. Maybe mine were being reticent. The women Elders suggested I might be surprised by what I found out (Peacock 2003).

After this encounter, instead of going back to my mother and repeating questions she had never answered about her past, I began to use the skills I had acquired in graduate school to answer those questions on my own. Knowing only her maiden name, date and place of birth, I found nothing in the town censuses at the National Archives, but looking at a map I noticed the town of her birth was on the border of the Devils Lake Sioux reservation. I found tribal rolls revealing her family were Dakota mixed-bloods, and boarding school records that eventually led me to the reason why they had left the reservation, why she had been so reticent for the rest of her life and the entirety of mine up to that point. But now new questions arose: What had happened not just to her voice, but to her Dakota language and culture? More importantly, what responsibility did I—no longer an inexplicably guilt-ridden child, but a professor with privilege and agency—have to inquire into the profound reticence about Indian boarding schools and Native language and culture loss in mainstream American culture, especially in higher education, where I had been empowered but students like Tony had not.

I forgot to mention that Mother had always pushed me to do well in school. Maybe she had never wanted to answer my questions, but after I told her about my discovery, she seemed to awaken from her life-long depression and asked me to find any family members still living on the reservation. When I found several cousins she didn't know existed, she asked me to take her back to meet them. They welcomed us, answered all our questions, and asked us two in return: why didn't we seek reinstatement in the tribe, and why didn't I—a student and teacher of language, literature, and culture—study, teach, and help revive Dakota language, literature, and culture? Before my mother died at age 96, we were both reinstated, and in 2005 I gave a paper at the Native American Languages Session of the Modern Language Association Convention suggesting that the thirty-thousand-member professional organization of college and university language and literature professors adopt a policy recommending that colleges and universities hire fluent Native language speakers to teach the indigenous languages of the regions where those colleges and universities were located.

An ad hoc MLA subcommittee of Lakota, Dakota, Oneida, Miami, and Haida MLA members drafted a policy "Statement on Native American Languages in the College and University Curriculum." Approved by the MLA Executive Council

Sustaining Indigenous Languages

and published on the MLA website and in the organization's magazine, the statement "urged colleges and universities to ... work with Native American language communities and with Native American educational and governing bodies ...

- To include, where appropriate, Native American languages in the curriculum in the same manner as foreign languages and to grant proficiency in Native American languages the same full academic credit as proficiency in foreign languages ...
- To encourage research to create and update dictionaries, grammars, orthographies, curricula, and other materials to support the teaching of Native American languages ... especially ... languages for which they have never been developed. (MLA Committee 2005: 227)

To practice what this policy preached, I helped North Dakota State University initiate its first accredited Dakota language and culture course, taught by a fluent-speaking Dakota Elder, whose cultural expertise was recognized in lieu of the usual PhD. This Elder was among several with whom I began working, some of them *mitakuyepi*, my relatives, on various projects to reclaim Dakota language and culture from years of enforced reticence.

Only some of these projects came to fruition. One that did not was a Bush Foundation planning grant that I wrote with my tribe's education director (the equivalent of school superintendent) for a Dakota Survival Institute where tribal school students could hear Elders tell endangered oral traditions in person or (after they died) on recordings. The planning grant was awarded but the actual institute never built, in part because of the reticence of some of the Elders to tell some of the most difficult stories, especially on recordings. More successfully, I was the editor and wrote the introduction and afterword for *The Dakota Prisoner of War Letters / Dakota Kaškapi Okicize Wowapi*, two Elders' translation into English of fifty letters buried for years in archives of the Minnesota Historical Society that had been written in Dakota by warriors imprisoned for their participation in the 1862 Dakota-US War, a war often not talked about because it was overshadowed by the American Civil War. The war has long been a part of Dakota oral tradition, which, because unwritten, has never been given as much credence by historians as documents written by non-Natives at the time. In mainstream American culture, both popular and academic, writing trumps oral tradition every time as a putative source of historical truth. The translated letters make available to everybody a primary documentary source of Dakota history written by Dakota participants (Canku and Simon 2013, 213.)

