The Post-Pandemic Achievement Gap in Indigenous Students in a First-Semester Mixed-Level Language Course

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Abstract

This paper analyzes data from Native American students' attainment in a first-semester Spanish language course at an indigenous-serving institution before, during, and after the pandemic. The gap between Native American and non-Native American students increased during the first post-pandemic semester to the point that just one out of 11 Native Americans passed the course in the fall of 2021. After that, the gap between Native American and non-Native American students gradually narrowed until reaching the lowest failing grades of 23% in the spring 2023. In my teaching, Native American students benefit from a classic teaching style involving longer lecture time, monitored note-taking, consistent attendance requirements, in-person communication, and clearly communicated differentiation strategies for grading. This may align with the cycle of learning outlined by Benally (1994): Nitsáhákees (Thinking), Nahat'á (Planning), Iiná (Living) and Sihasin (Assuring).

Keywords: *COVID education, achievement gaps, Native American students, indigenous pedagogies, culturally-responsive teaching*

Introduction

This paper presents a case study in which I examine the performance of Native American students enrolled in a first-semester Spanish course in comparison to their non-Native American counterparts. Specifically, I analyze the outcomes of DFW grades (D=failing grade, F=non-attendance, W=withdrawal) among Native American students and non-Native American students at Fort Lewis College, a public liberal arts institution located in Southwest Colorado. Native American students at this college benefit from a full tuition waiver, incurring mainly in fee charges. This information is public through the college database which I accessed through *Ask Analytics*. This case study investigates students' performance before (Fall 2019), during (Fall 2020-Spring 2021), and after (Fal 2021-Spring 2023) the COVID-19 pandemic.

This paper seeks to respond to the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What is the disparity in failing rates between Native American and non-Native American students in Spanish 101 classes?
Research Question 2: Which pedagogical modifications appear to be effective in supporting Native American students for academic success?

To address these questions, I present the amount of DFWs among Native American students in my Spanish courses against non-Native American students. I qualitatively examine the pedagogical strategies I applied during post-pandemic learning loss to reduce the achievement gaps between Native American and non-Native American students. Native American students encompass those registered to United States reservations, representing diverse tribal indigenous nations like Diné (Navajo), Comanche, Lakota, Ute, Apache, Pueblo, but this also includes Alaska Natives and Pacific Islanders. Non-Native American students include individuals of various ethnicities, including White, African American, Hispanic, and others. To maintain clarity, the terminology "Native Americans" and "non-Native Americans" will be used throughout the study. Also, in reference to the population, I'll refer to them as Diné since this is most commonly used by students when stating the cultural origins. Their name using tribal language is Diné, while "Navajo" was a label given by the Spanish conquerors.

This paper starts by describing the student population at Fort Lewis College and the development of my Spanish courses, to follow with a comprehensive examination of the existing literature on several key themes, including post-pandemic learning setbacks, and achievement disparities within racialized student populations. Following this literature review, I outline my research methodology, to later present quantitative data and findings derived from *Ask Analytics*. Finally, I discuss the noteworthy qualitative aspects of pedagogical strategies that seem to support better the Native American students.

Regarding my positionality, I identify as a Hispanic mestiza gender-conforming woman from a middle-class background. I originated from Colombia and relocated to the United States at the age of 29 to pursue a linguistics degree at the University of Florida. Later, I settled in Southwest Colorado after stumbling upon a job opportunity. My fascination with indigenous languages, folklore, and customs dates back to my undergraduate days, where I participated in the study group Mitakuye Oyasin (Universidad del Valle, Colombia).

The Setting

Fort Lewis College (FLC) is a small liberal college located in Durango, a tourist mountain town in Southwest Colorado, where Native Americans receive a 100% tuition waiver. They comprise 45% of FLC's student population, representing 185 tribes and villages (Ashike, 2018; Fort Lewis College website). The town is just one hour drive from New Mexico and close to Arizona and Utah as well, forming the "Four Corners" region. Ute and Diné reservations are located closest to the college. Fort Lewis was formerly a military base and a boarding school. In 1910, the federal government sold the property to the state of Colorado with the requirement to make a tuition-free institution for Native Americans. In 1927, the first Liberal Arts courses were offered.

