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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a microethnographic pilot study describing, analyzing, and interpreting how culture is transmitted and retained in one Navajo public school system. The study is both historically and educationally significant because it presents a portrait of the everyday realities of art teaching and learning in a school system during a period of transition as new teachers were hired, and new programs were developed. The aim of the study was to understand education in this context and to come to know the participants in order to offer a vivid education picture and some sensitive insights. Comparisons suggested that Navajo art education had changed greatly and was centered around the student as a Navajo and an American. Conflicts in the meanings of culture and education existed between the Navajo conception of education as a process of cultural preservation and harmony and the dominant culture emphasis on cultural change. The quality and quantity of art teachers have improved greatly. Even Anglo teachers adopted some Navajo teaching strategies such as being patient, flexible, gentle, and offering more individual technical and perceptual guidance, to relax and exchange good natured teasing. The Navajo word for teaching is showing. The culture teachers showed more than just technique. They shared ethical values like persistence, self-esteem, sharing, and the aesthetics of beauty. They were more repetitive in teaching and used more personal story telling, an appropriate art history method to adopt. (DK)

The Transmission and Reproduction of Art Culture in One Navajo Public School System

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Running Head: TRANSMISSION/REPRODUCTION OF ART CULTURE IN NAVAJO

The Transmission and Reproduction of Culture in One Navajo Public School System

A variety of pedagogical and aesthetic issues concerning Amerindian **art** education have been raised by art education researchers (Zastrow, 1980; Stuhr, 1986) in general and about Navajo education in specific (Kravagna, 1971; Bryant, 1974; Kolber, 1974). Some of these issues include the need for culturally-relevant curricula, based on indigenous tribal values, the use of appropriate teaching strategies to suit their learning styles, and the necessity of free choice to become assimilated or to remain distinct.

This microethnographic pilot study describes, analyses, and interprets how culture is transmitted and retained in one Navajo public school system. This study is both historically and educationally significant because it presents a portrait of the everyday realities of art teaching and learning in a school system during a period of transition. The transition involves the hiring of new art teachers and the development of new programs in a major growth center. The aim of this pilot study is to **understand** education in this context and to come to know the participants thoroughly in order to offer a vivid educational picture and some sensitive insights.

Lack of time is a limitation; however, results from the pilot study are compared with initial findings from the second year study, still under completion. Initial insights are idiosyncratic and should be respected for their uniqueness. Such early insights are important for future comparisons in checking cultural biases and in generating propositions for this continuing three-year study.

Theoretical Framework: Geertz's Cultural Interpretation

Culture is commonly understood as a dynamic complex of knowledge, beliefs, mores, customs, laws, and social institutions. In contrast, Geertz (1973) views culture as a web of interpretive significations. Thus, to understand a culture is to see what participants say about it. This methodological stance is called ethnography or more accurately "thick description." In essence, ethnography is an explanation of another's explanation. Analysis, then, is the sorting out "the structures of signification" (p. 9). Cultural interpretation is never complete, but rather an on-going dialogue. Dialogue is a give-and-take comparison of ideas, as researcher and participants together search for significant or hidden insights. According to Clifford (1988), "A culture is concretely, an open-ended, creative dialogue of subcultures, of insiders and outsiders, of diverse factions (p. 46). In another sense, it is an historical understanding, because cultures are always in dynamic transition.

Microethnographic Methodology

Microethnography, also known as participant observation, is a multimethod, multiconceptual, and multiperson methodology (Pohland, 1972). Data collection, content/comparative analysis, and time-sampling methods are used. Data were collected primary through note-taking, some photography, and informal interviewing. Audiotaping was not successful because participating teachers and students felt uncomfortable with the microphones and students spoke so softly that their voices were inaudible. Content analysis and time sampling followed. Content analysis is the search for dominant borrowed or emerging concepts which were coded in the margins of my daily notes. Time sampling, a method of timed note-taking with a stop watch, was used to record instructional behaviors and their

frequency (Barker, 1968).

