

# “That’s Me on a Horse of Many Colors”: Native American College Students’ Self-Portraits as Academic Writers

Barbara Z. Komlos

*ABSTRACT: Native Americans are largely absent from the basic writing literature, yet their experiences and identity construction as emerging academic writers offer important insights for college writing instructors. This study addresses previous research on Native American college writers, the legacy of education and writing in Native communities, and the role of cultural identity and the connection between self and writing. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 students who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native enrolled at a public university and two tribal colleges. To generate discussion around writing identity and experiences, participants were asked to draw portraits depicting themselves as academic writers. Six themes emerged as representative of students’ identities as writers. Findings also highlight the influence of culture and community on writing perception, which are triangulated with results from semi-structured interviews with faculty and staff. Recommendations are provided for integrating Indigenous literacies into college composition curricula.*

*KEYWORDS: basic writing; college writing; identity; Native Americans; place-based pedagogies; qualitative research*

I had taught English as a Second Language (ESL) and developmental writing for several years before moving to Bozeman, Montana. There, I continued to teach ESL and basic writing, but also provided writing support to American Indian students who I came to learn have persistently low college graduation rates.<sup>1</sup> Almost three decades ago, George Ann Gregory, then an English instructor at Oglala Lakota College, noted that Native American students’ difficulties in producing acceptable academic writing serves as one of the major stumbling blocks to academic success. In working with American Indian students on their essays, I became intrigued by similarities

---

**Barbara Z. Komlos** teaches first-year composition at Montana State University in Bozeman, Montana. She facilitates faculty workshops around inclusive pedagogy and culturally responsive mentoring, and serves as a program evaluator. She has previously published in the *Tribal College Journal* and is a co-author of recent chapters in *Issues and Trends for Higher Education on best practices for recruiting and supporting Native American graduate students in STEM disciplines*.

in their writing styles with Generation 1.5 students I had previously taught. Initially, I aspired to conduct textual analyses of students’ writing; however, under the guidance of my doctoral advisor, I realized the need for a holistic understanding of American Indian college writers, which led me instead to explore their perceptions of and experiences with writing.

My subsequent conversations with students, faculty, and staff revealed ways in which Native students’ families, communities, and culture shape academic writing identities, and became the impetus for a Native-centered first-year composition course.<sup>2</sup> Before I share insights and pedagogical implications, I would like to situate my work within the field of composition/rhetoric, specifically basic writer identity construction. I draw upon existing research on Native American college writers, perspectives of Indigenous educators, and connections between cultural identity and writing to pave a path for including “Indigenous literacies” in college composition. Undertaking this challenge would extend an invitation to our Native students to engage in our classes without checking their identity at the door, and pedagogically offer opportunities to expand definitions of “literacy” and explore Indigenous thinking and rhetoric. Composition studies has yet to come to terms with the paradox of teaching Native Americans to become proficient in wielding a tool of their colonization. I propose that by recognizing this reality and helping students to appropriate writing on their own terms, we can introduce a new chapter in our discursive history.

In discussing culture and identity, an important caveat is that American Indians identify culturally along a continuum from being “traditional”—knowledgeable about their tribal language, immersed in their traditional ways, and having grown up on tribal land—to the other end of the spectrum of having limited or no exposure to their language or tribal traditions and having grown up in an urban community. In this study, I asked participants to use their own criteria to define how culturally traditional they considered themselves to be. Based on their descriptions, such as participating in ceremony, or speaking their tribal language, I created four categories: (a) very, (b) fairly, (c) somewhat, and (d) less, as one way to identify possible patterns in students’ narratives around writing. Terry Huffman finds that a high degree of traditionalism positively influences Native students’ identity and confidence in college. Barbara Monroe explains that for American Indians, defining identity entails “an intimate, coterminous weave of personal autonomy, family lineage, and ancestral land” (324).

In this essay, I draw from the findings in my study to illustrate students’ emerging identities as academic writers, and the role of culture in shaping

their writing. In line with Roz Ivanič's model of writer identity, one of the most interesting findings that emerged in this study was with respect to the authorial self. Among the students, perceived sense of self as an author spanned descriptions of "having voice" to a rejection of identifying as a writer. Specifically, depicting and describing themselves as academic writers proved challenging for some participants. Students' self-portraits provided the initial clue that they were aware to varying degrees of themselves as writers and what being an academic writer meant.

In her 1999 *JBW* essay, "Investigating our Discursive History: *JBW* and the Construction of the 'Basic Writer's' Identity," Laura Gray-Rosendale notes efforts to shift the field away from the diagnosis-cure model. In her 2006 follow-up review, the author identifies three new approaches to the construction of basic writing student identity: 1) in situ; 2) theory, academic discourse, and/or history reformer; and 3) set of practices in action. Gray-Rosendale places her essay on Native American writers, "Rethinking the Basic Writing Frontier," in the category of context-dependent theorizations of basic writers' identities. Similarly, I maintain that identities of Native writers hold the power to reform our theories, and offer place-based considerations for practice. For example, tribal college students are likely to have different attitudes toward and experiences with writing than Native students at a predominantly white institution (PWI). I am particularly interested in how cultural factors in different learning contexts influence Native college students' experiences with and attitudes toward writing, and consequently shape their writing identities. I recognize that the concept of culture in Indigenous contexts is not separate from the histories of independent nations, the legacy of colonization, nor the persisting politics around indigeneity that together necessitate a unique framework for conceptualizing the academic writing identities of Native students.

A great deal can be learned from Native American students' perceptions of writing, and of themselves as writers to inform current theories and pedagogical approaches. Only a glimpse is available into their attitudes toward writing (D. Wilson) as previous research has been preoccupied with learning styles (Macias; More; Swisher and Deyhle; Van Hamme) and effective teaching strategies (Frestedt and Sanchez; Wescott), approaches that tend to reinforce the deficit model. Thus, not surprisingly, Native students have been marginalized in basic writing research and sometimes automatically tracked into remedial English based on tribal affiliation, and labeled as having ESL issues (Gray-Rosendale et al.). A concerted effort to understand Native students' writing development and experiences with college composition

is long overdue. Continuing to lump Native writers together with all basic writers means ignoring the unique cultures and languages of the more than 560 federally-recognized tribes within the United States, consequences of their systematic defrauding by means of the written word, and the assimilationist practices of Western education that persist today. If we acknowledge that “learning to write is always ongoing, situational, and involving cultural and ideological immersion” (Scott 48), then we need to examine the ways in which our classrooms might be promoting assimilation by restricting Native students to a dominant discourse or worldview. For example, the contrast between Western linear and Native circular thinking (Fixico) can manifest in students’ struggles to write according to a linear process (Chávez; Macias). A Native student’s “disorganized” essay could very well be a manifestation of circular thinking, and such a recognition can help both instructor and student transform what seem to be writing deficits into assets. Thus, our conceptual framework must account for Indigenous ontologies.

While we can expect Native “basic writers” to share characteristics of other basic writers, we need to better understand what sets them apart—not to address deficiencies, but rather to identify strengths and assets. Sweeney Windchief and Darold Joseph remind us that postsecondary institutions still maintain assimilationist practices that imply a need for Indigenous students to set aside their identity in order to succeed. The authors advocate for a recognition of the unique cultural and linguistic traits of students as assets rather than deficits. Bryan Brayboy points out that the oral tradition, the Indigenous vehicle for the transmission of knowledge and culture, has not always been valued or privileged in Western education. As a result, American Indians have often struggled with acquiring academic language, and have therefore been viewed as deficient. It is encouraging that the field of composition studies is beginning to embrace the notion that people’s difficulties with writing are not necessarily a result of a lack of intelligence or limited literacy skills, but rather a disconnect with participating in a particular community (Roozen). Thus, we should consider how our course content and personal assumptions and expectations with respect to writing might be alienating Native students. Or in more positive terms, we need to ask ourselves how to recognize and draw upon students’ cultural assets, such as orality, relationality, connection to land and water, and respect for elders. Ray Barnhardt and Angayuqaq Kawagley propose that Indigenous ways of knowing and Western formal education can be blended to create a system of education in which Indigenous students not only survive, but thrive, academically.

The influence of cultural identity on writing practices can be situated within our current conceptualizations of writing. In his discussion of a threshold concept about identities, Tony Scott posits that if we subscribe to the understanding that “writing is an ideological, socially involved practice” (50), then by extension we need to recognize that writers are not separate from the writing they produce. In fact, as Kevin Roozen argues, the act of writing is less about using a particular skill set than about developing a sense of who we are. Culture partly defines our students, but their identities and identifications do not necessarily produce positive experiences in the real world or in academic writing. While international students may perceive their culture as assets in their writing (Cadman; Fisher), historically marginalized minorities are more likely to have experiences that attempt to negate their cultural identities and rhetoric. As Barbara Monroe explains, “because discourse and identity are mutually constituent, involuntary minorities are even more likely [than immigrants] to actively maintain their traditional ways with words as acts of resistance against cultural erosion and loss” (323). Therefore, exploring the intersections of Native Americans students’ cultural and writing identities is important for understanding their writing practices and development. Moreover, Indigenous epistemologies can play a powerful role in Native students’ “survivance” (to borrow the term from Gerald Vizenor) in the construction of their academic writing identities, articulation of what they want from writing, and reframing of assignments.