Though *The Dakota Prisoner of War Letters / Dakota Kaškapi Okicize Wowapi* was selected for a 2014 American Association for State and Local History Leadership in History Award (the nation's most prestigious competition for recognition of achievement in state and local history), the book has not been without controversy within the Dakota communities for which it was intended. Among questions asked by members of various Dakota tribes: Though the translators were both descendants of letter writers, shouldn't they have handed the letters over to be translated by other Elders who had *more* ancestors among the letter writers? Were the translators and I wrong to publish with the Minnesota Historical Society, founded by the 19th century Minnesota governor who put down the 1862 Dakota-US War?

Such questions about whether, and if so, how to publish in the Dakota language were not restricted to *The Dakota Prisoner of War Letters* project. On another project, a tribal language teacher asked me help her fund production of a language teaching CD like one already in existence on a neighboring district on the reservation—only in the dialect spoken in her district. Speakers of different

dialects from Minnesota, North Dakota, and Canada would not sit down together at a lunch I attended at the 2005 Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Conference in Vancouver, British Columbia. Students at the conference did not dare speak Dakota in front of teachers of other dialects. A Dakota spiritual leader I know in Minnesota told me he wished that the Dakota teacher that his community hired from Canada would stop teaching the local youngsters to speak the way they do up there. In another Dakota community than mine, two competing Dakota daycare centers were started by tribal factions; so much bad feeling was generated that now at that community there is no daycare in the endangered language at all.

Even more fraught than the “dialect wars” were Elders’ questions and often guarded opinions about who owns the Dakota language. Should it be taught off the reservation? Are non-native language teachers, linguists, and especially software designers who make Dakota language learning materials just “in it for the money”?

Working on the above projects and listening with an open mind to such discussions has led me to reflect on the difference between teaching Dakota and French, the other language historically but no longer spoken by my mixed-blood ancestors on the reservation 90 miles south of the Canadian border.

Teaching Dakota versus Teaching French

Today a Dakota language class has to be taught differently than a French language class. First of all, as Dakota language students move beyond childhood into adolescence, they are more likely to ask, as my son did, about the point of learning a “dying” language. While this not a question that one generally needs to entertain in French language instruction, other questions do apply to both learning Dakota and learning French. For example, how is learning either language going to help students get their first entry level job, or advance further in their work lives? The utility of learning a second language may be obvious to teachers, but failure to instill in students a purpose they themselves can understand for studying languages is one of the reasons for the decline of French and foreign language instruction in general in the United States and, more seriously, for the rapidly approaching extinction of the Dakota language. It is not always easy to convince young Dakota to learn it, given its non-use as the principal language of their families and communities, and in the face of the ever-approaching passing of the few remaining fluent speakers

If a French language student progresses as far as majoring in the language in college, s/he very well might at some point encounter a teacher whose mother-tongue is French. Exactly the opposite tends to be true (with some notable exceptions) in Dakota language instruction: the youngest students may have started learning the language from mother-tongue Dakota speaking Elders in daycare, but the professionally trained teachers that Dakota language students encounter as they progress in elementary, middle, high school, and college are likely to read and write Dakota better than an Elder, but to speak it worse than one.

Some fluent Dakota speakers are still illiterate in a language that did not exist in written form until missionaries created an orthography in the 1830s in order to teach Dakota people to read the Bible that missionaries had translated into Dakota as a means of converting the first generation of Christian Dakotas in their own language. Making the 1862 Dakota prisoners of war literate in their language was instrumental in Christianizing them and getting them to stop practicing ceremonies as a precondition of their release. Some (not all) of the missionaries who first learned the language themselves, then, after several generations of Christianizing Dakota people in their own language, prohibited subsequent generations of Dakota people from speaking Dakota in mission board-

Sustaining Indigenous Languages

ing schools. One irony of Dakota language revitalization today is its dependence until very recently on written “missionary Dakota” texts such as the earliest Dakota dictionary and grammar, from which generations of contemporary Dakota people—those who grew up on reservations, as well as those like me who have only lately reestablished contact—have begun learning Dakota. The first Dakota dictionary, produced by missionaries, was used in the Dakota prisoner of war letters translation project that I worked on.

