

Inspiring Culturally Responsive Curriculum through Language Arts Seminars: A Reflection on Work during the Diné Institute for Navajo Nation Educators

Seven teachers share the challenges and possibilities of developing culturally responsive approaches that highlight how Language Arts curriculum makes a diversity of impacts.

This paper weaves the voices and stories of the authors' collective learning in and through the Diné Institute for Navajo Nation Educators (DINÉ), which is a professional development institute for teachers in Navajo-serving schools. We intentionally center the experiences of three teachers and three professors in order to narrate the transformative work that can happen in and through English language arts (ELA). Although the DINÉ offers teachers professional development across all subject areas, we focus here on three specific seminars led over two years by three professors who share English as their home discipline. Added to these voices are the voices of three teachers who participated in the ELA seminars, plus the director of the DINÉ. The three seminar topics, including the faculty leader and the participating teacher, are listed here:

- From Empathy to Advocacy: Storytelling for Social Justice; 2021; Angie Hansen (faculty/seminar leader); Jordan Morales (teacher/seminar participant)
- Stories of Home and Place: Belonging and Identity in Indigenous Literature & Film;

2020; Jeff Berglund (faculty seminar leader); Catrina Herbert (teacher/seminar participant)

- Writing and the Specificity of Place; 2020; Nicole Walker (faculty/seminar leader); DeLyssa Begay (teacher/seminar participant)

As we narrate in more detail later, these seminars shared some similar themes related to storying, writing, identity, and place. We highlight these themes through the independent words of each author, organized loosely around the Navajo philosophy of learning.

The seeds of the DINÉ were first planted in 2011 when two teachers from the Navajo Nation attended the Yale National Initiative, which is a professional development fellowship in New Haven, Connecticut. After five consecutive years of participation in this program by teachers from Navajo schools, a group of teachers approached Northern Arizona University's (NAU's) Office of Native American Initiatives to request their partnership in developing a similar professional development program locally. A group of NAU faculty and Navajo teachers worked together over the next

year to cultivate those seeds, and in 2018, the DINÉ launched its first cohort. The DINÉ has grown each year since, and although it evolves in response to feedback from stakeholders, it is guided by three core principles:

- Diné and other Indigenous youth, teachers, elders, and communities are rich sources and sites of knowledge.
- Culturally responsive schooling is a best practice, and the DINÉ integrates Navajo traditional knowledge throughout all aspects of our teaching, learning, and leading.
- Initiatives that strengthen teaching through culturally responsive professional development will in turn improve the educational attainment of Diné and other Indigenous youth, which is a necessary component for tribal nation (re)building goals of sovereign Native Nations in the United States.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to fully unpack these principles, but it is important to note that they were developed collaboratively through many conversations among the DINÉ teacher leadership team, the faculty who compose the DINÉ University Advisory Council, various tribal partners, and the director. Although these principles were locally articulated, they have a rich body of scholarly and community-based evidence supporting the ideas (e.g., Anthony-Stevens et. al, 2020; Castagno 2021; Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; McCarty & Lee, 2014).

The DINÉ professional development model is quite different from the professional development most often provided to K–12 teachers, and especially K–12 teachers in rural, Indigenous-serving schools. It is, perhaps most importantly, teacher-driven and deeply culturally responsive. By teacher-driven, we mean that the teachers themselves provide key leadership to the program, make the most critical decisions, and guide the direction of the entire initiative. This is done formally through a Teacher Leadership Team, but also informally through the cultivation of all teachers in DINÉ as leaders. By culturally responsive, we mean the centering and leveraging of the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of students and

the communities from which they come to ensure schooling is relevant, meaningful, and effective.¹ Most professional development offered to teachers in Navajo schools is short-term, content-based, and didactic. The DINÉ approach instead is long-term, centers culture and context, and positions teachers as knowledge producers.