What American Indians want from writing, or conversely what they don’t want, was explored at length by Scott Lyons almost two decades ago and subsequently advanced by others. Lyons’ “rhetorical sovereignty” aims to restore Native communities’ faith in writing that was repeatedly compromised by the hundreds of treaties dishonored by Whites and then by boarding school experiences, and to reframe writing as an important tool that can empower Native peoples. Rebecca Gardner uses the lens of rhetorical sovereignty to interpret findings about the writing processes and awareness of language agency of four American Indian college students. As an instructor, she hopes that students use their writing to reflect on their lives, cultures, and roles in shaping them. In a similar vein, Gloria Dyc proposes a tribal-specific literacy fusing oral traditions and essayist literacy: “one that embraces the cultural values and language practices of the people and ultimately empowers the learner” (212). Similarly, Christie Toth draws upon David Gold’s “locally responsive pedagogy” (6-7) to promote social justice in her basic writing course at Diné College. It is noteworthy that Toth’s tribal college context and mission drive her pedagogical decisions to structure her

basic writing course around “the exigencies of U.S. settler colonialism” (4). She invites students to consider the relevance of writing in their lives and to use it to further the interests of their communities given the structures and ideologies of the settler state that attempt to obscure the existence of Indigenous peoples and/or prevent their survival as distinct nations and cultures. My aim is to build upon this rich discourse around academic survivance and these culturally affirming and context-specific pedagogies of literacy. Incorporating Indigenous literacies into Basic Writing as a field has the potential to not only affirm and empower Native student writers, but also enable composition instructors and their students to gain a better understanding of and appreciation for Indigenous thinking and rhetoric within specific historical and place-based contexts.

### **Methods: A Writer Identity Model for Research**

As writing instructors can attest, student identity formation unfolds through academic writing. Romy Clark and Roz Ivanić in their seminal work, “The Politics of Writing,” assert, “[w]riting cannot be separated from the writer’s identity” (134). Likewise, Theresa Lillis postulates, “meaning making is not just about making texts, but is also about the making of our selves, in a process of becoming” (48). In her study, Gardner asks her Native American participants to imagine how people in their lives would define who they are, and then to describe those identities with the help of “mind maps.” Their exploration and positioning of self serves as a starting point for all writing. Similarly, I aim for students to reflect on how their identities and corresponding “lenses” by which they make sense of the world shape what and how they write, and also how they see themselves as writers.

Ivanić’s writer identity model—consisting of the autobiographical self, the discursive self, and the writer’s authorial presence in the text—is embedded in the writer’s socio-cultural context. For Ivanić, a writer’s “voice” is reflected in the decisions made regarding language (discursive self) and content (authorial self). As Barbara Bird beautifully explains, Ivanić recognizes that for students to develop a “holistic and authentic writer identity rather than a superficial, mimicked writer performance” (66), they must engage in negotiating what values or roles pertaining to writing they choose to adopt as well as reject. I apply Ivanić’s model in combination with the concept of “survivance” to interpret findings from my study about the writing decisions and identity constructions of Native writers. In particular, I am curious to what extent and in what ways students are blending their autobiographical

identities (life stories, cultural influences) with their academic ones. In the discursual dimension, I am looking for interpretations of expectations with regard to academic writing conventions. Finally, in the authorial component, I explore confidence not only in terms of effectiveness as a writer, but also the extent to which students recognize themselves as possessing the authority to voice their ideas as part of the larger academic discourse.

*Sample Group.* Given limited knowledge about Native American writers, I wanted to capture the lived experiences of students through qualitative analysis of narrative data. Furthermore, I aspired to engage with more than the two to six participants typical of research with Native American college writers. Such small samples problematize attempts to draw conclusions given the diversity of tribes, the cultural identity continuum, and tribal college versus other institutional contexts. Thus, after receiving IRB approval and signing memoranda of understanding with two tribal colleges, I elicited the help of either the dean of students at the tribal colleges or Native American student support services to ask first-year students who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native whether they were interested in taking part in the study. I ended up interviewing a total of twenty students (eight females and twelve males ranging in age from 18 to +40) representing eight different American Indian and Alaska Native tribes; nine of the twenty were enrolled at either Chief Dull Knife College (CDKC) or Little Big Horn College (LBHC), and eleven were enrolled in their first year at Montana State University (MSU), taking at least two courses requiring writing. CDKC and LBHC are located on their respective Indian reservations five to six hours from MSU, located in Bozeman. The tribal colleges each enroll less than 400 students while MSU enrolls more than 15,000. While the tribal colleges mainly serve their community members, MSU serves Native students from within and beyond Montana with a Native student population of around 3% at the time of this study. (For an in-depth look at the unique learning environments provided by tribal colleges and tribal college students' perceptions of PWIs, see Polacek).

*A Two-Part Interview.* The semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A) included a task for participants to draw a portrait depicting themselves as an academic writer, followed by completion of a flow-chart worksheet (see Appendix B) to shift the discussion to their writing process. By means of the self-portraiture, I aspired "to tap into an often underutilized yet powerful interface between the mind, emotions, and imagination to present ideas in representational signs and symbols" (Welkener and Baxter Magolda 580). Eliciting cartoon-like illustrations from writers about their literacy acts and

dispositions has rendered visible the linguistic and cultural struggles and metalinguistic awareness of multilingual basic writers (Wang), and articulated the challenges and successes with the process of writing across time-place-events (Prior and Shipka). The self-portraiture in this study invited unconditional depictions of self, including cultural representations, and unveiled participants’ understandings of and dispositions toward academic writing.

The flow-chart worksheet provided a common language to discuss the writing process and allowed for comparisons across participants<sup>3</sup>. It consisted of 30 bubbles with descriptions of what a writer might do as part of the writing process, such as “Talk to someone about assignment and ideas before starting to write”; “Imagine the whole ‘story’ (message or point) before beginning to write”; and “Read paper aloud to listen for mistakes.” I chose statements that characterized “good writers” based on the literature as well as a few that Native students might prefer given the use of oral language or more holistic thinking. There were also two blank bubbles for participants to write their own statements describing what they did as writers that were not already listed. Students selected the bubbles that described aspects of their writing process, and then elaborated, for example, whom they preferred to approach for writing help.

*Correlation.* Students’ identities and “voices” as writers and descriptions of their writing are presented in their own words. I employed the constant comparative method and member checking (Holton) to help corroborate findings. The study also included semi-structured interviews with faculty and staff at all three institutions who were involved with the teaching of writing or providing tutoring. After transcribing verbatim audiotaped data, I sent all participants their member-checking files via electronic mail, but also provided those who had a follow-up interview with a printed copy of the summary and asked them to review it at the beginning of the session. I used the QSR NVivo software program to aid organization, coding, and analysis of data<sup>4</sup> on the following aspects of participants’ writing experiences: motivations, definitions of success, prior experiences, self-concept, academic writing literacy, writing process, instructor feedback, and writing resources.

### **Students’ Self-Portraits Reveal their Writing Identities**

In line with qualitative research methodology, I looked for themes in participants’ illustrations, and their descriptions and explanations of what they had drawn. The following categories emerged that captured the



identities of these writers: (1) Seekers, (2) Feelers, (3) Planners, (4) Travelers, (5) Learners, and (6) Creators. These themes are not exclusive, and students' illustrations could potentially fit under more than one category; however, I found these categorizations to best capture the prevailing themes in students' narratives. While these categories reflect the degree of students' awareness of themselves as college writers at the time of the interview, they provide but a glimpse into their actual writing development. Participants had the option of providing a pseudonym to provide anonymity or using their real name to be acknowledged for their participation, which is more in line with Indigenous research methodologies in terms of addressing confidentiality in a manner desired by the research participants (S. Wilson). The tribal college students preferred their real names, while the students at the PWI chose pseudonyms.

***Seeking answers at the threshold of academic writing.*** The **Seekers**—Robert, Jim, Autumn, Lionel—(see Figures 1a-1d, respectively) were students who indicated that they were either unsure of what an academic writer was or how they themselves embodied that role. It is as if these students were at the threshold of their academic writing engagement, as if peering into the classroom to see how academic writing practices and expectations aligned with their own perceptions. An image of a sports writer popped into Robert's head when asked to draw himself as an academic writer. He connected the image with college writing because it depicted "using your own words," "telling a first-hand view of what's happening," and "relaying information," but he expressed uncertainty as to whether these were a part of academic writing. Similarly, Jim candidly shared his lack of understanding of academic writing and demonstrated a reluctance to self-identify as a writer, "I just drew a person who still doesn't know. I know there are certain types of writing; I haven't really found a comfortable way with writing my papers. I don't think I am much of a writer." Robert and Jim were first-semester students, and even though I talked with them on two separate occasions, they had limited experience regarding academic writing.