One consequence of the traumatic history of Dakota language suppression is that Dakota language classes like one funded by the Shakopee Dakota Community in Minnesota are sometimes devoted in part to providing adult Dakota language learners with their first and only opportunity to begin working through any guilt and anger they may feel about never having learned Dakota growing up, or about having stopped learning Dakota as children and having difficulty picking it up again. One relative of mine, for example, told me his mother stopped speaking Dakota to him as a pre-school-age child so he would learn English at home rather than the hard way at school, as she had. Later she felt so guilty about this that, when her grandchildren who had never learned it from their father were born, she began a twenty-five-year career teaching Dakota in the tribal schools, when teaching the language was once again permitted.

Such difficult emotional issues are not subsidiary but ever-present at all levels of Dakota language instruction. Unless and until these issues are dealt with, according to the most experienced Dakota-teaching Elder that I know, all bets are off in the Dakota language classroom, where there is a lot more to be both personally and culturally reticent about than in French language classes.

Again, this does not mean that “personal” reasons never keep students from participating in French language class. In fact, in my own high school years (long before learning my Dakota family history), the one class where I was uncharacteristically reticent was French class. Maybe if I wasn’t such a perfectionist, I might have been less embarrassed making mistakes and wouldn’t have kept silent in French conversation class until I was sure I had it right. I still am hesitant to speak French. My wife is far more conversationally fluent though far less literate in the language than I. I was, however, an excellent student of Latin, precisely because, when I was learning it, students were taught mainly to read and write it and only to listen to and speak it well enough to understand and participate in the Catholic mass, which was then still mainly performed in Latin.

Comparing my experience learning Latin to my experiences learning French and Dakota languages leads me next to compare the prospects of reviving Dakota and Latin.

Reviving Dakota versus Other “Dead” or “Dying” Languages

My 2010 paper “The Good News and Bad News About My Endangered Dakota Language” compared Dakota not just to Latin but to Hebrew, Māori, and Hawaiian language revitalization. Latin and Hebrew, after ceasing to be commonly spoken languages, continued for hundreds of years to be liturgical languages used in religious ceremonies. In the twentieth century Hebrew was successfully revitalized as the spoken language of the nation of Israel after a huge infusion of time and effort by the whole country—something approximated in the case of the Māori language, which, along with Hawaiian, has been perhaps the most successfully revitalized Indigenous language, in part by immersing not just students but their families and even the non-teaching staff of the schools they attend. As I learned when I attended the 2005 World Indigenous Peoples’ Conference on Education in Aotearoa, New Zealand, the Māori, who number 16.5% of New Zealand’s population, with proportional representation in Parliament, have the

political wherewithal to have made their language an official language in which the national anthem is sung on public occasions before it is sung in English. There are radio and TV stations that broadcast 24/7 in Māori. One can proceed from preschool through graduate school with Māori as the language of instruction. The United States has too many Native American languages for any one of them to receive the proportion of national resources that have been devoted to Māori (much less Hebrew) language revitalization. Similarly, many American states have too many Native American languages to devote the proportion of state resources that have been devoted to Hawaiian language revitalization.