Before the pandemic, the World Language Department was discontinued, and the Spanish program, the last survivor, started collaborating with the sociology department to create an interdisciplinary program on Borders and Languages, with Janine Fitzgerald at the forefront and Spanish professors: David Vásquez-Hurtado, Carolina Alonso, and Ana María Díaz Collazos (the author of this paper). I designed the course Music and Borderlands: Spanish 101, where I teach Spanish and Caribbean culture through cumbia, reggaeton, and salsa. I will call it Spanish 101 for the sake of simplicity.

The course follows a rich curriculum that allows students to develop their own Spanish-speaking skills from their respective proficiency levels. Most students were beginners, but some intermediate, advanced, or native speakers of Spanish had the opportunity to develop their skills.

With no college-wide language requirement, I made the class marketable by including culturally immersive activities such as singing, dancing, playing instruments, or interactive activities involving traditional Hispanic games. Conversation activities derive from some cultural content implied in the course. For example, we study Mexican cumbia with Selena and the song *Como la flor*, which repeats "Ay ay ay cómo me duele," meaning "How much it hurts." We learn the parts of the body and the vocabulary related to hurting. Then, students practice the verb "hurt" with some part of the body. Intermediates, advanced, and native speakers of Spanish add an explanation of why it hurt and something they would do to alleviate the pain. Students sing at least the refrain of the song, play percussion, and learn the basic steps of Mexican cumbia.

For an overview of the course structure, you can refer to the Open Access Resource I published on Pressbooks: *Multigrade Spanish and Caribbean Music: A Textbook in Borders and Languages* (Diaz-Collazos, 2023). This consists of 537 pages (71 chapters) in its PDF download. This textbook closely follows the curriculum outline with some additional content, providing practical examples that illustrate how Caribbean music can be integrated into a multigrade educational environment.

The pandemic hit just one semester after launching the new program. While I moved some content online, the college encouraged professors to teach hybrid in the midst of the pandemic following strict sanitary precautions. The first fully in-person course was in the fall 2021, where among the 11 Native American students registered in the course, only one passed the course. The course was fully immersive at the time, but after the pandemic the Native American seemed overly disengaged. Initially I applied intuitive changes to the course material, but after engaging in this research I started making them more intentional.

Review of the Literature

The study by Coleman and his colleagues (1966) revealed that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds experience lower academic achievement. In the United States, the combination of racial segregation exacerbates this disadvantage, particularly among Black, Native American, and Hispanic students. Years after the Coleman report, the situation is not better. Darling-Hammond (2015) shows that, compared to other wealthy countries, the United States shows the most unequal investment in K12 (primary, middle and high school) districts, which makes students at disadvantaged communities less prepared to obtain a college degree. Efforts to desegregate schools started in the 1960's have regressed by the 1990's and 2000's, thus racialized ethnicities are the most affected by lack of resources. Teacher training, curriculum quality, school supplies and extracurricular activities are more limited for African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans, which comprise an opportunity gap.

After COVID-19, it is crucial to analyze how these disparities may have deepened the opportunity gap and how various ethnicity groups have been impacted differently. While ensuring access to food and housing remains a fundamental prerequisite for enabling education, there is a clear need for more research-backed insights when it comes to teacher training, suitable curriculum development, and effective teaching methodologies. Ladson-Billings (2009) endorses the notion that culturally responsive teaching methods offer effective strategies to enhance the educational experiences of African American students. Utilizing culturally-meaningful materials boosts academic achievement for this population. For example, she shows evidence that the best teachers for African Americans are those who are immerse in the community, and bring African American cultural products like hip hop while using African American Vernacular English in the classroom.

During school closures, the students missed the opportunity to acquire academic skills and may have forgotten others, a phenomenon called "the learning loss" documented in several countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Angrist, Bergman & Matsheng, 2021). Patrinos, Vegas & Carter-Rau (2022) created a quantitative method for meta-analysis of 81 studies on the post-pandemic learning loss across 20 countries with samples from each continent. Moscoviz & Evans (2022) performed meta-analysis of 40 studies in several countries in Europe and sub-Saharan Africa as well as in India, Brazil, Mexico and the United States. Their results indicated that learning loss and school drop-out rates were more pronounced in lower socio-economic classes, particularly in economically disadvantaged countries. Even after the pandemic subsided, the increased reliance on screens persisted among tweens and teens (Hedderson et al., 2023; Rideout et al., 2021), which shows that the mechanisms of learning loss may be in place long after the lockdowns.