Teachers commit to the program for eight months, and during that time, they are in a cohort of peers led by a university faculty member. The group meets roughly once per month, and we come together for a ten-day residency on the university campus during the summer. The cohort experience is organized around a seminar theme, and the faculty leader brings expertise related to the theme and a particular disciplinary area. Each teacher researches a self-chosen topic within the theme and concludes the program by writing a curriculum unit to guide their teaching of their topic with their students. We strive to ensure that the structure of the professional development is as responsive as the content of the seminars.

The technical elements of the DINÉ professional development model do not accurately capture the real work that happens in the program, which is fundamentally about engaging in self-determination through self-education (Brayboy & Castagno, 2009). The main pieces of yarn here are storying and responsiveness. Schooling in the United States is informed by countless stock stories or master narratives; these can be heard across content areas and grade levels in rural, urban, and suburban schools. But the teachers in these three DINÉ seminars created transformative curricular counterstories. Their stories were personal, place-based, and celebratory. The other thread is responsiveness. Perhaps this was cultivated more explicitly because these three seminars happened during the pandemic, when the only possible way to engage one another was through radical care and flexibility. When those with whom

¹There is a robust body of research on culturally responsive, relevant, revitalizing, and sustaining education. Similarly, there is a robust body of research on best practices for teacher professional development. Due to space limitations, we do not unpack or cite the multiple scholars our work is informed by. We encourage readers to refer to other publications about DINÉ and by A. E. Castagno for a fuller discussion of this.

you are in community experience trauma, there is no other way. So we learned—together and in real time—to be contextually responsive, to adapt to the constantly changing conditions of the pandemic, and to imagine possibilities for teaching and learning. It is through our collective storying and responsiveness that the DINÉ cultivates space for teachers to engage in self-determination through self-education.

These small groups of ten or fewer practicing K–12 teachers differed widely in the subject matter and grade levels they taught, with not all teaching “language arts” but all committed to using language to create and celebrate art through story.

While the methodology and modes of inquiry varied, each seminar leader brought with them a plan that included exploring essential questions based on the theme and topic they developed, often based on requests from the teacher-fellows from a previous institute; the leaders’ expertise was matched with the teachers’ needs and interests. Leaders shared research and readings around the seminar topic for the teacher-fellows to discuss, and they engaged them in writing that was reflective, creative, and critical—with storytelling at its heart. These small groups of ten or fewer practicing K–12 teachers differed widely in the subject matter and grade levels they taught, with not all teaching “language arts” but all committed to using language to create and celebrate art through story. As teachers responded to the essential questions of each seminar, they created their own, thus emphasizing the responsiveness and recursiveness of the process of a community of learners working together to create counterstories. While there were monthly meetings

prior to and after the residency period, the majority of the inquiry took place in intense three-hour meetings where the stories of the seminar were transformed by these interactions. During these intensive sessions, teacher-fellows developed their own modes of inquiry as they journeyed into creating content and curriculum for themselves and others to teach.

The structure of this paper is influenced by the Diné philosophical system that organizes the processes of thinking into four components: inspiration, planning, action, and reflection (e.g., Benally, 1994; Garrison, 2007; Lee, 2014). Each “step” or “stage” is associated with different respective cardinal directions, times of the day, and of a lifespan, as well as one of the four cardinal sacred mountains. In Diné bizaad, the Navajo language, the four concepts are defined as follows with their respective associations (Table 1).

This system of thought, while complex and requiring a lifelong process of understanding, is often used by school districts on the Navajo Nation to foster intellectual and social achievement and as a heuristic for tackling new undertakings. Working with teachers, most of whom work in such districts, this system of thought becomes a useful touchstone and a way to take on the complex work of developing new curriculum units. The organization of our essay reflects this circular process that both seminar leaders and teachers were engaged in, though from different positions: first, our experiences of imagining and being inspired by the opportunity to participate in culturally responsive curriculum-building; second, our efforts to strategize and plan using some theoretical models; third, our work to implement and build the bridge between our plans and the particulars of specific contexts; and fourth, our attempts, specifically in the space of this essay,

Table 1. *Diné Philosophical Systems of Learning*

| Concept in Navajo | Concept in English Translation | Associated Cardinal Direction | Associated Period of Day | Associated Sacred Mountain |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Nitsáhákees | Imagine/Inspire | East | Morning | Sisnaajini/Blanca Peak |
| Nahat’á | Plan/Think | South | Afternoon | Tsoodzil/Mt. Taylor |
| Iiná | Act/Implement | West | Evening | Dook’o’ooshfíd/San Francisco Peaks |
| Sihasin | Assess/Reflect | North | Night | Dibé Nitsaa/Hesperus Peak |

to assess, reflect on, and refine our individual and collective work in order to inspire others to engage in similar efforts.

