INVITED FORUM: SOCIAL JUSTICE

Journal of Communication Pedagogy
2021, Vol. 5, 55–61
© The Author(s) 2021
Reprints and permissions: http://www.csca-net.org
DOI:10.31446/JCP.2021.2.09
Central States Communication Association

Invisibility as Modern Racism: Redressing the Experience of Indigenous Learners in Higher Education

Amy R. May and Victoria McDermott

Keywords: Native, Indigenous, colonization, intercultural communication, racism, instructional communication

Abstract: Indigenous Peoples represent the smallest group of ethnic minorities in the United States, and they are significantly underrepresented in the academy. The tumultuous relationship between institutions of higher learning and First Nation Peoples can be explained in part by the use of education to colonize and force the assimilation of Native Peoples. The end result of centuries of dehumanization and marginalization is invisibility, "the modern form of racism used against Native Americans" (the American Indian College Fund, 2019, p. 5). Educators are challenged to identify institutional inequities and redress barriers to promote social justice through informed and genuine practice, indigenization, and curriculum development that reflects intercultural communication competence.

Centuries of oppression and dehumanization in Eurocentric[1] educational systems have resulted in a tumultuous relationship between institutions of higher learning (IHL) and First Nation[2] Peoples. As scholars working within these racist and oppressive systems, we have a responsibility to support

1. Eurocentric is a collective term used to describe educational practices that frame Indigenous knowledge as "primitive, barbaric, and inferior, centering and privileging European methodologies and perspectives" (Battiste & Henderson, 2009, p. 6).
2. Indigenous Peoples and First Nation Peoples are used interchangeably to present the descendants of the first inhabitants of the Americas. The terms are capitalized "to signify the cultural heterogeneity and political sovereignty of these groups" (Bird, 1999, p. 2). Native American is used only when represented by a direct quote, and Native is used as an adjective in line with best practices defined by the Native American Journalist Association (n.d.).

Amy R. May, University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks, AK
Victoria McDermott, University of Maryland, College Park, MD and University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks, AK

CONTACT: amay11@alaska.edu

Native and Indigenous learners as they navigate educational systems designed to invalidate their way of knowing. As non-Indigenous scholars, however, we exist in the "nexus of gray space," navigating the gap (Anthony-Stevens, 2017, p. 84) between the status quo and our "good intentions" (Castagno, 2014, p. 1). Framed in the colloquial, we have an opportunity to "act and talk and learn and fuck up and learn some more and act again and do better" (Oluo, 2019, p. 230) as we partner with larger communities of inquiry to challenge systems that use Eurocentric educational practices as a weapon against Native learners. As such, we advocate for an experiential reflective[3] practice framed by four guiding principles (Crazy Bull,[4] 2014): (a) challenging the settler mentality that frames the Eurocentric higher education in the West; (b) honoring pre-contact Indigenous knowledge educational systems; (c) valuing culturally responsive education as a basic human right; and (d) changing our behavior through genuine, informed practice.

Eurocentric Higher Education: A History of Oppression and Legacy of Systemic Racism

Cornfield (2007) argues, "all people and peoples are living histories" (p. 1). For First Nation Peoples, colonization and the forced assimilation of Native children in boarding schools represents critical histories within the context of Eurocentric education systems that help us understand why, in part, Native peoples remain highly underrepresented in the academy. Only 17% of Native learners continue their education after high school compared to 60% of the larger U.S. population, and undergraduate Native student enrollment has been on the decline since 2016 (PNPI, 2019). As educators, we cannot increase Native student participation and engagement in and with IHLs until we (i.e., non-Indigenous scholars) understand the trauma Eurocentric educational systems inflicted on Native communities through colonization.

Colonization

The legacy of colonization is one of disruption, destruction, and degradation of Native and Indigenous Peoples and their culture. Early settlers from Europe claimed the Doctrine of Discovery, legally and morally granting themselves entitlement to Native peoples and their lands (Miller, 2008). Driven by the "settler mentality" of cultural superiority, Native peoples were challenged to adopt the colonizer culture through Eurocentric education systems or die. Collectively, "education was both a target and tool of colonialism, destroying and diminishing the validity and legitimacy of Indigenous education, while simultaneously replacing it with an 'education' complicit with the colonial endeavor" (Pihama & Lee-Morgan, 2019, p. 2). The primary strategies used by colonizers were boarding schools and forced assimilation.