In terms of Ivanič's model, the Seekers do not have a developed authorial self and are still searching for who they are as writers. Autumn drew a picture of a classroom with a teacher at the front. When asked where she saw herself, she replied with a laugh, "In the hall." She admittedly was not eager to "come in." Lionel offered a big question mark as his self-portrait. When prodded as to how he could do so well in his composition course, he retorted that expressing his ideas in writing was not in his nature, but he could do it for an assignment. This suggests that Lionel may be more of a competent academic writer than he perceived himself to be or wanted to

“That’s Me on a Horse of Many Colors”



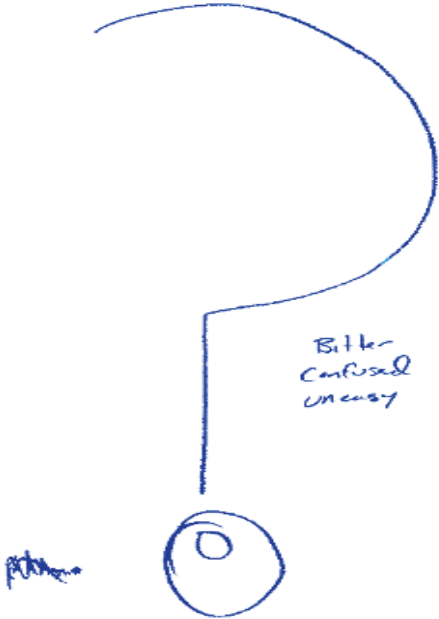
**Figure 1a.** A Seeker: Robert’s Self-portrait.



**Figure 1b.** A Seeker: Jim’s Self-portrait.



**Figure 1c.** A Seeker: Autumn's Self-portrait.



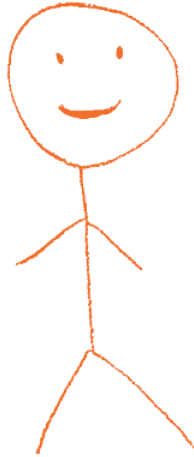
**Figure 1d.** A Seeker: Lionel's Self-portrait.

admit. The complexity of this student may also stem from a misunderstanding of academic writing since he expressed doubt that he would be able to write fiction given that he could only write based on personal experience. Therefore, it seems that Autumn and Lionel could not draw themselves as academic writers because they were unsure of their role and/or whether they wanted to embrace it. Clark and Ivanić explain that “feeling the right to exert a presence in the text is often related to the sense of power and status writers bring with them from their life-history” (152). Autumn’s detachment from the academic writing space, more than Lionel’s possible misconceptions, could signal cultural dissonance or rejection of an environment that otherwise does not feel open and accepting.

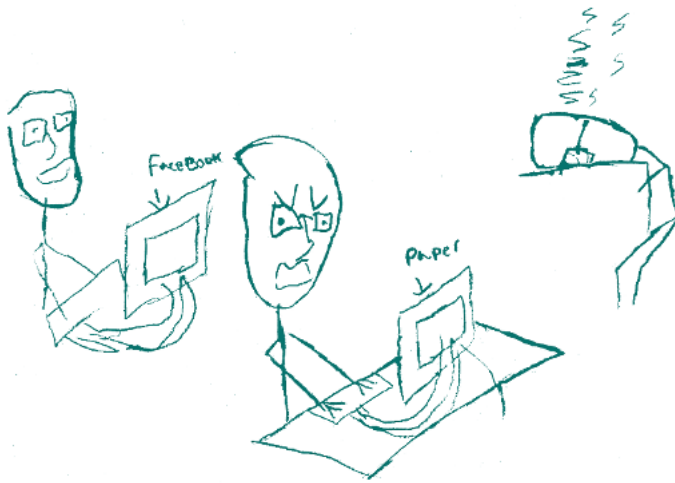
*Unpacking feelings about constructions of writing identity.* The **Feelers**—Kyle, Samuel, Shanelle—(see Figures 2a-2c, respectively) principally identified with writing on an emotional level. Kyle expressed being happy upon completing an assignment. Samuel described his boredom, frustration, and anger when attempting to write a paper on a topic that did not interest him. Shanelle used the emblem of the Apsáalooke (Crow) Tribe as the foundation of her drawing to symbolize the important place writing had in her heart and how happy it made her feel:

And then the teepee represents our home, like where our heart is. And writing comes from my heart. . . . And since I know how to write all kinds of different ways, it’s like how my clans are. Since there are so many. It just makes me happy. . . . So it’s like a sunny day in my teepee. (Shanelle)

The Feelers illustrate students who want to do well on assignments but in order to do so need to represent themselves in ways in which they are not entirely comfortable. For example, Shanelle explained that she was happy writing poems for herself—the type of writing she associated with her teepee illustration—but was less confident when she wrote for an audience. Thus, in terms of Ivanić’s model, these students’ feelings of uncertainty and frustration may result from conflicts within the discursal self and attempts to position themselves in ways that don’t align with their identities. The Feelers are more experienced than the Seekers in recognizing writing expectations. However, they have mixed emotions about academic writing, and fulfill assignments without necessarily connecting personally. These students seem to be vested emotionally in completing their assignments, while at the same time reserving their personal engagement for Facebook or poetry. We



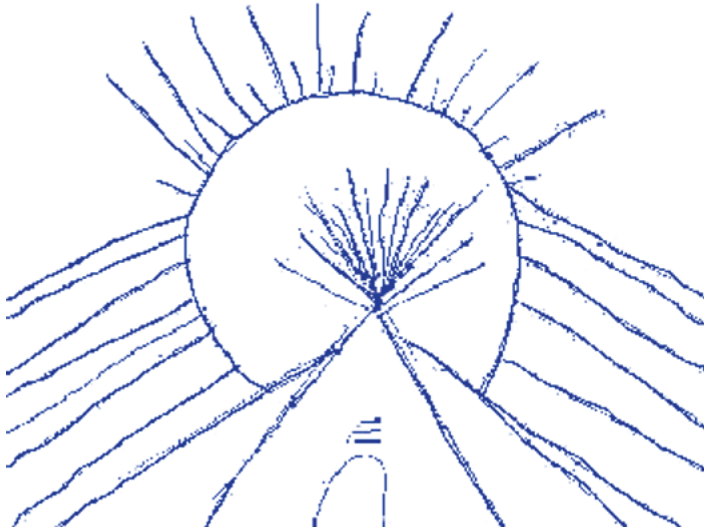
**Figure 2a.** A Feeler: Kyle's Self-portrait.



**Figure 2b.** A Feeler: Samuel's Self-portrait.

should recall the importance that Ivanič places on negotiation in identity development. Perhaps these students are enacting an identity in response to what they should be writing (Scott), or are divorcing the self from their writing in order to be successful (Windchief and Joseph).

**Planning** as a means of advancing discursal identity. Five of the participants demonstrated metacognition with respect to academic writing by reflecting on different aspects of their writing process. These **Planners**—Will, Jessica, Albert, Ed, Danielle—(see Figures 3a-3e) viewed writing as a



**Figure 2c.** A Feeler: Shanelle’s Self-portrait.

series of steps and/or reflected on one aspect of their overall writing process. Will described himself staring at a blank computer screen with his notes and textbook open while he tried to analyze a reading to connect his ideas and arguments. Jessica focused on brainstorming ideas. Albert and Ed, both nontraditionally-aged students, described the actual writing as the least daunting part of completing a writing assignment. Ed recognized that “the research part and putting it all together is the big part of making a paper. And the actual . . . writing part is, I’ll be honest, not that hard. It’s just sitting down and doing it.” Albert was aware of the importance and difficulty of successfully communicating his message to an audience, “for me the dream and the idea of what I am writing is easy to put down but to actually make it readable for somebody else is where I am lost.” Danielle depicted the drafting process with one peer review and a final draft that usually earned her a B grade. She was satisfied with writing papers in this way and doubted further drafts would result in a better product. Nevertheless, she understood that even good writers revise. These students provided snapshots of the parts of the writing process that seemed to draw their time and energies, and at least partially defined what academic writing entailed.

The Planners’ awareness of and engagement in the writing process means that they were shaping their discursive self. It is not clear if they were concerned more with the content or their language, but they were focused on



**Figure 3a.** A Planner: Will's Self-portrait.



**Figure 3b.** A Planner: Jessica's Self-portrait.

shaping the message they wanted to communicate. These students' perceived success of their discourse fostered their burgeoning confidence and identity as writers. At the end of their first year, Will shared that he had learned he could handle college writing, and Danielle reflected, "I am getting to know who I am as a college writer but I'd definitely like to work more on trying to become a strong writer." Ed did not feel eloquent but nonetheless efficient in his writing. Although not having written much before college, by her second semester Jessica was beginning to identify as a writer.