In the United States, the pandemic exacerbated the existing disparities in academic achievement between students from higher-income and lower-income households, particularly in communities that endured inadequate connectivity during the pandemic. According to a study by Dorn et al. and Viruleg (2020), educational institutions primarily serving African American and Hispanic students faced a higher likelihood of enduring prolonged closures. Kuhfeld, Soland & Lewis (2022) noted a decline in math and reading achievement in the United States according to standardized tests, with significant gaps between schools with low and high poverty levels. Furthermore, the pandemic-induced isolation and health concerns gave rise to heightened mental health issues, as noted by Viner et al. (2022) and Moscoviz & Evans (2022).

The pandemic hit Native American communities, especially those on the Diné reservation, disproportionately harder than the rest of the United States. In a report by Cahalan et al. (2021), the Native Americans showed the largest decrease in college enrollments compared to African Americans and Hispanics (p. 71 & 91), the lowest access to Internet (p. 49), and the greater number of self-supporting students (p. 85). Wang (2021) discusses how counties in the Diné territory reached the highest picks of COVID cases per capita compared to data in the rest of the United States. Lack of proper access to health care or higher incidence of other illnesses may have been the culprit. This resulted in intensified mental health issues related to isolation and illness (Viner et al., 2022).

Even before COVID, Native American students consistently scored lower on academic assessments not only compared to their White counterparts, but compared to other racialized groups such as African Americans and Hispanics (Brayboy & Lomawaima, 2018; Brayboy & Maaka, 2015). Given these circumstances, it would not be surprising to observe a widening achievement gap among Native-American students compared to people of other ethnicities during and after the pandemic.

Territorial isolation was an additional burden Native American communities endured during the pandemic, while being more vulnerable to domestic violence, food insecurity and the need to hold employment to support their families. There are reservation areas where WiFi coverage is non-existent and there is not even electricity infrastructure. Students had to travel hours to reach spots with connectivity (read "It's exhausting" by the Guardian). As an educator, I witnessed instances where students would participate in online classes from their cars perched atop a hill, the only spot where they could access a decent internet connection. Some others juggled their responsibilities of caring for their younger family members due to culture-specific obligations. Additionally, I encountered a situation where one student was unable to show her face during class because she had suffered physical abuse from her former romantic partner. There were also numerous cases where students had to be absent from class to fulfill funeral duties.

In the post-pandemic era, there is a clear need for change. Institution and educators should not be doing the same as ever before the pandemic. However, what to do? How do we inform the changes to provide solutions in terms of student achievement? Research shows that the best way to support disadvantaged students is to promote a level of rigor. Despite differences in ethnic backgrounds, maintaining high expectations for all students and holding accountability systems seem true for African American students (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 48 and p. 74). That might explain why African American students exhibited lower performance in standardized tests during the implementation of No Child Left Behind policies in the United States between 2002 and 2007, as noted by Darling-Hammond in 2010 (p. 284). Maintaining high expectations for all students seems the most effective approach to support Native American students (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008, p. 960), and also for African Americans (Eren & Ravitch, 2021, p. 194). Lowering expectations is a biased response and an expression of racism (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008, p. 950).

In my role as a teacher of foreign language and culture, I frequently received requests from Native American students to be excused from certain assignments due to cultural prohibitions. One example is the Day of the Dead, a celebration from Mexican-indigenous origins. In the fall 2019, I organized field trips to El Centro de Muchos Colores, the Hispanic center at the college, where students could partake in cultural activities related to the Day of the Dead. However, some traditional Diné students asked to be dismissed from participation because their culture prohibits exposure to dead-related imagery. Rather than granting them exemptions from participation, I provided guidance to Diné students on how to engage in culturally-appropriate ways during the event. I facilitated open discussions about the cultural distinctions between Hispanic and Diné traditions. This approach allowed students to both honor their cultural values and build confidence in their abilities to navigate cultural diversity.