Beginning in the late 1800s, the U.S. government started forcibly removing Native children from their homes and placing them in government-funded boarding schools. The goal was to weaken and break the cultural identity of Native Peoples (i.e., detribalize), and force their assimilation into Euro-American culture, thereby reducing their resistance to colonization efforts (Pihama & Lee-Morgan, 2019). One

3. Reflection is intentionally used as opposed to a "research" project. As noted by Smith (1999): "The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized people. It is a history that still offends the deepest sense of our humanity" (p. 1).
4. Delivered during her keynote address at the 27th Annual National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in American Higher Education.

of the first government-sponsored boarding schools[5] in the lower 48 states opened in 1879 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, by General Richard Pratt who argued his model of education would "kill the Indian . . . and save the man" (Pratt, 1892, para. 1). The Carlisle Indian Industrial School's model for forced assimilation was adopted across North America. The boarding school model arrived slightly earlier in pre-statehood Alaska, opening in 1878 in Sitka by missionaries (Alaska State Archives, 2019). The children were forced to speak English, adopt Christian ideals, and learn about the "greatest" of Western cultural norms and values (Alaska State Archives, 2019). The documented trauma and abuse these children suffered was profound; moreover, the loss of their children destroyed many families and their villages. This forced assimilation continued for decades, and between 1950–1960, 70% of Indigenous children were in boarding schools where their home language and cultural practices were forbidden (Robinson-Zanartu, 1996).

Although many generations suffered cultural deprivation and abuse in these boarding schools during their century of operation, it wasn't until the late 1970s that the U.S. Congress outlawed the forced removal of Native children from their families (Treuer, 2019). Centuries of oppression in the European colonial process of education resulted in "intergenerational trauma and multigenerational deficits, benefits, grief, and distrust of non-Indians" (Pewewardy & Frey, 2004, p. 35). The legacy of trauma has resulted in skepticism and disdain for institutions of IHLs. IHLs were (and are) perceived by some Indigenous learners as "irrelevant, hostile, and unwelcoming" (Brayboy et al., 2015, p. 155), adding little value to Native communities and lessening students' knowledge of traditional skills needed for tribal life and survival, especially in the Arctic. As non-Indigenous scholars, we must honor the trauma inflicted by Eurocentric educational practices and change how we function within these oppressive systems. Without this acknowledgment, we risk continuing the destructive cycle of dehumanization and marginalization (the American Indian College Fund, 2019), resulting in invisibility, "the modern form of racism used against Native Americans" (the American Indian College Fund, 2019, p. 5).

Herein lies the challenge for many non-Indigenous educators: How do we shift power in a way that invites, promotes, and supports Indigenous students to self-direct their learning and validate their culture and lived experience? We don't have *the* answer to this question, but in the next section, we affirm the importance of our work as communication scholars and share strategies for promoting visibility through intercultural communication competence. We end by sharing the story of one Native learner who fundamentally shifted our way of knowing.

Indigenous Knowledge, Culturally-Responsive Education and an Opportunity to Change Behavior

Jefferson Keel, executive board president for the National Congress of American Indians, underscores the importance of communication for Native communities by noting "our future success as tribal nations is directly linked to how effectively we communicate, and advocate for, the issues important to all of our people" (National Congress of American Indians, n.d., p. 2). As such, communication instructors play a critical role in empowering Native learners to tell their stories and bring about positive change for their people. However, we are challenged as educators to create inclusive learning communities that support the development of fundamental skills in a way that will support "a long and varied history of storytelling

5. The authors acknowledge that we are oversimplifying and omitting important history regarding Native boarding schools. For more information about the boarding schools, the *Civilizing Fund Act,* and the schooling of Alaska Native people, see Barnhardt (2001) for a historical overview.