Imagining: From Empathy to Advocacy Seminar

Angie: A professor's imagining: In this seminar, I wanted to explore the concept of empathy and how literature can help us become better, more compassionate human beings. To be truly compassionate, we must take action and advocate for others, especially those whose voices may not always be heard and those whose stories may not always be told. My starting point for the seminar was a social justice education paradigm that looks at diversity through the structured dynamics of power and privilege (Adams & Bell, 2016).

Using this focus, I turned to Lee Anne Bell's (2020) text *Storytelling for Social Justice: Connecting Narrative and the Arts in Antiracist Teaching* where she describes a project that connects art and storytelling while analyzing how race and racism affect storytelling. We collaboratively considered ways to tell stories that took into account our own racialized identities and the dynamics of power. Using Bell's text as a springboard, we created a conceptual framework to examine the following topics in our seminar centered around social justice education: the nature of storytelling; the lives and experiences of our students; the lives, experiences, and challenges facing the teachers; the teaching context such as community, culture, and colonization; and themes in literature that addresses diversity and social justice.

Jordan: A teacher's imagining: Social justice is valuable in the classroom because it encompasses many ideals that education strives for. Bell reminds us that students need to express themselves by working through the goal and process of social justice. What is social justice but the very heart of student agency? Intentionally including the full participation of people from all social identity groups means that teachers must seek out the perspectives of students and historical figures who are routinely overlooked. I embarked on this DINÉ project to allow students to genuinely take a part in their

learning and participate in making sense of the subject matter as well.

Planning: From Empathy to Advocacy Seminar

Angie: A professor's planning: In our seminar we discussed how to teach through a framework of social justice education and examined the themes of empathy, resilience, and compassion in multicultural literature written for young people. We began with the following questions:

- What is social justice education, and how do we teach for social justice?
- How can we honor the diverse backgrounds of our students and make sure their voices are heard and identities are supported?
- How do we include diverse literature in our curriculum to support teaching for social justice?

We examined and discussed ways in which teachers can promote social justice in their classrooms, schools, communities, and beyond through curricular materials, teaching activities, modeling civil discourse, and work with their local communities. As a group we read and examined children's literature and literature for adolescents that explored identity and advocacy for social justice.

What is social justice but the very heart of student agency?

We began by reading Laura Tohe's poem "The Names," which describes a classroom teacher taking roll who cannot pronounce the last names of the Navajo students in her class. We discussed the importance of names and how they reflect our identity, and we talked about how, historically, names of the colonized have been changed, mispronounced, and erased. We talked about the role of teachers to be compassionate and empathetic and the importance of being culturally responsive. We discussed the narrator's anger in response to generations of cultural genocide. Next, we took a deeper dive into

how storytelling creates understanding across differences. We asked: Why teach literature? Whose stories get told in public schools? Whose do not?

Jordan: A teacher's planning: As I moved into a new teaching experience, I gave a lot of thought to the kind of fifth-grade teacher I wanted to be. Through my processing, I realized that I wanted students to leave my class with a strong sense of self, their value, and their contributions to their community. I am proud of my ability to form relationships with my students. I can truly say at the end of each year that I understand who my students are as young people. I can see their potential and what might hinder them from reaching the fullness of their futures. I feel that my job is to remove those hindrances so that students can pursue their best selves. I focused on social studies that year, so I wanted my students to see themselves reflected in our history, geography, and social and political lessons.