Latin may be a more interesting case to consider when thinking about the real prospects for Dakota. The reasons I was told to study Latin as a boy are similar to those given to Dakota young people for studying Dakota today: besides being able to follow religious ceremonies, I was told, you will learn the moral and intellectual basis of your culture, develop character and self-discipline, improve your academic performance in other subjects, and learn to appreciate a particular language and language in general for its aesthetic beauty and intellectual complexity. Nobody ever expected me to become conversationally fluent in Latin to gain these benefits. Nobody suggested that my studying Latin was part of a movement to revitalize it as a community's spoken language. I encountered and shared both these assumptions, however, when I began taking classes in Dakota, of which I'm sorry to admit I know less after ten years of formal and informal study as an adult than the Latin I knew after two years in middle school. Part of this I attribute to not devoting as concentrated a period of time studying Dakota as I was forced to do as a Latin student in middle school. Another part is a result of the laudable but perhaps unachievable aspiration on the part of Dakota tribes to revive Dakota as the spoken language of the community without sufficient resources.

Should we then devote the more modest resources we do have to achieving the more modest benefits that studying Dakota shares with studying Latin? Latin has not been any community's spoken language for hundreds of years; hardly any individuals speak it fluently; but it is currently undergoing a modest resurgence in schools, colleges, and online.

To return to the subject of cultural reticence, I am extremely reluctant to have just asked the preceding question—based as it is on comparing Dakota and Latin—for fear of offending older Dakota language teachers who were forced to study Latin in Catholic mission schools while being punished for speaking Dakota. About the prospects for overcoming the consequent reticence many Native students of other Native languages besides Dakota have felt in school ever since, there is both good and bad news, as I realized after linguist Frederick White, with whom I had worked on the MLA Statement on Native American Languages, asked me to write the preface to his 2008 book *Ancestral Language Acquisition among Native Americans: A Study of a Haida Language Class*.

Good News, Bad News

First the bad news: White calculated that only 24 hours per year, 168 hours total for K-7 are devoted to Haida language instruction in the school he studied. Greymorning "assessed that Hawaiian children were achieving an age appropriate level of fluency in Hawaiian after being exposed to from 600 to 700 language contact hours.. At the Haida school rate of just 24 hours per year (15 minutes per day), it would take 25 years to achieve the minimum 600 hours needed for fluency. This data led me to calculate that only three quarters of this minimum, or 450 hours, will be met by students who take three years of Dakota language

Sustaining Indigenous Languages

at the University of Minnesota (where I took the first online Dakota language course.) Four hundred and fifty hours equals one hour a day, five days a week, for six semesters.

The good news is that Native educators are making considerable inroads into the problem of Native student reticence in class. Paralleling early education research done on the Wasco and Paiute confederated tribes of Oregon's Warm Springs Reservation, White found that Haida first graders in the Massett Haida tribal school tend not to compete academically. Expecting them to compete only alienates them from American mainstream culture as well as from their own Haida traditions, in which appearing to outsmart others is culturally unacceptable, the model learner being first an observer/apprentice and only later a participant. Also paralleling Warm Springs research, White observed that Haida children respond to teachers' questions less but visit with each other and wander in and out of class more than mainstream students. This may be, White suggests, because at tribal gatherings, where attention shifts among as many speakers as in a normal class, nobody equivalent to a teacher formally decides who gets to talk and when; children are free to come and go and interact with whomever they please while others talk. Haida children do better with a teacher they are allowed to call "auntie" or "grandma," but even then, rather than raise hands to talk to her, they tend to get out of their seats to go ask her something, often out of hearing of the others. Euro-American first graders transition easier than Haida children from informal kinship gatherings to classrooms controlled by non-kin authority figures with whom they have already had more experience.