Albert recounted how in researching his high school paper on Manifest Destiny he had wanted to speak out on the topic. Since "it wouldn't have

“That’s Me on a Horse of Many Colors”



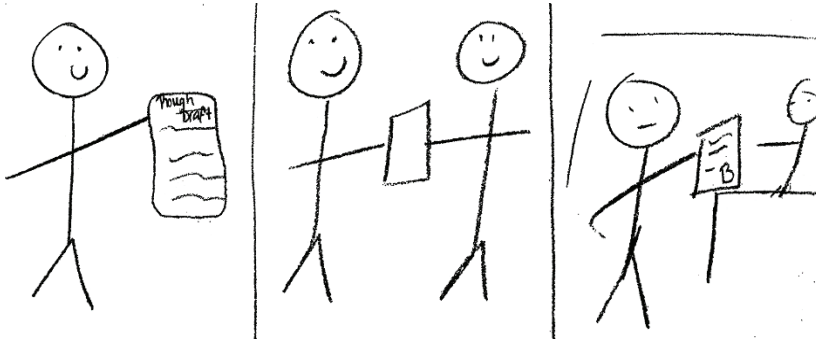
**Figure 3c.** A Planner: Albert’s Self-portrait.



**Figure 3d.** A Planner: Ed’s Self-portrait.

been very well received to speak out vocally,” he found his voice through writing: “I still have that paper and I just remember thinking, ‘This is the way I can shout . . . my voice and write it down on paper and somebody would have to listen to it, even though it was just one teacher’.” Albert added that





**Figure 3e.** A Planner: Danielle's Self-portrait.

furthering his skills as a writer in college “has really helped me to fan that passion cuz I think the more I learn the more confident I'll be.”

In contrast to the Seekers and Feelers, the Planners not only demonstrate greater confidence as writers, but also exercise rhetorical sovereignty (Lyons) in basing decisions regarding topics and revision, for example, on their own interests as opposed to principally an instructor's expectations. The positive connection between students' identification as writers and perceived skills isn't surprising, but I wonder, given the limited visibility and marginalization of Native Americans in mainstream society, whether writing assignments that serve as a platform for students to explore and project their voices do not also positively impact their development as writers.

*Traversing the path to authorial identity.* The **Travelers**—Quincy, Juan, Dieter, Ellsworth—(see Figures 4a-4d, respectively) were similar to the Planners in their recognition that they were developing as writers, but they were more reflective on where they were along their path. These students' journey of discovery also transcended the academic domain and intertwined with other aspects of their life. Quincy and Juan were in their second semester of college and used similar metaphors to depict the long and hilly process of both becoming a writer and completing a writing assignment. For Quincy, “a sunset . . . the end of I guess whatever you are trying to do is always beautiful” because “any sunset can have its own . . . different kind of beauty in someone else's mind.” Juan used the metaphor of a rider to illustrate how he acquires writing skills to become more colorful (beautiful, skilled, complex):

There's me on a horse . . . of many colors. It kind of signifies I have a lot of traits and it's come from where everyone else has come from and I've made it on top of a hill but there's many more hills to climb

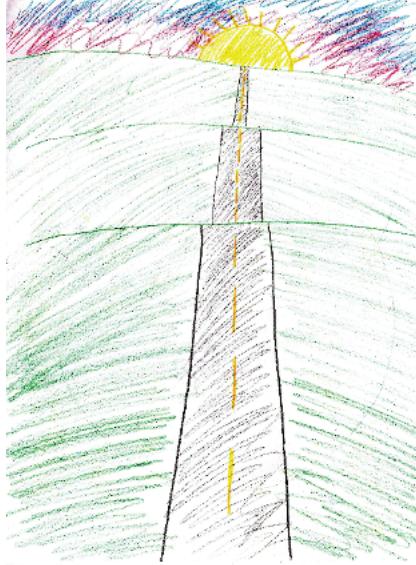
“That’s Me on a Horse of Many Colors”

and that’s kind of incorporated with the colors I guess . . . it brings more color than I used to have I guess.

Dieter, a first-semester tribal college student, drew the world in a large sky with rays of the sun to demonstrate being “high on writing” and express the potential in becoming a good writer, “[I]f I was a good writer, enough to be at the college level. . . I think that possibilities are endless because I think if you can write. . . you can write a story for somebody who can’t speak or something and it would be good because everybody has a story.” His use of “if I was a good writer . . . at the college level” suggests that he did not perceive himself to be a strong academic writer, but he also expressed an awareness that becoming a good writer is a process and that he would become a good writer “sooner or later.” Ellsworth disclosed a lack of confidence in his ability to complete his writing assignments, but also reflected the motivations of the other Travelers in his desire to “touch the sky as a writer.” In Juan’s words, these students feel they “gonna have a lot more places to go” both in developing as writers and in terms of what they can accomplish through their writing.

Given that the Travelers all expressed having something worth saying, they are on the road to encountering their authorial presence. Quincy explained that he wanted his writing to be judged based on its own merits and not in comparison to what others have written. Juan provided an example of having a “clear voice” in an argumentative essay on the effects of prison and showing the reader why a certain viewpoint is important. He elaborated that it is not effective just to quote others to provide a convincing argument and strong voice: “It may be *your* [emphasis in original] writing but you’re reflecting on their paper and you have to have your own opinion on it and show your opinion.” Dieter and Ellsworth perceived written discourse as a way to lend their voice to others. Dieter hoped to write people’s personal stories or work for the tribe, and Ellsworth composed song lyrics to express the struggles he and other youth faced in his community. Similarly to the Planners, the Travelers found a personal reason to write, but for the latter, the purpose also included an element of agency (Gardner) in writing to a specific audience or on behalf of others. Furthermore, Quincy clearly embraced academic survivance in defining his expectations for assessment by specifically resisting being compared to others and underscoring the importance of his authorial voice.

*Conceptualizing **learning** within the writing classroom.* While all of the students reflected on the autobiographical self as developing writers, three



**Figure 4a.** A Traveler: Quincy's Self-portrait.



**Figure 4b.** A Traveler: Juan's Self-portrait.

“That’s Me on a Horse of Many Colors”



**Figure 4c.** A Traveler: Dieter’s Self-portrait.



**Figure 4d.** A Traveler: Ellsworth’s Self-portrait.

of the participants focused specifically on where and how they were learning to write academically. These **Learners**—Dawn, Victoria, Courtney—(see Figures 5a-5c, respectively) depicted themselves as writers in the classroom. Dawn saw herself at a desk, “taking notes on what I am supposed to be writing academically. . . what I am supposed to be using for my writing.” Victoria drew herself watching the instructor write on the board, whom she identified as an important model, “I think the only way that I can learn is if somebody shows me before I do it.” Courtney created an aerial view of

herself in a classroom surrounded by other students collaboratively learning about college writing. An interesting aspect of her image is the absence of the instructor, which Courtney explained is because of the role students play in teaching one another, “[I]n our class you help each other out and if one has a problem we help ‘em and if we all have the same problem we help each other.”

Whether taking notes or collaborating with peers, these students’ illustrations depict what it means for them to learn in a classroom setting. Unlike the Planners, the Learners were not focused on an aspect of their writing, rather they were attempting to uncover the practices and discourses they needed to assume as college writers. These three students provide insights into the learning spaces in which they readily engage: those in which they can observe others model academic discourse, as well as work collaboratively with other students. In the Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications section, I will address the significance of this variability in classroom experiences, and offer suggestions for creating a supportive learning space.

***Creating academic discourse with authorial presence.*** Just as all the students are learners, they are also creators in the sense of producing writing for their courses. However, one participant, Jane (see Figure 6), categorized as a **Creator**<sup>5</sup>, drew a self-portrait that reflected the nature of her written products. Jane was in her second-semester of college but because of Advanced Placement credits in English had placed out of first-year writing. She provided a unique glimpse into the experiences of first-year students who were placed in a higher-level writing course. Jane drew herself with a paper in hand with “the story kind of jumping off the page.” The flowers and butterflies represented the creative energy of her words. When asked how the illustration would change for a chemistry lab, she reflected, “Maybe I’d have scientific concepts jumping out or like equations for how to find the density of something jumping out. . . maybe I’d have photons and atoms. . . things that pertain to chemistry jumping out.”