and culturally unique ways of communicating with one another and with other communities" (National Congress of American Indians, n.d., p. 9). Indigenization or Indigenous knowledge honors and maintains strong cultural connections to the traditional ways of knowing despite the experience of colonization and forced boarding schools (Smith, 1999). As educators, we have the ability as leaders in our respective learning communities to provide space for Native and Indigenous knowledge (i.e., make them visible). Thus, we offer strategies for dismantling educational practices that "view cultural knowledge as unrelated units" and provide opportunities for our students to "think critically about their world and what is happening to them" (Pewewardy & Frey, 2004, p. 35). We strive to make our Native students visible through building intercultural communication competence and respecting communication differences.

Intercultural Communication Competence

Traditional communication basic courses often maintain strict requirements and rubrics to evaluate students' communication abilities within a narrow scope defined by topic selection, content structure, the ability to cite "credible" sources, and Westernized ways of communicating during formal delivery. However, First Nation Students' cultural communication norms[6] may vary significantly from the requirements of Western communication practice. For Native learners, these Western educational practices may represent a colonial mindset wherein Native knowledge and ways of knowing are deemed inferior to Western standards, continuing centuries of oppression (Tachine et al., 2017). One strategy is to encourage informative and persuasive speech topics that provide the opportunity for Native learners to share their language, culture, and ways of knowing, situating their culture at the intersection of their educational experience and showcasing knowledge that far exceeds "their ability to memorize facts" (Pewewardy & Frey, 2004, p. 35) or research a random topic that does not speak their lived experience. Providing these opportunities to express their culture are critical for Native learners "to be alive as tribal people" (Crazy Bull, 2014, 35:05).

Storytelling is another integral part of Indigenous communities that should be celebrated as a form of public speaking. Ignoring storytelling as a structure and organizational framework invalidates Indigenous educational systems and cultural norms, limiting equitable access to education. Moreover, the traditionally accepted norm of citing academically approved sources discredits and undermines the cultural norms of elder knowledge in Indigenous communities. Ultimately, the perpetuation of only Western ways of knowing have and continue to "crowd out other epistemological and ontological possibilities" (Stein, 2019, p. 144) and further "discredit the knowledge possessed by dominated people" (Pewewardy & Frey, 2004, p. 35).

Communication Differences

Western standards of eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, and posture are often the standard by which we measure competence. However, these Western standards do not align with many of the communication norms for Native learners. Forcing them to adopt Western communication standards reaffirms the colonial mindset by treating their cultural practices as deficient (i.e., adapt to our cultural norms or fail). This "deficit syndrome" has defined the educational experience for many Native learners (Pewewardy, 2002). Such specific standards for nonverbals and verbals can directly contradict cultural norms within Native communities. For example, making eye contact can be seen as disrespectful,

6. The authors recognize the unique cultural identity of each tribe, and the dangers of defining a generic standard by which all Native learners communicate. The framework provided here serves as a starting point for understanding the differences between Native Peoples' communication practices and Western communicative norms.

especially when power differentials exist (i.e., professor and student). Children are often taught to respond to questions using their eyebrows, as opposed to verbalizing "yes" or "no," a practice that carries over for many Native learners in the classroom. As previously noted, elders are seen as credible sources, and openly challenging an elder is perceived as disrespectful (Stiegelbauer, 1996). One of our most powerful failures occurred during a public speaking intensive. We were attempting to use debate to introduce some of the basics of persuasion; however, we noticed the students were uncomfortable engaging in the activity. Following the activity, we asked the students to reflect on the experience. This was when we learned that we had placed all the elders on one side of the argument and all the younger community members on the other. We had inadvertently asked the students to break their culture norm of respect and regard for elders as knowledge creators and sharers to argue against those they considered their community teachers (Stiegelbauer, 1996). Ultimately, the perpetuation of cultural norms centered around Whiteness, can "create isolation and alienation for non-White students despite no overt racial animus" (Tachine et al., 2017, p. 800).