Acting: From Empathy to Advocacy Seminar

Angie: A professor's acting: We examined what stories are told and who gets to tell them, asking ourselves to name the underlying messages of dominant narratives. In July 2021, the Arizona legislature passed the bill ARS 15-717.02 (Arizona Department of Education, 2021) that prohibited instruction on certain topics in Arizona public schools. This bill bans the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT). This law is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of CRT, which examines the ways in which racial biases are part of the American legal system and other public institutions. Proponents of the law believe teaching from a CRT perspective places blame on White children for racism, which will make them feel guilty, and they believe that non-White children will be taught that they have no future due to systemic oppression, which will make them feel hopeless. As a seminar leader, I needed to be responsive to the teacher's fears of legal repercussions. Could we challenge stock stories and create counternarratives, teach from a culturally responsive and antiracist perspective, and still have teachers feel secure in their teaching positions?

One way we were able to challenge dominant perspectives was through the reading of *An Indigenous People's History of the United States: For Young People* by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. This book supports one of the key principles of antiracist teaching established by the Center for Antiracist Teaching (CARE): how to embrace historical truths. We explored multicultural literature written for young people through a critical lens, asking ourselves what stock stories are told in the United States and discussing how we can counter those narratives through and with multicultural literature that allows teaching for historical accuracy. For example, we looked at the history of women's suffrage in the United States and the influence Indigenous cultures had in shaping the women's movement. We read Sally Roesch Wagner's (2020) book called *We Want Equal Rights! How Suffragists Were Influenced by Haudenosaunee Women* and watched the documentary *Without a Whisper*. Wagner's work encourages the reader to "explore the little-known story of how these suffragists were inspired by women of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) who were guaranteed equal rights to men" (back cover).

Jordan: A teacher's acting: I sought to write this curriculum and participate in this seminar geared toward social justice because discussing ideals of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion has become controversial. I often see news articles and discussions about CRT. Typically this phrase is misused as a term that describes an educational curriculum where students are taught that White people are inherently oppressive to people of color and therefore should feel bad and be blamed for societal inequities. However, CRT, which is more than forty years old, merely means that I am obliged to teach history with accuracy and nuance.

We need culturally responsive curriculum because my students have incredibly unique life experiences. Students tell me stories I could not imagine. Some of these stories make me laugh with joy, while others break my heart. Students need exposure to unfamiliar stories, because these stories can act as metaphorical mirrors, windows, or sliding glass doors. This concept comes from Rudine Sims Bishop (1990), who says that stories can act as

mirrors by reflecting the student into the story. For many of my students, stories do not typically act as a mirror, because the protagonists do not reflect back my students' identities. Fortunately, this is becoming less of an issue as more children's and young adult literature is published by more diverse authors. This means that more children are finding themselves mirrored in literature than ever before. However, it also means that educators need to seek out these mirrors so as to let all children know that somewhere in literature, there is a specific place of comfort for them.

My intention with this unit was to begin students on a path of critically examining history through more than just the colonizers' lens. I wanted students to feel comfortable asking questions that push back on the typical narrative. And I wanted students to know that they are welcome to create their own vision for the future of their nation.

Imagining: Stories of Home and Place Seminar

Jeff: A professor's imagining: In December 2019, I felt that exploring the subject of "home" would support teacher and student reflection on the importance of family and kin, of community, of land, of culture, as central components of identity. I chose this thematic approach because it allowed us to consider identity/identities in a relational way. One of the values of reading Indigenous literatures is to see the world in different ways, and this includes how individuality is defined against the grain of dominant culture or western colonizing influences/forces. In addition to human-to-human relationality defined in terms of "I am who I am in relation to this person and this person and these people," relationality extends to the nonhuman world, to animals, plants, the land. Reading Diné and other Indigenous writers on the subject of "home," I hoped, would allow teachers to develop curriculum units that would engage their students in an exploration of self that was expansive.

Catrina: A teacher's imagining: I dedicated the curriculum unit I produced to Nora Kaibetoney, my adopted grandmother, who was a teacher, a role model, and an overall amazing Diné woman.