More about how teachers shape student behavior: White cites research on an Odawa teacher who gave students three times longer to answer than a Euro-Canadian teacher does. In turn, White found that Haida teachers differ from mainstream ones regarding how much and what kind of participation they expect and therefore require of Haida students—subtle differences that have received little attention. When "peripheral participation"—without purpose or pressure—is encouraged at the students' discretion, Haida first graders participate more. On the other hand, they typically remain silent or give wrong (because premature) answers when forced to demonstrate skills or knowledge beyond what their community would normally expect of a nonparticipating observer/apprentice; or else they deliberately give incorrect answers or shrug their shoulders so as to compel the teacher to ask someone else for the correct answer. By not forcing these kinds of participation, Haida teachers reduce stress on Haida students and free them to participate more, when they are ready. Doing this especially in Haida language classes where participation is crucial allows students to concentrate on rather than anxiously filter out the language. By contrast, mainstream teachers actually ratchet up the stress level by quickly stifling student interactions not directly related to instruction, thus maintaining the teacher's own sole authority over who speaks when. Tolerant of much more noise and interruption, Haida teachers let students wander or speak when they want.

Dakota Applications

White's study of Haida first-grade classroom dynamics helped me make sense of four quite different Dakota contexts:

1. In a multigenerational Dakota language class I took at a reservation community school the instructor told me I could be another "uncle" to several toddlers who came with young single mothers and expected to sit on the laps of older adults.

2. In a tribal college Dakota studies class that I observed, a young woman wandered in late, went right up to the instructor's desk in the middle of his lesson, asked him to fill out some forms, left, and came back later to ask if he had completed them—something he didn't seem to mind.
3. In another tribal college Dakota studies class to which I guest lectured, the instructor told students that I had studied and taught in Euro-American universities and therefore expected them to ask and respond to probing questions; nevertheless, many more students came up to me individually afterwards rather than responded during class.
4. White's findings about Haida first-graders' reticence in particular helped me make sense of tribal college student reticence in a blended (partly online, partly face-to-face) Native American studies course I team-taught with a tribal Elder from our respective classrooms fifteen hundred miles apart, mine at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in Baltimore and his at Cankdeska Cikana (Little Hoop) Community College (CCCC), the tribal college of North Dakota's Spirit Lake Dakota Nation (as my mother's Devils Lake Sioux Tribe was officially renamed in 1996) (Lambert and Peacock 2018). The next section discusses this class in more detail.

Team-Teaching Native American Studies Online

Tribal college and MICA students communicated via synchronous videoconferences and asynchronous online discussion forums. (Both schools also held separate face-to-face class meetings.) In videoconferences, the tribal college students were even more reluctant than in face-to-face classes to ask questions and express opinions, especially when they might have been perceived to be competing with each other. The Elder did not ask individual Indian students direct questions, and he restricted our initial videoconferences to fifteen minutes out of concern that his students, as he confided in me, might feel uncomfortable being "looked at," as he put it, for longer by the distant non-Native MICA students. In asynchronous discussion boards, conversations were also very one-sided, with my art students in Baltimore asking far more questions than did tribal college students.

After much consultation, the Elder and I risked encouraging more tribal college student participation. Taking as a clue African American educator bell hooks' observation in her 1994 book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* that "non-white students talk in class only when they feel connected via experience," we assigned both tribal college and MICA students to watch an online symposium at my school on "Black Lives Matter" and then to compare and contrast Indians' experiences of police harassment on the reservation with experiences of police harassment of African American residents of Baltimore (Maryland Institute College of Art 2015).

Fraught with even greater possibilities for cultural tension than previous discussions, this videoconference started off quieter than usual, even on the MICA side. Finally, a tribal college student broke the silence by asking if any of my students had been racially profiled by Baltimore city police during the nearby protests that closed the art school after the death of Freddie Gray. *Most of us are white* came the first reply, but then one of those white students volunteered that he was gay, as was his brother, who had been hassled by police. My students reversed the question and asked whether tribal students had ever been racially profiled, to which the tribal college students replied yes, sometimes when they went into the white town off the reservation. The Elder added that clerks sometimes follow Native American shoppers around in white-owned stores.