Jane clearly anticipated her written work to turn out a certain way. Although in her self-portrait she did not focus on the process leading up to the final product, her descriptions of her writing suggest an awareness of discourse communities (English composition vs. chemistry) and the need to employ different strategies within them. As a Creator, Jane considered the degree to which her writing captured her readers’ attention. She demonstrated a strong discorsal self in her choice of certain discourse conventions to stylize her language. Jane also remembered favorable feedback from high school that indicated a notable authorial presence in her writing, “I had a lot

“That’s Me on a Horse of Many Colors”



**Figure 5a.** A Learner: Dawn’s Self-portrait.



**Figure 5b.** A Learner: Victoria’s Self-portrait.



**Figure 5c.** A Learner: Courtney’s Self-portrait.

of teachers that said I have really good voice.” Among the participants, Jane was the most developed as a writer in terms of confidence, metacognition, and skills writing across disciplines.

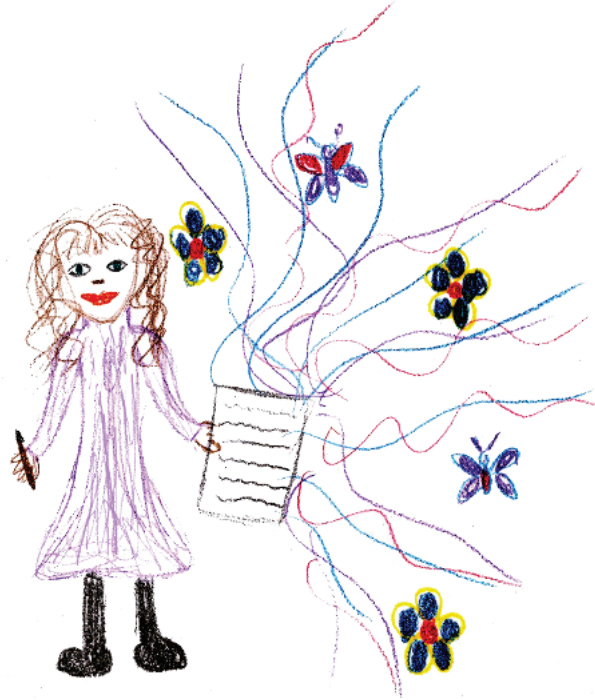
Describing their self-portraits provided a starting point for the students to talk about their writing and themselves as writers. These self-portraits provide insights into the threads that weave students’ academic writing identities: past experiences with writing, confidence as writers, understanding of writing expectations, and the writing process. A self-portrait with the “self” missing reveals something that the student likely would not have been able to express in words. Illustrations invite metaphors and descriptive language such as “a sunny day in my teepee,” “a beautiful sunset,” “a horse of many colors,” and “words as flowers and butterflies.” Drawing also creates a safe space for expressing emotions and insecurities. Overall, the self-portraits offer a snapshot of where the students are in their journey as college writers, and ways in which they perceive or do not perceive themselves in that role. Conversations with participants also revealed that their self-perception as academic writers was influenced by how important they perceived writing to be within the context of their families and communities.

### **Writing Identity Shaped by Families and Communities**

Given the historical context of writing in tribal communities and the significance of family and relationships, I included questions in the interview protocol that explored possible connections to writing and students’ extended circle. To gain insights into writing in their communities and families, I asked students about role models in their lives who were also writers of some kind, and how important they thought writing was in their community. *I found that students with immediate family members or close friends who wrote regularly or who encouraged them to write regularly tended to view writing in the community as important.* One of these students recalled writing as a way to have fun:

I’d say [writing] was pretty important because . . . me and all my cousins and some of my friends, we’d watch a movie and we’d start writing about it and then we’d kind of guess the ending and then we would watch the movie and the ending would be like the complete opposite of it. It was pretty fun. (Jessica)

Another participant shared how her mother assigned writing during her high school years:



**Figure 6.** A Creator: Jane’s Self-Portrait.

From when I was fourteen all the way up until I was seventeen . . . my mom made sure [my sister and I] read articles [and] maybe like out of the newspaper and there was this one book I really liked . . . and she would have us write maybe about that much of what we read and to this day she still has them. (Courtney)

A third participant related how one friend with a weak educational background and rough life went on to attend graduate school, and how a relative of that individual received a perfect score on the writing section of the ACT. The fact that Native Americans were achieving success in the area of writing made an impression on these participants.

Native American authors and famous orators were also among students’ influences. The words of Chief Plenty Coup and Chief Joseph inspired two students. Sherman Alexie was the most cited influential Indian author, mentioned by three students, one of whom tried to emulate his style of writing, but Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch, and Woody Kipp also made the list. Lastly, one participant depicted his elders and teachers in his self-



portrait as flying birds, watching over him and influencing decisions about his writing. The fact that some of the students' role models include orators addresses the importance of acknowledging the oral tradition as valid and valuable as written discourse (Brayboy).

With respect to their own writing practices, participants frequently involved people in their extended circle in their process of planning or reviewing their assignments. The third most cited writing strategy from the flow-chart activity was: have friends, classmates, professors who are good writers proofread. Most of the students either asked friends or classmates to read their work, but two turned to family members. Additionally, a few had received proofreading assistance from past or current instructors or Native American program advisors. Talking to someone before beginning to write, especially to come up with a topic, was also a popular practice. One described consulting with her sister as a part of her planning process:

[I]f it's something I am interested in or I know someone else's opinion will help, I usually talk to them first, like my sister. I always do that with her cuz me and her have a lot of the same ideas and if there is a good topic we can talk about it for days and we can get into pretty good discussions. (Danielle)

For Juan, just being at home enabled his creative juices to start flowing, "[D]uring the weekend I'll work on [the assignment] cuz I'll probably go home and have time to think on it and other ideas come back from just being home; it's like a comfort zone." The power of place is especially striking in Juan's example, and underscores the strength that Native students draw from their families and home communities (Huffman et al.). The influence of students' families and communities went deeper than providing ideas for content and help with proofreading. In the next section I share how specific aspects of their culture and community shaped their writing perceptions and practices.

### **Writing Identity and Practices Shaped by Culture**

*Aspects of participants' cultural backgrounds dotted the landscape of their writing experiences and shaped the development of their identities and practices as writers. Participants' autobiographical selves emerged from the data in references to the influence of tribal culture<sup>6</sup>. While my interview questions did not directly address relationships between culture and writing, sometimes the topic arose in the course of conversations. Naturally, a number of par-*

“That’s Me on a Horse of Many Colors”

ticipants considered Native American-related topics for their assignments, such as aspects of reservation life, Indian mascots, or being bicultural. One student expressed a conscious effort to write his papers from a “Native perspective. . . Like the community aspect. . . like seeing things as it affects the whole instead of just one’s self” (Juan).

Possibly as a reflection of the collectivist values of their cultures, two participants mentioned using writing as a tool to create positive change beyond themselves. Juan linked agency with writing, as a “willing[ness] to do something and. . . make the world a better place to live.” Further reflecting on his self-portrait, he applied the concept of “color” to explain how sharing with others what he had learned was for him part of being a successful writer, “I’m colorful as a writer. I can go off about anything but. . . just incorporating these colors into the aspect of writing, not just doing things one way because that gets bland for me, but. . . just reflecting the stuff I’ve been taught, showing them to others.”

Dieter also envisioned that becoming a good writer could enable him to help others. He was more specific in identifying his tribe as the intended beneficiary of his success, and gave examples of how writing could translate into a profession he could practice in his community:

I think I can help anybody I think just by, like if I became real smart in English, real good at it, I think I could come back here and work for the tribe or something like that. Or, something else, psychologist or something. Let’s see. Help other people, like teach or something. Or journalism or something like that.

When further prompted about the relationship between writing and helping others, he confirmed its importance and gave a practical example of how he could give others a voice through writing, “I could be able to tell somebody else’s story or talk about like struggles and stuff like that, whatever people go through.”

In contrast, two participants at different tribal colleges did not recognize such inviting opportunities for the use of writing in their communities. As Ed explained, being a good writer on the reservation leads to an involvement in tribal politics, “Well, I don’t want to say, I want to be into politics here on the Rez or anything like that but I think that if writing [for] a person who’s eloquent and who can voice their opinions that’s where they are headed. And that’s not what I want. I just want to survive.” Thus, these tribal college students shared a perception of the role of writing in their

respective Indian communities that deterred them from wanting to be an especially skilled writer. In the next section, faculty in those communities expound upon this striking observation.

Several participants shared ways in which tribal language, and other aspects of culture including the oral tradition (history, teachings, and traditions transmitted orally) shaped their identity and practices as academic writers. A tribal college student enrolled in a Native language course expressed a desire to not just speak, but also write in his tribal language, which he saw as potentially helping his English writing skills. Additionally, a non-tribal college student explained that when he was able to go home and reconnect with where he was from, he found it easier to write on given paper topics. Similarly, in reflecting on the specific influences that contributed to how she viewed herself as a writer, Jessica commented, “Probably I would have to say my culture and like my background from all the stories that my grandma and my mom and everyone told me.” Juan described learning from his grandfather how to connect the oral tradition to stories in written form. Even after his grandfather’s passing, he emulates the bridging of the written and spoken word by reading a book or story and then talking about it with his mother, inspiring her to want to read it as well. Juan was also able to identify aspects of orality in his writing style, such as having an interesting angle, including humor, and focusing on the “journey” he creates for his reader.