She left us all tragically in July 2020 during the first summer of the pandemic and while I was working on this curriculum project. It seemed fitting that I dedicate it to her considering the subject matter—exploring with my students the values that make us feel like we're home, that we belong. I must also acknowledge that my father taught me the beauty of being Diné. He was a husband and friend to my mother, a dependable father to his children, and a medicine man to our community. His belief in teaching children at a young age about Diné ways and kinship and clanship has impacted my life. He has shown the balance I can create in my life with Hózhó. These teachings have influenced me to become the woman, the loving mother, and the teacher I am today. My father is not living in the physical world, but his teaching within me still lives, and his presence carries on in the hearts of those who remember him. My father took the time to teach my girls when they were young. He shared stories, songs, and his teachings; he taught us all to look at our world through appreciation and balance.

Planning: Stories of Home and Place Seminar

Jeff: A professor's planning: Thematically, the topic would allow us all to collectively and individually reflect on some of the following questions: Who am I? Who/what defines me? How do I define myself? Where do I belong? To whom do I belong? What does it mean to belong? I wanted to center, most significantly, the Diné concept of K'é, which Lee (2014b) describes as the "integral system designed to understand the relationship that Diné peoples have to one another and all living things on Earth and in the universe" (p.182). Putting this understanding in the context of home helped us develop this extended definition: the story of home, *of who I am*, is also a story of who I am in relation to whom I belong to and who I am responsible for.

Catrina: A teacher's planning: Through my work with DINÉ, I wanted to develop a research-based Diné early childhood curriculum that focuses on Diné-specific content and culture. Engaging in culturally responsive teaching requires that teachers validate their students' cultures and use their

cultural knowledge to help students see cultural diversity as an asset that inspires them to become agents of change in their communities (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Children with strong cultural roots and a sense of self-identity and cultural identity will strive to their fullest potential.

Children with strong cultural roots and a sense of self-identity and cultural identity will strive to their fullest potential.

Berglund outlined some basics about K'é earlier, but let me give some in-depth and personal reflections on its importance in my life and in the lives of many Diné students. A new child in a Diné family is uniquely woven into a culture of kinship and clanship. Like a thread woven into a rug, a newborn child creates a story into a family lifeline. The knowledge of K'é, the Navajo language, Diné bizaad, and traditions are passed down through the next generation, and they must be respected and taught. All of these teachings are necessary for the survival of the traditional ways of the Diné people.

Acting: Stories of Home and Place Seminar

Jeff: A professor's acting: We began with some broad questions and generated some amazing lines of inquiry, some focused on the intricate wealth of intergenerational relations, as was evidenced in Herbert's unit. The following were some of the questions I shared during our second meeting to generate reflections about home:

1. Without using an address, describe how to reach your home.
2. Your daily routine: What is the first thing you do each morning?
3. Have you ever been "homesick" or "not at home" somewhere? Why?

In response, Darwin Clauschee, a participant in the seminar, writes, "My morning routine at [includes] watering the plants . . . we have around the house. The vine overtaking our chain link fence is special,

because I transplanted it from my late shima sani (my grandma), around her hooghan many years ago. . . . Now, here I stand outside my own home, older, content, and preoccupied in the magic light of the sunrise . . . watering this vine."

When three teachers dropped out due to the pressures of the pandemic, we made some adaptations about the ways that literature would be used within curriculum unit development. One example beyond Herbert's: A seventh- and eighth-grade special education math/science teacher (Diné) found a way to connect the thematic thread of "relationality" to a curriculum unit on Navajo Nation forest stewardship and predatory firewood collection and sales.

Catrina: A teacher's acting: I teach in a pre-school program housed in a high school on the Navajo Nation. I work hard to educate young children about their world, but I wanted to make a bigger impression and celebrate my students' culture and Diné being. The mindset of a child today is no different from my father's time, but today in public schools, we are given the opportunity to celebrate our culture, unlike the previous generations. Both the school system and Diné families support traditional values and teachings.