Initially, data was analyzed by coding the data line-by-line into concepts on the computer with the Hyperqual Macintosh program (Padilla, 1989), a version of Hypercard. Some concepts were borrowed, such as types of teaching (substantive, managerial, in-process, non-functional) behaviors and their meanings (Stokrocki, 1990). Substantive instruction is the formal teaching of a new art concept or skill; appraisal behavior is the process of evaluating student product or process; managerial behavior consists of distribution, cleanup, and discipline rites; and nonfunctional instruction is behavior not related to the art lesson. Other concepts emerged, such as "teasing" interactions. Comparative analysis is the interrelation of conceps to form tentative insights. Participants, administrators, reseachers, and Navajo comments are included. (Visitations occurred nine times, full school days, once a month, 72 hours total, during the school year.)[2.]

School System Demographics and Philosophy

The Running Water Unified School System services three towns in northeastern Arizona and over 4, 271 children. The school system is state affiliated with a Navajo-dominated school board. The employment rate is high (77%) and the school system is a major employer. The arec, however, has been designated as a major growth center by the Tribal government. The nearby canyon had been proclaimed as a National Monument, and tourism provided a growing source of economic strength (Arizona Department of Commerce, 1991). The new philosophy of Navajo education is centered around promoting student self-esteem, parent/community partnership, language/culture maintenance, and the excelerated development of tools and skills to live in a dual society.

Participants

Every school has a certified art teacher. This pilot study focuses mainly on the Anglo teachers: the new junior high (Mr. K) and primary (Mr. D) teachers and high school art teacher (Mr. T), recently transferred to the high school. Observations of the new Navajo culture teacher (Mr. E) and the new Navajo (1992) elementary art teacher (Ms. W) are also included.[3] Students are bilingual, but non-traditional of low socioeconomic background, and many on welfare.

Findings: Understanding Navajo Art Education

A school system in transition, rapidly expanding art programs, a vocational and studio emphasis: The State of Arizona art consultant recommended The Running Water Unified School District as the most amenable for my study. The school system had a separate vocational building and program in which high school students learned the graphic arts--photography, bookbinding, computer graphics, small scale printing operations, and silversmithing. Lack of jobs was a major problem and graduates needed to leave the reservation to find employment or become self-sufficient in some art-related field. The fine art program included four 50-minute drawing, one painting, and one ceramics courses at the high school level. The junior high art program consisted of a daily, 45-minute, nine-week rotation of art courses. At the elementary and primary schools, art was offered once a week for 40-minutes. Art teaching was predominately studio-oriented and encouraged student self-expression. In the past, cut-and-paste activities dominated at the elementary school. The art teachers regarded the old program as culturally-irrelevant and were developing a new one.[4]

How is Culture Transmitted?

Technical and perceptual in-process appraisal instruction

4

dominant at all levels: Prior to 1868, Navajo children were educated by their immediate and extended family about Navajo ways, rules, and taboos. Skill repetition, demonstration, and adult critique were the dominant educational methods in this once nomadic community of sheepherders and weavers. Such individual, technical, in-process appraisal still dominated. In-process appraisal is the informal everyday monitoring of student process and product (Stokrocki, 1990). The primary and Navajo art teachers interacted more with students than the Anglo secondary ones. Mr. D at the primary level and Ms. W, the Navajo elementary art teacher, spent nearly 50% of their time with this informal appraisal of students at work. In contrast, the junior high teacher (Mr. K) spent 31%, and the high school instructor (Mr. T) interacted only (9%) of the instructional time. Erickson and Mohatt (1982) first videotaped and studied communication differences in Native American and Anglo teachers. They noticed that Native American teachers spent most of their time circulating the room and giving individual attention. Ms. W constantly repeated directions and concepts with students.

Little formal art history, Navajo guest artists, written not oral questioning: Neither Navajo nor American art history were covered due to lack of appropriate strategies. The high school art teacher, primarily trained in drawing and painting, felt that he had little exposure to teaching art history. The closest large university, where he received his degree, trained art teachers with a studio emphasis, although State mandates were changing curriculum demands. Art teachers, however, often invited professional Navajo artists into the schools. The junior high art teacher, for example, arranged for his students to work with a Navajo mural painter and to react to the work of a guest Hopi sculptor in the form of a short answer worksheet, which emphasized technique and self- expression.