Overall, students described the influence of their culture and the oral tradition on their writing in positive terms, especially with regard to their autobiographical and authorial selves. However, in discussing aspects of their discursal selves, I noticed that some students were critical of their organization of ideas. Students described themselves as “skipping around,” “jumping from idea to idea,” “going off in tangents or meandering,” “shifting in tones,” and “clustering ideas that don’t belong.” While non-Native students could just as easily describe themselves in these ways, it is important to keep in mind that these labels represent expectations for linearity valued in Western discourse that are contrary to Indigenous thinking. Employing orality—verbal expression in writing, particularly as it applies to societies where writing is fairly recent (Catlin)—sometimes blurs the distinction between oral and written discourse, manifesting in a non-linear organizational style, non-standard grammar, homophone errors, and missing punctuation. Although the students did not attribute their divergence from linearity to a strong oral tradition, the faculty participants confirmed this connection and underscored other findings that emerged from the student interviews.

### **Faculty Confirming the Influence of Community and Culture on Writing Identity**

I found that faculty and support staff in my study were engaged in supporting not only the writing skills, but notably also the writing identity development of their students. These faculty—both Native and non-Native—viewed writing identity as intertwined with cultural identity, and reflected on how their students’ autobiographical identities may be influencing their decisions as writers. One theorized, “[t]here’s a cultural dissonance to who they are and . . . having worked in . . . other parts of the country and looking at the struggles that minority students have, it often comes down to language and culture and identity and their [self-]esteem . . . And if they don’t have the confidence, if they don’t view themselves [in that space], or if the environment or the classroom is not conducive to learning, they’ll shut down.” Others observed that students’ difficulties formulating opinions stemmed from the perceived lack of value or validity of their ideas. Two faculty participants at different tribal colleges explained how politics in the community and fears of expressing opposing viewpoints, or the crab in the bucket syndrome (i.e. cultural importance of standing with one’s community) deterred students from expressing their opinions or even excelling in writing. For culturally traditional students, persuasive writing and taking a stand on an issue were more of a struggle than for more assimilated students. However, it was observed that maintaining one’s traditional culture and language increased confidence in writing and college persistence. One tribal faculty member noted, “I found that the [students from] really traditional families who are bilingual are actually higher in their academic quality of work. But then when you have the more modern student . . . they express their confidence a little more loudly.” To help students develop their authorial selves, faculty encouraged students to study literature and other forms of expression, including beadwork and traditional Indian songs, and to trust their own opinions.

Aspects of students’ discursive identity development surfaced in interviews with faculty in discussing the influence culture has on thinking and organization of ideas. A tribal college faculty participant explained that because of the nature of oral discourse strategies, some students tend to repeat themselves when they write, “You’ll bring back a point, embellish on it or you won’t get to the point. The journey to get to the point is equally important because it is a descriptive language.” Another faculty member remarked that the more culturally traditional students tended to write as if

they were “talking in the good way.” This “writing in the Indian way” means establishing a certain mood or feeling, and using facts in support of that goal, but to an outsider the train of thought may seem rambling and without a point. These observations echo student participants’ self-criticism of “going off in tangents,” which undoubtedly stem from having experienced their style of writing being labeled as redundant and incoherent. Brayboy would likely deem such negative perceptions around orality-enhanced writing as detrimental to American Indian students’ academic writing success.

While students may not be cognizant of all the ways that their culture and community influence their writing identity, perceptions, and practices, faculty and writing support staff working directly with Native students can pinpoint many ways in which these interactions manifest. These influences naturally weave themselves into the development of the autobiographical identity, but they continue to stitch their threads through the discursal and authorial identities as well. Faculty observations related to the benefit of strong cultural ties and bilingualism align with the research on traditionalism and academic success (Huffman et al.). Also, the cited importance of the classroom environment in determining students’ willingness or ability to engage as writers underscores the need to be cognizant of exclusionary acts on the part of classmates or isolating classroom discussions that could contribute to a student feeling disconnected from a particular community (Roosen).

An important caveat for this section is that I chose to highlight faculty and staff participants who shared observations regarding the influence of community and culture on their students’ writing, and these participants’ ideas happened to align with research on Native writers, and support many of the thoughts shared by the student participants. This does not mean that all the faculty and staff were similarly knowledgeable about cultural influences on their students’ writing, nor that dissonance around Native American identities and rhetoric in the field does not exist. The fact that most of faculty at the PWI in this study commented more on the struggles of Native students, rather than their strengths suggests that they have much to gain from insights provided by the tribal college faculty to inform culturally responsive practices in the writing classroom.

## **Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications**

My investigations have tried to discover the factors that shape the construction of Native college students’ writing identities, and capture the

“That’s Me on a Horse of Many Colors”

effects that culture may have on their dispositions and writing practices. I came to discover that the similarities between Native and Gen 1.5 students that had sparked my research interest were superficial given the rich knowledge I gained from my interviews. Prior to my study, I suspected that culture influenced Native writers, but I did not anticipate that it would surface not only in choices for writing topics, but also in types of messages targeted to specific audiences, who or what is involved in the planning process, how ideas are organized, and attitudes toward writing. Participants’ prior experiences with writing and role models are especially important given the tribal legacy of the written word and trauma of the boarding school era for which the case has been made by Scott Lyons and Bryan Brayboy among others. Even though there are similarities among all first-year college writers irrespective of cultural backgrounds, the need to recognize the unique experiences and perspectives of our Native students continues to be just as important as in 2003 when Laura Gray-Rosendale, Loyola Bird, and Judith Bullock asked to rethink the basic writing frontier for Native American students.

Excerpts from my conversations with students, faculty, and staff in this study highlight perceptions of writing that are typically marginal if at all present in the college classroom: 1) writing is about collaboration; 2) the writer is inseparable from their family and community; 3) writing is influenced by cultural values and ways of knowing; and 4) the underlying purpose of writing is the creation of agency. These views of writing may be shared by many college students; however, collectively they may be more important for Native students.

In terms of Ivanič’s model of writer identity, the students in this study underscored the importance of the autobiographical self. They mentioned not only a preference for writing from personal experience, but even a desire to “return home” to explore their identity, and allow for deeper connections in their writing. The metaphoric depiction of one student as a “horse of many colors” beautifully illustrates the worldview held by many Native students that their selves are intimately connected to and shaped by those who came before them, their families, and other community members (Monroe). Elders and teachers, like “birds flying overhead,” may serve as respected guides influencing decisions about writing. Although my study didn’t include textual analysis, the students I interviewed provided a glimpse into their discursual selves. Their decisions about textual representations took place in the context of their emerging conceptualizations of academic writing. They were cognizant of the need to “understand the language” of academic discourse and instructor expectations. Students also made decisions about

how much to reveal of themselves in their writing depending on whether it was for personal or academic purposes. The intimate nature of writing (“writing from the heart not just the head”) manifested in some students’ hesitation to share their work, and a resistance to being compared to others. More experienced students expressed an awareness of authorial presence. They describe themselves as having a “unique way of writing,” and also evaluated their decisions about content and style in light of their audience.

Since Native American students find strength in writing that connects to their cultures and tribal communities, place-based pedagogy can help inform the design and implementation of writing curricula. Wendy Pfrenger notes the strong sense of place of college composition students in rural Appalachia that drives the underlying mission of writing center consultants to help their writing clients draw upon what is familiar (self and community) and transpose it to other areas of learning, thus creating “layered” literacies as they “fold” in knowledge from their communities. Similarly, Susan Catlin explores the idea of “place-conscious writing practices” with non-Aboriginal teachers in the Canadian Northwest Territories as a way for students “to explore who they are, where they live, what they wish to express and understand in a manner conducive to their thinking and sensibilities (140). I would like to extend these authors’ conceptualizations around “hybrid literacies” and “multiliteracies” to include the concept of “survivance,” and offer three approaches for infusing “Indigenous literacies” into college composition curricula.

*Fostering community-based and culturally-affirming identities as writers and readers.* As the participants in this study illustrate, their identities as writers are linked to their tribal communities, including traditional ways of knowing and imparting knowledge. The writing classroom can serve as a supportive space for Native students to develop their identities as writers, but first instructors have to create an environment and curriculum that will encourage students like Autumn to “come in” and want to engage and write. We have to recognize that Native students bring into our classrooms their communities’ complex historical and current relationships with writing, which can surface as distrust, disinterest, or defiance. We also need to acknowledge that students write to not only tell their personal account, but also to lend their voice to their extended circle. Tribal college students<sup>7</sup> in particular write “for community” as well as “in community,” drawing upon and even collaborating with others in their writing process. Regardless of institutional type, creating a culturally affirming learning environment requires recognition of the cultural values, languages, dialects, and rhetorical

practices of Indigenous peoples, and when possible specifically those of the tribes represented in a class.