My pre-K class (ages three to four) is a mixture of children from the community (usually 75 percent are Diné) from different economic backgrounds. The families I serve range from a nuclear family, single-parent family, extended family, step-family, grandparent family, even foster children.

In my curriculum unit, I guided students to consider how Diné culture connects to both home and school, about their identity, their family, and building new relationships in our world. Specifically, the Navajo Nation educational standard my unit focused on is K'é dóó nitsa'ha'kees dóó nahat'a'na'asgóó iina' bee siih hasnigo a'doolnítł, developing an understanding of a Diné way of life. I was able to inspire interest in many concepts in Diné bizaad (Navajo language) in discovery areas, through small group activities, readings, and songs, and guest speakers also deepened interest. A topic as seemingly simple as the weather provided students rich connections to deeply rooted cultural

traditions. And while students just began to skim the surface, this knowledge is in the service of what Edward Little (Navajo medicine man) says when he teaches us, “Our traditional Navajo grandparents taught . . . we are of nature, we are nature, we come from nature, we go back to nature. . . . The Earth, nature, and the universe communicate with each other by electromagnetic energy, which is our sense of spirituality. That’s our identity and life” (personal communication, September 8, 2020). And in teaching about traditional jewelry, my students glimpse something passed down through generations. As my adopted grandmother, Nora Kaibetoney, taught me, “Diné jewelry is spiritual as it shows health and prosperity and some jewelry will tell a story.” She was told as a young girl that Asdzáá Nádleehé (Changing Woman) would wear her turquoise and shell jewelry, and she lived in a turquoise home on the West horizon. She created Diné children and guided them with her songs and prayers. She was a woman, and women in Diné carry the family tradition and value because we are a matrilineal society. Nora also stated that “jewelry is used for prayers and ceremonies, the elements in the jewelry is from Mother Earth and it brings identity and vitality.” Nora, who also learned to weave as a young girl, noted how the subject of weaving introduces the story of how Na’ashjé’íí Asdzáá (Spider Woman) helped Diné people by protecting them and teaching the process of weaving using wool, coloring, and a loom. “Diné woven rugs can share stories, places, and a way of life,” she shared with me, and that is what my curriculum unit attempts to do as well (personal communication, May 20, 2020).

Imagining: Writing and the Specificity of Place Seminar

Nicole: A professor’s imagining: This seminar explored how to combine the experiences of a particular place with larger, more global ones in a braided essay. The idea behind the seminar is that writing from an individual perspective invites a reader into a unique view of a historical event or global concern. By conveying a personal point of view, a reader understands that there is not just one version of events—that everyone’s point of view

matters. In this seminar, teachers wrote their stories and, from them, developed curriculum units that encouraged students to tell their personal stories in the context of a larger social happening.

The Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in “The Danger of a Single Story,” a popular TED Talk, describes how one version of a story can quash others. To repeat the dominant narrative “is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me.” One of the early conclusions of our discussions is that when teaching, the students often deliver received stories because the students assume the teacher wants to hear the perceived “correct” or “dominant” story. So when students read history from a distant, third-person point of view, the students write the story with the same detached, third-person, impersonal perspective.

In this seminar, teachers wrote stories about their own lives and how the unique details of their stories connected with larger issues. One teacher wrote about the healing powers of sagebrush and how the climate crisis may change access to these important plants. Another wrote about the history of the Navajo Preparatory Academy and how its boarding school past makes an impact on its present. Another teacher wrote about the birthing tree under which her mother buried her placentas. These essays pushed back against the dominant narrative, creating a path for the teachers’ students to do the same. By focusing on putting their individual bodies in a particular place, each writer established her own idiosyncratic voice and experience.

DeLyssa: A teacher’s imagining: The DINÉ seminar supported my effort to design and develop a curriculum that was authentic to my students and the content in New Mexico history. The short writing exercises we worked on in the seminar workshops became one of the activities I used in my own classroom. One of the essays read in the seminar focused on specific words and vocabulary, and I created a lesson focused on researching the etymology of phrases and words unique to New Mexico. The students’ reflection essays focused on their reactions and opinions about the topics and one extensive lesson on intense observation about specific

places. I spent more time on units that focused on the viewpoint about specific events like the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, the Navajo Long Walk, and the Indian Boarding School experience.