On an asynchronous forum, one of my students posted a link to a Lakota People's Law project article entitled "Native Lives Matter," which quoted data

Sustaining Indigenous Languages

from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention for the period 1999-2011 showing that “the racial group most likely to be killed by law enforcement is Native Americans, followed by African Americans, Latinos, Whites, and Asian Americans” (Lakota People’s Law Project 2015). To this information one of my students responded by asking why the Black Lives Matter movement was receiving more attention than the Native Lives Matter movement? A tribal college student broke the silence of her cohort in the asynchronous forum by acknowledging that Dakota people have been less successful than African Americans in using media to downplay internecine disputes and present a unified front in their political and racial struggles. They tend to be quiet in their everyday lives, she said, adding that textbooks tend to present them as victims of conquest and removal.

A follow-up asynchronous discussion board about academic literature stereotyping Indians as victims led in turn to a videoconference about how Native American students sometimes feel that academic reading, writing, or speaking can seem impersonal, exclusive of ordinary Indian people, or dubiously authoritative, compared to the oral stories they hear or tell in their homes or other familiar cultural settings, where it is inappropriate to assert ideas as if they are absolutely factual rather than mainly experiential and felt. Tribal college students confirmed what the literature says about Native young people not stating opinions unequivocally in competition (explicit or implicit) with peers (Elbow 1998, 78). Doing so can feel like “acting white,” “selling out,” disrespecting or betraying one’s own culture, especially in front of non-Natives during discussions of race and ethnicity at mainstream colleges and universities, where Indian transfer students from tribal colleges may already feel at odds. The frequent presumption in mainstream higher education that every Native student must already possess the knowledge to speak for and about the whole of his or her culture’s experience runs counter to tribal cultural norms that teach young students not to be so presumptuous. They come to college to listen and learn, not to speak authoritatively. No wonder they often feel anxious and insecure in classrooms where they are expected to ask questions and express opinions (Sorkness and Kelting-Gibson 2006). Being called on in class can feel like being “picked on” (White 2011, 12). All this can lead Native American students to perceive mainstream colleges and universities as alien, if not hostile, environments.

The Elder with whom I was team-teaching the class chimed in that he remembered his own white education professor at the University of North Dakota initially advising him to switch from education to another program in which he might have more to say in class. But when he explained that Indian students like him tend to be more reserved than their white peers about asking professors questions and competing with fellow students, the professor asked him to stay in the program and give a presentation on the reasons for this reticence. In this presentation, he reported that Dakota traditionally promote communal sharing over individualistic striving; authority figures are looked to as guides by apprentice learners who tend to listen, observe, and collaborate rather than single themselves out for individual recognition in accordance with the mainstream ethos of personal autonomy. Now, many years later, listening to the Elder talk about his own reticence as a student and how he taught his own professor about it, our team-taught hybrid class began for the first time to discuss a question brought up earlier in this paper about root causes of Dakota students’ reticence: how much is student reticence a positive sign of respect when learning from Elders? How much is it a negative legacy of boarding schools, about which the class had read an assigned reading by Standing Rock Lakota Phyllis Young, who had attended two South Dakota Boarding schools:

[y]ou had to suppress your feelings because you couldn't have an opinion ... you did not speak when you were talked to or talked at. Indian children in the boarding schools did not interact, did not respond, did not question. There are three generations of parents that have raised their children that way; we are just now coming out of that ... [T]he teachers ... were threatened ... if you communicated ... and you were punished for it. (Barrett and Wolter 1997, 22, quoted in Braun, Hans and Gagnon 2011, 227)

All this we continued to discuss in the last video conference between the Baltimore and tribal college students. This particular videoconference was supposed to last the usual fifteen minutes but continued for an hour and a half, at the end of which students started a Facebook page for the two groups to keep in touch online (Native American Studies and Dakota Studies 2015.)