Wax, Wax, and Dumont (1964/1989) suggest that Navajo students do not like to recite publicly or be placed in academic competitive situations with classmates, so the researchers suggest motivation by peer groups instead of individuals. The Navajo are extremely sensitive to shame or ridicule. I noticed that primary students, however, had no problem responding publicly to artworks (Mr. D's short art appreciation lesson on Dali).

The culture teacher and Navajo art and values clarification: The school system hired Navajo "culture teachers" to instruct students in their history and traditional arts and to promote ethnic pride. I observed the full time, elementary culture teacher, Mr. E, thank his students, "I grew up here and went to college. You made this year very enjoyable for me. Try hard in the future and don't quit." On his blackboard was written the following inspiring message, "Students, you are beautiful as these beads. They are special like you. I see shiny, sparkly, happy colors." At the primary school, I also noticed that Navajo grandmothers demonstrated traditional weaving to young children, who made their own samplers. The ethical values of persistence, self-esteem building, sharing, and the aesthetics of beauty (character) were promoted.

In time, I noticed that Mr. D, who was informally coached by the culture teacher, began to interact more (teasingly) with students. Informal bantering resulted, such as comments on hairdos. Mr. K, the soccer coach, also joked more with his class. Navajo teasing is well-documented (Kluckhorn & Leighton, 1962). Both new teachers acknowledged that they were becoming more relaxed with their jobs and accepted by students.

How is Art Culture Retained?

Independent high school students and observational drawing: Since Navajo students were not formally evaluated in art, retention of

knowledge was hard to determine. Students' art-making process therefore was documented. High school students, for example, quietly and independently worked during art class.[5] At times, they stared into space for the entire period or flipped through a book for an idea, even after the teacher had individually motivated them. Hall (1959) realized that the Navajo regarded just plain sitting as doing something. Through a learning style survey, La Pointe (1990) confirmed that Amerindian students are more independent than Anglos in regards to teacher contact, but less than Asian students. Some of this distance can be regarded as a sign of respect to elders.

More specifically, this preferred independence was coupled with an observational learning style, evolved from the Navajo nomadic way of life. Troeh (1989) reported that Native American students have a **superior power of perception in recognition memory.** Recognition memory is a learning tool which increases the identification of images and increases student retention. In drawing, this ability may be a helpful tool in rendering images well. For example, one student who won an award for his 12' chalk mural of faces in the annual arts festival, acknowledged that he was highly influenced by his grandmother's colorful weavings and his sister's drawings. He mentioned various feelings and memorized faces, which came to him as he worked on the mural all semester.

The Influence of Copying or Modeling: At all levels, students frequently imitated traditional Navajo imagery, which included landscapes, dwellings, animals, especially horses, and the sacred eagle. In their testing of Navajo children nearly five decades ago, Leighton and Kluckhohn (1947) reported the frequency of such related subject matter in the Navajo children's free drawings. These subjects included "landscapes (38%),

dwellings (17%), and animals (11%)" (p. 17). The persistence of such imagery reveals a strong desire to preserve traditional symbols. Crapanzano (1972) noted that some children's traditional drawings are considerably skillful; others are not. The Navajo had their stereotypes too and wanted to expand their techniques to make these symbols more meaningful today.

On the other hand, students were also fond of copying popular American imagery. Primary children portrayed popular "child art" stereotypes, such as the sun-in-the-corner of a paper, hearts and flowers, triangular houses, lollipop trees, and rainbows. Mr. D found they learned these images from their classroom teachers. Indeed, walking around the school, I noticed classroom teachers' mimeos and much holiday art. From the popular media, students copied drawings of pickup trucks, dinosaurs, and cartoons, noticeably the Ninja Turtles. When I asked some students why they were making Ninja Turtles, they replied, "Everyone is doing it." Popular cartoon influences were noted as early as 1947 by Leighton and Kluckhohn.

Kravagna (1971) earlier noticed the prevalence of copying by Navajo high school art students and warned that the Navajo child's tribal images must be maintained. Wilson and Wilson (1977) recognized the value of young people's copying behaviors, as a primary means of expanding visual sign making. They insist that all children be exposed to and imitate great cultural examples and not just popular ones. Navajo students' preference for copying two-dimensional images and their keen observation must also be trained, especially in drawing three-dimensional relationships. As dominant culture children, Navajo children needed to be motivated to expand their popular and stereotypical imagery with Navajo and American contemporary master models.