Planning: Writing and the Specificity of Place Seminar

Nicole: A professor's planning: I encourage writers to "put their bodies in a place." Empathetic narrators need both a body and a place from which to tell their story. If a reader can envision someone walking down a dirt road, stopping to scratch their ankle, bending over, noticing a tiny lizard on a rock, then the reader is effectively walking along with them, scratching their ankle, bending over, noticing a tiny lizard on a rock. That lizard, that rock, that narrator are each securely located in a place. In an essay that braids research and personal narrative, those personal details transport the reader. But now you must associate meaning to those details, so next to that personal story, you set a researched paragraph. Suddenly, your personal story is reshaped by these new facts, and the facts of your personal story cut into the hard statistics of your paragraph.

In this seminar, we showed how specific objects can evoke a particular place and the associations that constellate around that place. For example, Robin Wall Kimmerer, a member of the Potawatomi tribe and a botanist, writes in *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2015) about "goldenrod" as a focused object. Kimmerer shows goldenrod through the lenses of botany, history, cultures, religions, philosophies, even physics. Goldenrod is inextricably linked to place and the human understanding of that place. By understanding how one physical object can be expressed through multiple disciplines and points of view, teachers not only emerged from the seminar with a braided essay of their own but also saw how concrete and material details underpin the long histories and multiple stories that make up our understanding of place, helping to broaden, if not shatter, dominant narratives.

DeLyssa: A teacher's planning: *Hweeldi* is the Navajo word for the Navajo Long Walk; it was a terrible time that ended the conflict between the Navajo people and the United States federal government.

The United States military scouted and forced the Navajo/Diné people to surrender. The people were marched about 300 miles east to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, and they were forced to stay in this "camp" for four years. The Navajo people suffered greatly, as there were little to no resources to sustain the Navajo and the United States military soldiers. The history textbook in my high school covered this history in about three pages with illustrations.

It seemed like the academic history I learned at school was distant and sanitized, while the oral tradition often included personal details and emotions. The Navajo oral stories included the intimate details about the land and the Navajo people's relationship to the land. As a high school student, we weren't encouraged to explore cultural perspectives or personal connections to the land and culture. We seemed separated from history. "History" happened away from us, and it was often about the dominant United States history and culture.

Acting: Writing and the Specificity of Place Seminar

Nicole: A professor's acting: Perhaps it's thanks to the pandemic's challenges that we quickly delved into stories about our lives. Even if we couldn't put our actual bodies in place, we could communicate how our classes and our teaching were being transformed. We learned a new kind of responsiveness that transcended distance and geographical boundaries and made us close peers because of our shared difficulties. This differed from other seminars because teachers wrote their own essays about their relationship to place before they incorporated what they experienced from the seminar into their curriculum.

Teachers wrote about where they came from and how place shaped their identities. Mary wrote about the doorframe of her house and the horse she groomed. Crystal wrote about how yoga taught her to stay in the moment. Nancy wrote about the cottonwood tree in front of the Navajo prep school where she taught and felt haunted by the souls of the students who had attended when it was a forced-education Indian boarding school. Priscilla wrote about sagebrush and how its many uses form a part of Indigenous ways of knowing. DeLyssa wrote,

“Sheep manure. I wear a different pair of shoes because the smell stays on the fabric, and it does not simply fade away. . . . It does not stay long as the wind and monsoon rains carry the manure towards the yellow-white sandstone canyon.” The teachers were then able to help their students “put their bodies in place,” guiding them through writing that became visceral when the students wrote about their connection to that history.

DeLyssa: A teacher’s acting: I wanted my students to have a meaningful experience with history that illustrated their personal history and views based on the content we studied throughout the semester. The braided essay allowed the students to review connections they have written about in their previously written pieces and then make revisions. Their final draft was a braided essay on how New Mexico had influenced their life.