I am not suggesting that writing instructors need to become experts on all the tribes with which their students are affiliated—although I recommend some familiarity with local tribal communities and/or traditional tribal homelands where one is teaching. We can learn much about students’ literacy practices and influences through writing assignments that invite them to position themselves as writers while exploring and affirming their identities. Autobiographical writing assignments invite students to explore their journey thus far with reading and writing, and also reveal to instructors the moments that have defined each student’s relationship with writing. I vary the ways in which I ask students to reflect on their history and relationship with literacy, such as exploring the intersectionality of their identities, or responding to Scott Lyons’ hallmark question, “What do American Indians Want from Writing?” or rephrased for both Native and non-Native students: “What do YOU want from writing?” Undoubtedly, all students can find strength in autobiographical writing, but Native students may find it especially empowering, especially at PWIs where they may not find many places where they feel comfortable to share aspects of their cultural identities.

*Blending Indigenous and Western content and perspectives.* My study participants’ references to tribal language and the oral tradition suggest that some are consciously looking for ways to weave aspects of their linguistic and cultural heritage into their writing. Writing instructors can help empower Native basic writers through reading assignments that are relevant to their lives and include the perspectives of Indigenous thinkers, especially those from communities closest to or most represented at the college or university. American Indians rarely appear in college course content outside of general mentions in history textbooks, and they are represented in advertising and entertainment as caricatures, stereotypes, and appropriated symbols. The blending of Western and Indigenous content and perspectives should not reside solely within the purview of tribally controlled institutions. All students, Native and non-Native, can benefit from discussions and assignments focused on an analysis of historical artifacts, such as the Doctrine of Discovery or Manifest Destiny, through an Indigenous lens. Or a course theme on environmentalism can incorporate Indigenous views of land through the study of speeches by tribal leaders from the treaty period, and more contemporary orators like Russell Means and Winona LaDuke; writings of Oren Lyons, Daniel Wildcat, and Robin Wall Kimmerer; and media coverage of the #NODAPL (No Dakota Access Pipeline) movement. In addition, exposing



students to tribal oral history projects, and historical accounts, such as *Crazy Horse: The Lakota Warrior's Life and Legacy*, will help position oral tradition as a valid source of knowledge within academic discourse. The instructor does not need to be an expert on Native issues and perspectives, but rather serve as a facilitator and model the process of inquiry to help students draw conclusions based on their readings and class discussions. Having Native students in a class can enrich discussions, but I would like to emphasize the importance of not expecting Native students to be knowledgeable about topics related to Indigenous peoples, or even to provide a "Native perspective." Any honest and educated attempt at including Indigenous voices and perspectives in the writing curriculum will be a step toward legitimizing tribal histories and cultures in academic discourse.

*Employing Indigenous discourse as survivance.* Many students in my study associated writing with the creation of agency. Indigenous literacies not only reflect "layered" and "hybrid" literacies as manifest among other community-based and marginalized writers, but also uniquely, sovereign peoples' right to determine the nature of their textual representations. Catlin's concept of "multiliteracy" emphasizes the writer's role, as opposed to the teacher's, to determine who is included or excluded in a text and how certain groups are portrayed. However, "survivance" as applied to writing offers a more comprehensive lens by which to understand how students construct their academic writing identities, articulate what they want from writing, engage in the writing process, employ rhetorical strategies, and reframe assignments. In addition, the "resistance" implied in "survivance" allows that students can exert their authorial voice and reject aspects of Western discourse. Clark and Ivanić remind us that the power compelling adherence to writing conventions is socially constructed and thus, can be socially challenged.

In order to shift "survivance" from theory into practice, writing instructors can support students in their efforts to survive and succeed on assignments even when they resist aspects of academic discourse in favor of Indigenous discourse strategies. Specifically, instructors can invite students to study the different styles that orators and writers use to communicate their message, including the use of irony, false flattery, logic, and humor (Monroe). Additionally, they can encourage students to experiment with the rhetorical strategies that they discover in texts such as the Alcatraz Proclamation, as well as to incorporate words from their Native language in their essays to effectively embed layers of meaning. Because many students have heard too often that their writing goes off topic (Chávez; Macias), it is

“That’s Me on a Horse of Many Colors”

helpful—indeed for all students but especially for those who speak “non-standard” languages and dialects—to discuss the role of culture in how we think, and therefore write.

One way to introduce the connection between culture and rhetoric is by sharing Robert Kaplan’s cross-cultural writing patterns, and then asking students to draw the thought pattern of an elder or other storyteller in their lives. Because frequently the ensuing pattern is not linear, it leads students to reflect on their own organizational style in comparison to what is expected in Western academic discourse. It is important that the self-exploration be followed by a discussion of how the flow of ideas reflects a speaker’s or writer’s purpose, which for an elder could be to guide listeners to their own conclusions, and for an academic writer to steer readers to the point as directly as possible.

Overall, instructors need to find ways to counter the dichotomy of academic writing as “good” versus their own writing as “bad” that has been ingrained in so many students during their prior schooling. A good start is encouraging students to identify possible cultural influences on their writing style and to embrace them as assets. If students wish to defy linearity, an instructor can show them how they can both survive and resist by “looping back” to their main point every paragraph or so. Employing this common writing technique can be rationalized as “taking pity” on their readers who might otherwise get lost, with the subsequent result that their readers are more likely to deem their writing as “organized.”

Native students in this study, like Albert, hope that “writing can be healing” and provide a platform to “shout [their] voice[s].” They demonstrate “survivance” in constructing their academic writing identities, articulating what they want from writing, and reframing writing assignments accordingly. Their assets as writers can include an ability to think non-linearly, identify connections among disparate ideas, bridge the spoken and written word, incorporate tribal language and cultural references, and use their writing to advocate for their community. There are many ways in which basic writing instructors can simultaneously affirm and help strengthen Native students’ writing. As such strategies become more common place, we can move beyond theorizations of Native students’ writing identities, and begin to study their actions as emerging context-specific practices of Indigenous literacies.

## Notes

1. Just under 40% of first-time American Indian/Alaska Native college students attending a four-year institution full-time graduate within 6 years (Keith).
2. I use the term “Native” and “Native American” interchangeably to be inclusive of both Alaska Natives and American Indians. I acknowledge that people who identify as “Indian” prefer a variety of terms for their collective ethnic group.
3. Only findings related to identity, self-concept, and role of writing in the community are included from the flow-chart activity. More insights into students’ writing process, and thoughts on revision, instructor feedback, and writing resources are detailed in “Constructing a Model of Success for First-Year Native American College Writers.”
4. My conceptual framework and research questions informed the initial tree nodes (hierarchical categories), and the constant comparative method helped me identify new areas of inquiry (additional tree nodes). The recursive process of coding and analysis allowed the grouping of data in different ways for concepts to emerge, and to explore how these emerging categories fit together and what relationships seem to exist between concepts.
5. A pilot study with students representing all four years of college yielded additional participants categorized as Creators. These tended to be more experienced writers, which explains why more participants from this first-year sample do not fall into this category.
6. I recognize that there is not one American Indian culture and that there are considerable differences among tribal languages, religions, and traditions. For example, the Northern Cheyenne and Crow nations are close neighbors geographically; however, historically they were enemies and have conflicting religious beliefs. In addition, Cheyenne belongs to the Algonquian language family while Crow belongs to the Siouan language family. This section rests on the premise that despite these great differences, these and other Native American tribes share certain cultural orientations, namely a collectivist orientation, an oral tradition, a circular philosophy, and transference of language characteristics between an indigenous language and English. These traits manifest in conversations with the participants to varying degrees.
7. I would like to note that the participants in my study were attending two-year, and not four-year, tribal colleges, and I caution against general-

izing findings across all tribally controlled institutions. I do, however, find that there are some noticeable differences between the experiences and perceptions of tribal college students and American Indian students attending a PWI. More research is needed to tease apart how much tribal college curricula and instruction, or perhaps the degree of “traditionalism” of students contribute to these distinctions. I provide more insights into the writing experiences and expectations of tribal college students in my 2015 article in the *Tribal College Journal*.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Dr. Doug Downs, two blind reviewers, and the *JBW* co-editors for their constructive feedback on earlier drafts of this manuscript. I dedicate this work to the legacy of Dr. Betsy Palmer, as well as the students in this study who shared of themselves so that we can better understand their experiences as college writers.