In sub-Saharan countries, the response to the learning loss resulted in the implementation of a program called *Structured Pedagogy Framework* (Angrist et al.; UNICEF). Key components to the program are teacher trainings, one to one coaching with students, accountability systems, simplified text materials, and greater involvement of families. While some of these strategies were in place before pandemic (Piper & Zuilkowski, 2015), post-pandemic they are contributing to greater academic success on the part of the students (Angrist et al., 2021). The important role of accountability in attendance and participation has been shown by Zhu et al. (2019), whose quantitative study showed that stricter attendance and participation policies correlate with higher achievement rates.

Before pandemic, there were programs aiming to reduce the achievement gap for students of color. Results from such programs may still be useful to inform how to reduce the achievement gap after COVID. An initiative known as Success for All was looking to narrow the achievement gap among African American and Hispanic students in Baltimore (Slavin & Madden, 2001). This program includes elements such as teacher training, a family support team, enhanced access to high-quality learning materials, eight-week assessments, and personalized coaching. It played a significant role in diminishing the achievement disparities during its implementation in the late 1990s. The program shared similarities with the Structured Pedagogy Framework happening today in sub-Saharan countries, such as teacher training, family support, high-quality learning materials, and personalized coaching. Family support and one to one coaching shows the importance of social networks to support students of African descent. Conversely, for Native American students, the teacher's role takes on greater significance compared to the social network. The teacher is expected to embody the concept of the “warm demander,” as stated by Castagno and Brayboy in 2008 (p. 970).

As an authority, the teacher re-enacts the four stages of the life cycle outlined by Benally (1994, p. 29) and Fowler (2002, p. 28): Nitsáhákees (Thinking), Nahat'á (Planning), Iiná (Living), and Sihasin (Assurance). The process of learning reflects the act of creation, as learners engage with the world and internally reconstruct it. They absorb and contemplate knowledge silently, showing reverence for every aspect of creation, prior to applying it practically. While teaching Diné students, I observed a comparable process in my language classes, where lessons followed clear stages that aided in the assimilation of new knowledge and skills. These four stages of the life cycle are represented as four cardinal directions as paths to learning, and have been used to organize the teaching of mathematics through the Diné four-staged cycle (Fowler, 2022, p. 28).

Methods

Ask Analytics at Fort Lewis College provided me with complete data on grade results disaggregated per Native American percentages versus non-Native Americans (which includes Whites, Hispanics, African Americans and others) in my in-person courses of Spanish 101. Native Americans are those who receive the tuition waiver because they have an identification document attesting their enrollment in a federally recognized tribe. Data includes:

- Pre-pandemic data: two fully in-person sections of Spanish 101 in the fall of 2019.
- Pandemic data: all hybrid sections of the course from the fall 2020 and spring 2021, in which there was an in-person component.
- Post-pandemic data: fully in-person versions of the course, with fall 2021, spring 2022, fall 2022, and Spring 2023.

Data for this research excludes fully online courses, and the first-pandemic semester data happening in the spring of the 2020. The first half of such semester I was teaching it with no expectation of quarantine, shut-down, or a COVID pandemic. Authorities announced the shut-down on the Friday before Spring break. A full week after Spring break was taken for the purpose of preparing to move all courses online. Thus, this semester is not comparable to other semesters since the pedagogical policy was not consistently pre-meditated.

Data from DFWs in Spanish 101 courses addresses Research Question 1, while qualitative analysis addresses Research Question 2 in the discussion. To isolate and attribute the observed changes to the modifications I made in my teaching approach, I provide a parallel dataset across all 100-level courses throughout the college. This comparison allows me to identify and distinguish trends that are specific to my own course, and will be most likely attributed to pedagogy modifications.

A prospective question that needs further analysis is whether students are achieving fluency in their Spanish speaking skills. Beginning in the spring of 2022, I initiated the collection of data on how Native American students were progressing in their Spanish language proficiency, utilizing the conversation platform TalkAbroad. Through this platform, students were paired with native Spanish speakers from various parts of the world to engage in conversational practice. The college supported these conversations through my Junior Faculty funding. Addressing this question comprehensively is beyond the scope of our current discussion, since it would require a specific method and theoretical tools from Second and Third Language Acquisition.