Listening and Learning: Joanna's Story

In addition to our failures, we offer one of the most profound experiences that fundamentally shifted how we define our role as educators. We witnessed the legacy of trauma and its impact on Native learners firsthand when we worked with Joanna,[7] a student in the communication basic course. She disclosed she was educated in boarding schools outside of her village where she was told she was "stupid" and "incapable of learning" because she was Native. When she put "pen to paper" she was "haunted" by the "ghosts" of her educational past, resulting in what she described as a paralyzing inability to complete the assigned coursework. As we listened to her story and worked with her over several months, we struggled to fully understand her trauma as "American Indian people realize the atrocities that have been committed against them far better than the larger society" (Pewewardy & Frey, 2004, p. 35). Moreover, we struggled to support her in a way that validated Indigenous knowledge systems.

To support Joanna, we had to become listeners and learners (the American Indian College Fund, 2019), waiting for Joanna to invite us into her space, affording us this opportunity to fail, to learn, and to change our approach to education. First, utilizing Indigenous practices of peoplehood matrix (see Holm et al., 2003; Tachine et al., 2017), we had Joanna tell her story freely, without constraints. Allowing her to engage in storytelling, while providing positive affirmations and demonstrating active listening, Joanna slowly started to feel more comfortable talking with us. As Joanna shared her story, we took notes with her permission to reformat the information to fit within the Eurocentric required class rubric. At the end of the conversation, through our collaborative effort of Joanna speaking and us listening/writing, we created Joanna's first complete speech outline. Joanna had not even realized that we had completed the entire assignment within our hour of talking. For Joanna, this validated that her story and her experiences could be translated into the Eurocentric education system she had once been told she was "too stupid" to engage in.

During the first two speech presentations, we sat silently on the phone without interruption as Joanna recorded her speech to provide a sense of community and support. By adopting a "learner mindset," we were able to establish trust, affirm her way of knowing, and build a meaningful interpersonal relationship to support her sense of belonging. With this newfound confidence in her ability to engage

7. Out of respect for the student and to ensure her privacy, we have used a pseudonym and omitted identifiable descriptors. Joanna's story is told using her words as detailed in a letter sharing her experiences.

with the Eurocentric education system, Joanna directed her own learning, defined the rules for classroom engagement, and has started the journey to reconcile the ghosts of her past. During the editing process for this piece, we checked in on Joanna. She is continuing to meet her educational goals and working toward degree completion, constantly challenging and defying the "ghosts" that once haunted her.

Conclusion

Fleming (2006) argued "because many people have such limited knowledge of Indians, we are, arguably, among the most misunderstood ethnic groups in the United States" (p. 213). This quote still rings true as the struggles of Native Americans remain invisible, and the traumatic legacy of Eurocentric education continues to negatively impact and impair the success of Native learners in higher education. To bring about change and earn the trust of Native communities, educators must become learners, challenging Western ideals of communication practice as the standard by which we evaluate and judge communication competence. Furthermore, as we heed the cries for social justice and reform, we are urged to reflect on our teaching practices, acknowledge different ways of knowing, and make genuine and informed change.

References

Alaska State Archives. (2019, September 26). Boarding schools Alaska. https://archives.alaska.gov/education/boarding.html

the American Indian College Fund. (2019). Creating visibility and healthy learning environments for Native Americans in higher education. https://collegefund.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Creating-Visibility-and-Healthy-Learning-Environments-for-Natives-in-Higher-Education_web.pdf

Anthony-Stevens, V. (2017). Cultivating alliances: Reflections on the role of non-Indigenous collaborators in Indigenous educational sovereignty. *Journal of American Indian Education, 56*(1), 81–104. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/jamerindieduc.56.1.0081

Barnhardt, C. (2001). History and culture: Boarding schools. *Journal of American Indian Education, 40*(1). http://www.ankn.uaf.edu/curriculum/articles/CarolBarnhardt/HistoryofSchooling.html

Battiste, M., & Henderson, J. Y. (2009). Naturalizing indigenous knowledge in Eurocentric education. *Canadian Journal of Native Education, 32*(1), 5–18. https://acurriculumjourney.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/battiste-henderson-2009-naturalizing-indigenous-knowledge-in-eurocentric-education.pdf

Bird, M. (1999). What we want to be called: Indigenous Peoples' perspectives on racial and ethnic identity labels. *American Indian Quarterly, 23*(2), 1–21. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1185964

Brayboy, B. M. J., Solyom, J. A., & Castagno, A. E. (2015). Indigenous Peoples in higher education. *Journal of American Indian Education, 54*(1), 154–186. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/jamerindieduc.54.1.0154

Castagno, A. E. (2014). *Educated in Whiteness: Good intentions and diversity in schools*. University of Minnesota Press.