### **Works Cited**

- Barnhardt, Ray, and Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley. “Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Alaska Native Ways of Knowing.” *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2005, pp. 8-23.
- Bird, Barbara. “A Basic Writing Course Design to Promote Writer Identity: Three Analyses of Student Papers.” *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2013, pp. 62-96.
- Brayboy, Bryan McKinley Jones. “Toward a Tribal Critical Race Theory in Education.” *Urban Review: Issues and Ideas in Public Education*, vol. 37, no. 5, 2005, pp. 425-46.
- Cadman, Kate. “Thesis Writing for International Students: A Question of Identity?” *English for Specific Purposes*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1997, pp. 3-14.
- Catlin, Susan Jane. “Exchanges between Two Rivers: Possibilities for Teaching Writing in the Northwest Territories.” *Canadian Journal of Education*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2013, pp. 119-143.
- Chávez, Alicia Fedelina. “Weaving My Way: The Cultural Construction of Writing in Higher Education.” *Journal of Poverty*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1998, pp. 89-93.
- Clark, Romy, and Roz Ivanić. *The Politics of Writing*. London, Routledge, 1997.
- Clown Family, Edward, and William B. Matson. *Crazy Horse: The Lakota Warrior’s Life and Legacy*. Gibbs Smith, 2016.

- Dyc, Gloria. "The Use of Native Language Models in the Development of Critical Literacy." *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1994, pp. 211-33.
- Fisher, Steve. "The Power of Stories." *Appalachian Journal*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2002, pp. 421-25.
- Fixico, Donald. *The American Indian Mind in a Linear World: American Indian Studies and Traditional Knowledge*. New York, Routledge, 2003.
- Frestedt, Myna, and Marilyn Sanchez. "Navajo World View Harmony in Directives for English Texts." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the University of Wisconsin/ Milwaukee Linguistics Symposium, Milwaukee, WI. 01 March 1980. ERIC Document ED 193 661.
- Gardner, Rebecca Lynn. *Rhetorical Agency and Survivance: American Indians in College Composition*. Dissertation, The University of North Dakota, 2012. UMI 3516786.
- Gray-Rosendale, Laura. "Back to the Future: Contextuality and the Construction of the Basic Writer's Identity in *JBW* 1999-2005." *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2006, pp. 5-26.
- . "Investigating Our Discursive History: *JBW* and the Construction of the 'Basic Writer's' Identity." *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1999, pp. 108-35.
- Gray-Rosendale, Laura, Loyola K. Bird, and Judith F. Bullock. "Rethinking the Basic Writing Frontier: Native American Students' Challenge to Our Histories." *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2003, pp. 71-106.
- Gregory, George Ann. "Composing Processes of Native Americans: Six Case Studies of Navajo Speakers." *Journal of American Indian Education*, vol. 28, no. 2, 1989, pp. 1-6.
- Holton, Judith A. "The Coding Process and Its Challenges." *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*. edited by Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz. SAGE Publication Ltd., 2007, pp. 265-89.
- Huffman, Terry E., Maurice L. Sill, and Martin Brokenleg. "College Achievement among Sioux and White South Dakota Students." *Journal of American Indian Education*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1986, pp. 32-38.
- Ivanić, Roz. *Writing and Identity: The Discoursal Construction of Identity in Academic Writing*. John Benjamins Publishing, 1998.
- Keith, Jill F. "Barriers and Strategies for Success for American Indian College Students: A Review." *Journal of College Student Development*, vol. 57, no. 6, 2016, pp. 698-714.

- Komlos, Barbara Z. *Constructing a Model of Success for First-Year Native American College Writers*. Dissertation, Montana State University, 2011. UMI 3439789.
- . "Tribal College Writing: The Bumpy Road to Success." *Tribal College Journal of American Indian Higher Education*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2015, pp. 44-45.
- Lillis, Theresa M. *Student Writing: Access, Regulation, Desire*. London, Routledge, 2001.
- Lyons, Scott Richard. "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?" *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2000, pp. 447-68.
- Macias, Cathaleene J. "American Indian Academic Success: The Role of Indigenous Learning Strategies." *Journal of American Indian Education*, vol. 29, 1989, pp. 43-52.
- Monroe, Barbara. "Plateau Indian Ways with Words." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 61, no. 1, 2009, pp. 321-42.
- More, Arthur J. "Native Indian Learning Styles: A Review for Researchers and Teachers." *Journal of American Indian Education*, vol. 29, 1989, pp. 15-28.
- Pfrenger, Wendy. "Cultivating People and Places at the Center." *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2017, pp. 87-119.
- Polacek, Cheryl Birdhat. *Different Hunting Grounds: American Indian Tribal College Student Perceptions of Predominantly White Institutions*. Dissertation. Montana State University, 2017. UMI 10284509.
- Prior, Paul, and Jody Shipka. "Chronotopic Lamination: Tracing the Contours of Literate Activity." *Writing Selves/Writing Societies: Research from the Activity Perspectives*, edited by Charles Bazerman and David R. Russell. The WAC Clearinghouse, 2003, pp. 180-238.
- Roozen, Kevin. "Writing is Linked to Identity." *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, Utah State UP, 2015, pp. 50-52.
- Scott, Tony. "Writing Enacts and Creates Identities and Ideologies." *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, Utah State UP, 2015, pp. 48-50.
- Swisher, Karen, and Donna Deyhle. "The Styles of Learning Are Different, but the Teaching Is Just the Same: Suggestions for Teachers of American Indian Youth." *Journal of American Indian Education*, vol. 29, 1989, pp. 1-14.
- Toth, Christie. "Beyond Assimilation: Tribal Colleges, Basic Writing, and the Exigencies of Settler Colonialism." *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2013, pp. 4-36.

- Van Hamme, Linda. "American Indian Cultures and the Classroom." *Journal of American Indian Education*, vol. 35, no. 2, 1996, pp. 21-36.
- Vizenor, Gerald Robert. *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance*. U of Nebraska P, 1999.
- Wang, Xiqiao. "Developing Translingual Disposition through a Writing Theory Cartoon Assignment." *Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2017, pp. 56-86.
- Welkener, Michele M., and Marcia B. Baxter Magolda. "Better Understanding Students' Self-Authorship via Self-Portraits." *Journal of College Student Development*, vol. 55, no. 6, 2014, pp. 580-85.
- Wescott, Siobhan. "A Crash Course in Writing." *Winds of Change*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1997, pp. 20-22.
- Wilson, Darryl B. "You Must Learn to Use Words Like Bullets." *Winds of Change*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1998, pp. 24-26.
- Wilson, Shawn. *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Fernwood, 2008.
- Windchief, Sweeney, and Darold H. Joseph. "The Act of Claiming Higher Education as Indigenous Space: American Indian/Alaska Native Examples." *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2015, pp. 267-83.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL: INITIAL INTERVIEW**

1. Let’s start by you telling me a little about your background.
  - a. Where did you grow up?
  - b. Where did you attend high school?
2. What is your home community like?
  - a. What language(s) did you speak at home growing up? (use as follow-up if needed)
  - b. How bilingual do you consider yourself to be? (use as follow-up if needed)
  - c. How culturally traditional or untraditional would you consider your family and yourself. Why?
  - d. How important was writing in your home and community?
  - e. Can you think of any role models in your family or community who are also writers of some kind?
  - f. What role did family/community members have in your academics, especially writing?
3. How would you describe your writing experiences in high school? (Qs below as follow-up)
  - a. What are teachers/classes that stand out in your mind in terms of writing?
  - b. What writing assignments stand out in your mind? How did you do on them?
  - c. How did you feel your high school writing assignments prepared you for college writing?
  - d. How prepared for college writing do/did you feel compared to other students?
4. I would like you to see what image comes to mind for the next question. Then, I would like you to draw an illustration of what comes to mind using this paper and these colored pencils. How do you picture yourself as a writer, and specifically a college writer of academic-type assignments?
  - a. Please describe your illustration for me.
  - b. What feelings do you associate with this image? How confident do you feel as a writer?
  - c. Where do you think those feelings/degree of confidence and/or the image originate?



- d. Are there any other specific influences or people that you think contribute to your perception of yourself as a writer?
  - e. Has this image changed from when you started college or from high school? How?
  - f. How would you describe someone who is a “successful” writer? What elements do you see in this picture that demonstrate these characteristics?
  - g. Is it important for you to be a “successful” writer in college? What are your goals for this semester in terms of your writing? How are you going to achieve these?
5. Did you bring a graded assignment with you today? If yes, proceed:
- a. Please tell me about this assignment, such as what class it was for, when you completed it, and what your experiences were like with it.
  - b. Here are some elements of planning and writing a paper. Please pick out the ones that you used for this assignment. Then, glue the strips of paper onto this larger paper to illustrate the process you used to complete the assignment. If you did something more than once than you can write it in on the paper.
  - c. Using your diagram, please describe your process for completing this writing assignment. Is this typical of what you do when you write?
  - d. Do you have any questions about any of the slips that you did not use this time? Have you used any of them in the past? Would you potentially use any of them in the future? Why or why not?
6. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your writing experiences?

**APPENDIX B**

**STUDENT INTERVIEW: FLOW CHART ACTIVITY**