Starting spring 2022, students submitted an initial survey in which they self-rated their proficiency level in Spanish and reported any other languages they speak:

- Beginner 1: You know nothing of Spanish.
- Beginner 2: You can produce some words and simple sentences. OR You know French, Portuguese, Italian OR Latin.
- Intermediate: You can produce complex sentences in conversation but need a cooperative interlocutor. OR: You feel you can understand everything you hear, but you're barely able to speak.
- Advanced: You learned Spanish at an adult age and are able to interact with a non-cooperative Spanish speaker.
- Native speaker of Spanish: You know Spanish because you were intensively exposed to the language when you were a child.

Intermediates, Advanced and Native speakers of Spanish are grouped into a single level called the "Advanced domain." *Table 1* shows comprehensive results from such surveys.

Table 1: *Proportion of Indigenous Students per Level*

	Non-Native Americans	Native Americans	
	N	N	%
Beg1	11	25	69
Beg2	46	14	23
Advanced Domain	10	1	9
Total	67	40	37

Note: this includes data from hybrid and in-person Spanish 101 courses in from the spring 2022 to the spring 2023 according to the Getting Started Questionnaire students submit at the beginning of the course.

This survey shows that among the 107 students who submitted their responses, 69% of Beginners 1 were Native Americans. The vast proportion of these students know nothing of Spanish, but they do come from a bilingual space where their mother languages are spoken. Within the Diné reservation, tribal regulations enforce the Diné language and culture by teaching it in the K12 institutions across curricula (McCarty et al., 2015, p. 242). Even when they underreport their proficiency in such Native American languages, they are at least passive bilinguals in that language and sustain the traditions of their home cultures. In addition to having never taken Spanish before, Spanish will become their L3 (third language) through my class.

Results

Table 2 shows the percentage of Native Americans who received DFW grades (failing grades like D or F and withdrawals) among the total of Native American students, compared to their non-Native American counterparts, enrolled in my Spanish 101 course. *Table 3* shows comparable data concerning the incidence of DFW grades in all 100-level courses across the college. The term "Native Americans" refers to individuals who are eligible for the Tuition Waiver due to their documented residency in an indigenous reservation or their status as descendants of such residents. The category "Non-Native Americans" encompasses Whites, Hispanics, African Americans, and others.

Table 2: *BL101: Beginning Spanish 1 - DFWs in Native American (= Indigenous) verse Non-Native American (= White, African Americans, Hispanic, and others)*

	Fall 2019		Fall 2020		Spring 2021		Fall 2021		Spring 2022		Fall 2022		Spring 2023	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Native Americans	3	13	3	13	1	7	8	73	9	43	7	30	6	29
Non-Native Americans	3	10	3	10	1	13	2	17	1	9	3	10	1	13
TotalNatAm	15		19		8		11		21		24		21	
TotalNonNatAm	30		27		15		12		11		31		8	

Note: Data was provided by *AskAnalytics* at Fort Lewis College. TotalNatAm=total of Native American students registered in the course, TotalNonNatAm=total of non-Native Americans registered in the course.

Table 3: *100-level courses College-wide – courses where Native American (= Indigenous) obtained DFWs verse Non-Native American (= White, African American, Hispanic, and others)*

	Fall 2019		Fall 2020		Spring 2021		Fall 2021		Spring 2022		Fall 2022		Spring 2023	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Native Americans	689	23	1277	37	868	36	1135	33	856	35	829	27	1,316	24
Non-Native Americans	553	16	598	17	443	19	509	15	353	14	547	14	901	12

Note: Data was provided by *AskAnalytics* at Fort Lewis College. N=Amount of courses where Native Americans or non-Native Americans received DFWs. Totals of Native Americans versus non-Native Americans are omitted since number of courses multiplied by Native American students may be too high to include in the table.