In end-of-semester course evaluations, students suggested there be a face-to-face “cultural exchange” in future years of the course between the two schools based on tribal and art students’ common understanding of culture as something less to be studied academically than to be performed, practiced, and participated in through music, dance, storytelling, and visual art. These art forms have never been considered as separate from one another by American Indians as they have been, until recently, by Euro-American cultures—one of the reasons my contemporary multimedia art students love studying with tribal college peers. Like tribal college students themselves, art and design students tend to be non-traditional learners in the sense that they mainly learn by performing, practicing and participating in cultural activities, rather than by engaging in academic discussion. They tend to be “doers” and “makers”—not “big talkers” (Pewewardy 2002; Price, Kallam, and Love 2009).

Baltimore and tribal college students also jointly suggested that in future years the course pair tribal college and MICA students in service learning projects. But what kind of projects?

For years, the Elder I taught with had been asking me to conduct various kinds of research regarding the tribe’s treaties in the Bureau of Indian Affairs records at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. (Lambert and Peacock 2014). What if he and his students in North Dakota generated questions for MICA students to research at the Archives? The Elder and his students would need to answer my students’ questions about how and why this research matters, spelling out its context and purpose from the perspective of the tribe. Small groups of members from both classes could jointly produce Google documents and present their research findings to the whole class. These projects could be archived as a knowledge base for future students in the course to learn from and build on.

Some of this research might be of interest to tribal constituencies, who, if sufficiently impressed, might in turn submit questions of their own for the joint class to research. In a very modest way, the class might, in collaboration, begin to learn to do the kind of research for the tribe that post-secondary research institutions perform for their communities.

Tribal college students had already had some experience doing this. For example, a year before our class, Dakota culture and language students at the tribal college recommended as part of a course project that the tribal council pass a resolution to engage in nation-to-nation negotiations with the US over returning Spirit Lake’s boundaries to the jurisdiction of the tribe as per its 1867 treaty. The tribal college’s Dakota language teacher, representing the Council of Elders, had, in written testimony in a US Congressional hearing, presented the oral traditional view, not often heard in the halls of Congress, that Spirit Lake’s periodic flooding was a natural disruption that tribal members have for generations adapted to by

Sustaining Indigenous Languages

simply moving to higher ground rather than attempting to divert with dikes and outlet pipes as the Army Corps of Engineers proposed in order to protect white border town properties built on the flood plain, all the while inundating even those tribal properties built on high ground. “What is really in my heart is that the lake should be left alone,” the Dakota language teacher testified. “We let things happen naturally. We practice respect” (quoted in Hamilton 2011).

Likewise, and in conclusion, failing to respect Indian students’ natural cultural reticence only makes them unnaturally quiet, like those three generations of their ancestors whose voices were virtually extinguished by boarding schools. If respected and engaged in ways directly connected to students’ experience, they will converse with each other and with their mainstream peers. If this is a prerequisite for the success of a Native American studies class like the one I team-taught in English, how much more important is it in Indigenous language classes in which Native students need to speak freely and often in class in order to learn those languages?