Cornfield, P. J. (2007). All people are living histories which is why history matters—A conversation piece for those who ask: Why study History? https://www.academia.edu/30424509/ALL_PEOPLE_ARE_LIVING_HISTORIES_WHICH_IS_WHY_HISTORY_MATTERS_A_conversation_piece_for_those_who_ask_Why_study_History

Crazy Bull, Cheryl. (2014, June 27). NCORE 2014 keynote [Video]. YouTube. http://web.archive.org/web/20210525184037if_/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ps0pJx8hOE

Fleming, W. C. (2006). Myths and stereotypes about Native Americans. *Phi Delta Kappan, 88*(3), 213–236. https://doi.org/10.1177/003172170608800319

Holm, T., Pearson, D., & Chavis, B. (2003). Peoplehood: A model for the extension of sovereignty in American Indian studies. *Wicazo Sa Review, 18*(1), 7–24. https://doi.org/10.1353/wic.2003.0004

Miller, R. J. (2008). *Native America, discovered and conquered: Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, and Manifest Destiny*. Praeger Publishers.

National Congress of American Indians. (n.d.). Effective tools for communications and leadership in Indian country. http://www.ncai.org/news/tribal-communicators-resources/NCAI_ConferenceBooklet_FINAL_SinglePage.pdf

Native American Journalist Association. (n.d.). Reporting and Indigenous terminology. https://najanewsroom.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/NAJA_Reporting_and_Indigenous_Terminology_Guide.pdf

Oluo, I. (2019). *So you want to talk about race.* Seal Press.

Pewewardy, C. (2002). Learning styles of American Indian/Alaska Native students: A review of the literature and implications for practice. *Journal of American Indian Education, 41*(3), 22–56. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24398583

Pewewardy, C., & Frey, B. (2004). American Indian Students' perceptions of racial climate, multicultural support services, and ethnic fraud at a predominantly White university. *Journal of American Indian Education, 43*(1), 32–60. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24398562

Pihama L., & Lee-Morgan J. (2019). Colonization, education, and Indigenous Peoples. In E. McKinley & L. Smith (Eds.), *Handbook of Indigenous Education* (pp. 19–27). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-3899-0_67

PNPI. (2019, October 26). Factsheet: Native American students in higher education. https://web.archive.org/web/20210222104135/https://pnpi.org/native-american-students/

Pratt, R. H. (1892). Official report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction. http://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/sites/all/files/docs-resources/CIS-Resources_PrattSpeechExcerptShort.pdf

Robinson-Zanartu, C. (1996). Serving Native American children and families: Considering cultural variables. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools, 27*, 373–384. https://doi.org/10.1044/0161-1461.2704.373

Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. Zed Books Ltd.

Stein, S. (2019). Beyond higher education as we know it: Gesturing towards decolonial horizons of possibility. *Studies in Philosophy and Education, 38*, 143–161. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-018-9622-7

Stiegelbauer, S. M. (1996). What is an elder? What do elders do?: First Nation elders as teachers in culture-based urban organizations. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies, 16*(1), 37–66. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242253356_WHAT_IS_AN_ELDER_WHAT_DO_ELDERS_DO_FIRST_NATION_ELDERS_AS_TEACHERS_IN_CULTURE-BASED_URBAN_ORGANIZATIONS

Tachine, A. R., Cabrera, N. L., & Yellow Bird, E. (2017). Home away from home: Native American students' sense of belonging during their first year in college. *The Journal of Higher Education, 88(*5), 785–807. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2016.1257322

Treuer, D. (2019). *The heartbeat of wounded knee: Native America from 1890 to the present.* Riverhead Books.