Conclusions

From a microethnographic internal comparison of my findings in this transitional situation and an external comparison with the teaching situation of Navajo boarding schools two decades ago (Kravagna, 1971; Bryant, 1974; Kolber, 1971), insights suggest that Navajo art education has changed greatly and is centered around the student as a Navajo and an American. This exploratory study relates rich contextual information about a setting which sets the stage as the drama continues to unfold. Conflicts in the meanings of culture and education exist between the Navajo conception of education as a process of cultural preservation and harmony and the dominant culture emphasis on cultural change (Saville-Troike, 1984).

The quality and quantity of art teachers have greatly improved. Even though the observed art teachers were mostly Anglo, they have adopted some Navajo teaching strategies--to be patient, flexible, gentle (Kolber, 1974); to offer more individual technical and perceptual guidance (in-process appraisal); to relax and exchange good-natured teasing. From a cross-site analysis of several studies of pedagogy in small-scale remote communities, Osborne (1991) postulates that culturally-responsive teachers need not come from the same minority group as the students they teach. Such responses are learned adaptations.

The Navajo word for teaching is showing and the culture teachers, however, "show more" than just technique. They share such ethical values as persistence, self-esteem, sharing, and the aesthetics of beauty (character) They are more repetitive in teaching and use more personal story-telling, an appropriate art history method to adapt. More certified Navajo art teachers are needed.

Navajo children are traditionally more independent and imitative in their arts, but not more talented. The arts, however, are more supported and

valued by the Navajo culture and public school system. Clifford (1988) describes modern Amerindian identity as "a multivocalic surrealist collage of ideas continually negotiated in the dynamic context of tribal, pan-Indian, and dominant culture experience." Different types of Navajo students exist and their traditional imagery seems to be blending with more popular influences. Navajo students need motivation in art, intense mentoring, and knowledge of Navajo/American art history if they are to survive in a dualistic world.[6] Combined influences, however, reflect the Navajo's keen adaptation and accommodation abilities. The Navajo maintain their right to self-determination, even though they (Native Americans) have been criticized for assimilating American ways (Freedman et al, 1989).

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Footnotes

Added Notes

1. Tribal and BIA permission were not necessary to obtain since the school district administration granted permission to conduct the study and the collected data will become part of the art program. The school system is a separate entity under State jurisdiction with a predominant Navajo school board.
2. The drive to and from the reservation is approximately 14 hours. After teaching classes at the university, arrival time is 12 midnight. Limited time and energy and inclement weather curtailed visitations to once a month, rather than once a week as originally planned.
3. Rigid certification requirements continue to bar the Navajo from easily entering the teaching profession. The "culture" teacher, a para-professional, seems to be a workable temporary solution. The researcher was recently allowed to document the art teaching of the new female elementary art teacher, whose teaching will be the focus of the second major study--the Navajo viewpoint.
4. Art teachers are currently developing a formal sequential curriculum with supplemental art history lessons with help from the State Fine Arts consultant.
5. This researcher's presence may have prompted students to be quieter than usual because she is Anglo and a respected adult figure. The Navajo prefer to get to know someone well before revealing themselves. My presence also gave the high school art teacher extra managerial work and perhaps made him more cautious and shy. The art teachers and students seemed more open the second year.

** Due to limited space, supporting tables are not included. To obtain copies, write to the author at the School of Art, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287-1505.

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6. **Confirmation of Perceptions/Bias/Cultural Filters:** First drafts of the pilot study were submitted for clarification to the three participating art teachers that were studied, two Navajo college students as key informants, the new principal and assistant superintendent, and art educators who has done research in this context (Kolber, Kravagna). One art education professor, one elementary art teacher, and two graduate students, all of whom visited the reservation with me on different days, also offered their reflections. Negotiation occurred over correct interpretation of meanings; for example, the pilot study was corrected/titled the "Anglo View of Running Water" (Stokrocki, in press). This study was then sent out to five Navajo art teachers. One novice elementary art teacher responded and my second year study focused on her teaching. Another male Navajo art teacher at a Christian boarding school added additional ideas and will be visited in the Spring. Three Navajo art teachers did not respond. Initial assumptions are refuted and corrected. This research is a collective view of ideas and stands to be corrected with next year's new information.