References

- Barrett, Carole Britton and Marcia Wolter. 1997. “You didn’t dare try to be Indian”: Oral Histories of Former Indian Boarding School Students.” *North Dakota History* 64, no. 2 (Spring):4-25.
- hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Braun, Sebastian, Birgit Hans and Gregory Gagnon. 2011. *Native American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, 2nd ed. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt.
- Canku, Clifford and Michael Simon. 2013. *The Dakota Prisoner of War Letters*. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press. Introduction and afterword by John Peacock.
- Elbow, Peter. 1998. *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Greymoming, Steve. 1997. “Going beyond words: the Arapaho Immersion Program.” In *Teaching Indigenous Languages*, edited by Jon Reyhner, 22-30. Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University. Accessed December 24, 2020. https://www2.nau.edu/~jar/TIL_3.html.
- Hamilton, Lisa M. 2011. “Spirit Lake Rising: Living with a Never-ending Flood.” *The Atlantic Daily*, May 31. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/05/spirit-lake-rising-living-with-a-never-ending-flood/239644/>.
- Lakota People’s Law Project. 2015. “Native Lives Matter.” Accessed December 16, 2020. <https://s3-us-west-1.amazonaws.com/lakota-peoples-law/uploads/Native-Lives-Matter-PDF.pdf>.
- Lambert, Vernon and John Peacock. 2014. “Mni Wakan Heciya Ihduhapi Unspewicakiya: Teaching Sovereignty at Spirit Lake.” *Tribal College Journal*. Web-exclusive feature. Accessed December 16, 2020. <https://tribalcollegejournal.org/mni-wakan-heciya-ihduhapi-unspewicakiya-teaching-sovereignty-spirit-lake/>.
- Lambert, Vernon and John Peacock. 2018. “Team-Teaching Native American Studies Online.” *Tribal College and University Research Journal* 2:1-29. <https://issuu.com/collegefund/docs/tcuresearchjournalv2>.
- Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). 2015. Constitution Day 2015: Black Lives Matter, Structural Racism in 21st Century America. Highlights Available at https://www.worldcat.org/title/constitution-day-black-lives-matter-structural-racism-in-21st-century-america/oclc/962193341?referer=list_view.

- MLA Committee on the Literatures of People of Color in the United States and Canada. 2005. "Statement on Native American Languages in the College and University Curriculum." *MLA Profession* 2005:226-227.
- Native American Studies and Dakota Studies. 2015. Public Group. (Facebook). 16 February. Accessed October 7, 2016. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/559051640911382/>.
- Peacock, John. 2010. "The Good News and Bad News About My Endangered Dakota Language." In *Reversing Language Shift: How to Re-awaken a Language Tradition: Proceedings of the Fourteenth Foundation for Endangered Languages Conference*, Carmarthen, Wales, edited by Glyn Lewis Hywel and Ostler Nicholas, 13-15. Bath, England: Foundation for Endangered Languages.
- Peacock, John. 2003. "Origin Story." In *Beyond the Borders: American Literature and Postcolonial Theory*, edited by Deborah Madsen. London: Pluto Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183q5jn>.
- Peacock, John. 2008. "Preface." *Ancestral Language Acquisition among Native Americans: A Study of a Haida Language Class* by Frederick White, i-v. Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Peacock, John. 2005. "Where Do We Go from Here?" Paper presented at the Native American Languages Session of the 2005 Modern Languages Association Convention, Washington, D.C., December 28.
- Pewewardy, Cornell. 2002. "Learning styles of American Indian/Alaska Native Students: A review of the literature and implications for practice." *Journal of American Indian Education* 41, no 3:22-56.
- Price, Melanie, Michael Kallam, and John Love. 2009. "The Learning Styles of Native American Students and Implications for Classroom Practice." In *Proceedings of the Eighth Native American Symposium and Film Festival: Images, Imaginations, and Beyond*, 36-45. Durant, OK.: Southeastern Oklahoma State University, November 4-6. Retrieved from: <http://dl.icdst.org/pdfs/files1/27980b467162bce5de4deb03769b59d5.pdf>.
- Sorkness, Harold L. and Lynn Kelting-Gibson. 2006. "Effective teaching strategies for engaging Native American students." Paper presented at National Association of Native American Studies Conference, Baton Rouge, LA, Accessed December 17, 2010. https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/oieresearch/conference/sorkness_200602.pdf.
- Department of Education. 2003. "College transition programs: Promoting success beyond high school." Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education.
- White, Frederick H. 2008. *Ancestral Language Acquisition among Native Americans: A Study of a Haida Language Class*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press.
- White, John Wesley. 2011. "Resistance to Classroom Participation: Minority Students, Academic Discourse, Cultural Conflicts, and Issues of Representation in Whole Class Discussions." *Journal of Language, Identity and Education* 10, no. 4:250-265. doi: 10.1080/15348458.2011.598128.