When I asked students to review various credible accounts, including videos and stories told by descendants of these events, and then reflect, it was evident in their responses. Many shared that they did not know about the events from Indigenous perspectives. Several students asked family members about these events. One student interviewed her grandfather who had attended a residential school. He shared his mixed emotions about the punishment he received when speaking the Navajo language and his positive friendships and experiences. And another Navajo student shared that he viewed the Navajo as “conquered,” because that was how it was presented in his history lessons. But after reading different accounts like *Bighorse the Warrior* and Navajo interviews, he wrote, “I saw the Navajo people change from *subdued* to brave and courageous . . . I truly liked this unit, not only because I learned more about the Long Walk, but because of how deeply I looked at my own life.” Students also wrote beautiful descriptions about their connection to a specific place. One student wrote: “As I walk around, I see the old hogans that were knocked down, different kinds of chipped pottery scattered, and the rocks with fossils in them. All around me, in one place the animals walk and birds fly. I am comforted that He took His time as I see the many different details in this one section of this canyon.”

Reflecting, Assuring, Synthesizing

Begay, Herbert, and Morales have all participated in the DINÉ multiple years, and many of their colleagues similarly return year after year to this professional learning community. They often recruit other teachers to join them, and most take on new leadership roles in their schools and communities. In a similar way, Berglund, Castagno, Hansen, and Walker sustain their involvement each year, evolve their own teaching and writing as a result of the learning they experience with teachers, and bring additional colleagues into this collective work. We continue to be intentional about our centering of cultural responsiveness, and we simultaneously continue to expand the network of teachers and faculty committed to all that the DINÉ represents.

One student interviewed her grandfather who had attended a residential school. He shared his mixed emotions about the punishment he received when speaking the Navajo language and his positive friendships and experiences.

What we all discovered was the usefulness of ELA in helping us to think through, write about, and develop curriculum for the complex issues we tackled in our seminars. In these seminars, we collectively engaged writing, cultural and historical memory, context, oral narratives, literature, and film, and we learned to draw specific examples from our experiences to convey how empathy, understanding, and voice can be developed through our writing. Because the DINÉ designs seminars with a strong emphasis on cultural responsiveness, we were able to think about how culture and identity shape our stories. Cultural responsiveness was cultivated by bringing together preK–12 teachers from Navajo-serving schools, university faculty, and Diné elders and knowledge holders. The DINÉ intentionally positions each of these stakeholders as experts with important knowledge to share, and we strive to consistently center Diné experiences, epistemologies, histories, landscapes, and language. By thinking about how we make our stories reflect our unique and diverse backgrounds, we push back

against dominant narratives. Each individual story can begin to question the dominant, singular narrative. And collectively, the stories produced by teachers in the DINÉ shatter the master narrative.

Cultural responsiveness is underscored by bringing together teachers and faculty members from various backgrounds, but we also practiced disciplinary responsiveness. The language arts inform every discipline in that the strongest stories are told with the most specific, experiential detail. Our social studies and history teachers adapt principles of ELA teaching to provide new ways for their students to respond to assignments. Frames of reference like personal, cultural, specific, individual become commonplace terms that allow students to write in ways particularly relevant to them. That relevance is the manifestation of the responsiveness these seminars made room for. Cultural, disciplinary, audience, age group, COVID, distance learning are each threads of a story that provide an opportunity to practice responsiveness. As the teachers and leaders adapted their seminars, their writing, and their curriculum, they modeled what they hoped to teach their students: that telling your story matters and the more you tell it with specific detail, evident experience, and with a mind to audience, the richer and thicker the story of our shared narrative grows.

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INTO THE CLASSROOM

readwritethink
Lisa Storm Fink  **NCTE**

Use this activity from *ReadWriteThink.org* to revive elements of the oral tradition. Have students interview older family members to learn about family stories that may have been passed down

through generations. Students may wish to share these stories in class or write them down and illustrate them.

<https://bit.ly/3POgeem>