As depicted in *Table 2*, the widest achievement occurred in the fall 2021 semester in my Spanish 101 courses, the first fully in-person semester following the pandemic. Among the 11 Native Americans registered, only one passed the course. In 100-level courses across the college, the widest gap happened in fall 2020, one year earlier than in Spanish 101, with 37% Native American DFWs against 17% non-Native Americans. Such difference between Spanish 101 and 100-level courses may imply something specific to Spanish 101. Following the fall 2021 semester, my course follows a gradual reduction in DFWs among Native American students: 73% in fall 2021,

43% spring 2022, 30% in fall 2022. During spring 2023, 29% of my Native American students received DFWs compared to 24% Native American students college-wide. Spanish showed a sudden decline in the achievement gap in the fall 2021 different with the most gradual tendencies college-wide. At the same time, Spanish 101 shows a faster decline in the achievement gap than college-wide.

Discussion

Why did Native American students perform particularly poorly in Spanish 101 compared to college-wide 100-level classes in the fall 2021? Students who enrolled in Spanish during the fall 2021 and spring 2022 semesters were those who endured almost two years of K12 school closures, with a "learning loss" of their social skills necessary to develop languages. Since Native Americans experienced the most extreme isolation, they were most notable enduring loss of social abilities necessary to taken on language learning.

In response to this situation, I deliberately implemented a structured approach in my classroom that mirrored the four stages of Diné learning cycles outlined by Benally (1994, p. 29): 1) Nitsáhákees (Thinking): characterized by extended lecture periods where students predominantly listen, 2) Nahat'á (Planning): guided note-taking, 3) iiná (Living): application of knowledge into conversation and immersive cultural activities, 4) Sihasin (Assuring): regular exams, secondary deadlines, face-to-face communication, and explicit differentiation to ensure understanding and proficiency. These are also stated as part of the pedagogical philosophy in the Diné College

Long Lecture Periods with Individual Writing and Immediate Feedback (Diné Concept of Nitsáhákees, Thinking)

Contrary to common practices in language teaching, I take a longer portion of the class periods to lecture on a specific grammar, music, and/or cultural topic. Around 15-20 minutes of the class revolve around lecture where I speak slowly with long pauses. I take the time to use the white board to write vocabulary and grammar while students listen or perform repetition drills. As a Hispanic professor, these long periods of silent make me feel awkward and uneasy, but I have gradually learned to distance myself from such feelings. All students, Native American and whites alike are active during these periods by thinking and meditating the material.

Monitored Note-Taking (Diné Concept of Nahat'á, Planning):

After students have listened to my lecture, I stay silent for 5-10 minutes for students to take notes. I strategize by distributing information between the PPT and the white board. I let students make photos of the PPT. I delay the change of slide if I note at least one student still taking notes from that slide. Students can use their phones only for class-related purposes, and it is something I enforce through attendance grades.

I keep brand-new notebooks available in my classroom for students who may not have their own adequate note-taking materials. I ask students to perform brief written exercises in their journals. These are the same exercises the students will use during conversation. I use tutors or myself to review the journals to see whether they have written the correct material. In one occasion, I noticed a student attempting to write on a malfunctioning notepad, then I gave her a brand-new notebook to take notes. I explained that I would store it in the classroom for her to use during the

semester. I would return it to her before the exam for study or she could make photos of the journal. Students who have benefited from this intervention have consistently achieved passing grades in the class.

While lecturing, I explicitly tell the students what is worthy to write in their journals and how content would fit various entry levels (Beginners 1, 2 or advanced). I allow for all the time students need to take notes while I propose further activities for those who move faster. This lets appropriate silent times for students to process the material before we move to active conversational practice. While this helps students of all ethnicities, note-taking also increases confidence in the language abilities among Native American students with a sense of correctness. Students submit their class notes as photos on Canvas.

I have observed some Native American students putting extra effort to their note taking than students of other ethnicities. These students record the class material with clearly drawn charts, lists, bullets, and color-coded signals. I observed one Native American student taking a photos from every single slide of my presentation. When I approached to him, he was transforming that information into colorful lists with novel ways to reframe the same information. I learned from this student visual approaches I could use to present grammatical information on the white board. When moving to conversational activities, this student was focused on his note-taking. I encouraged him to continue the note-taking at his own pace while others where on conversation. This student reached full achievement of the material, and I noticed gradual improvement in his ability to engage in conversation.

After COVID, many 100-level students of all ethnicities in my class were not taking notes spontaneously. The pandemic broke their note-taking skills, and they needed the opportunity to relearn them. Students who start the semester as Beginners 2, typically white, are still able to obtain passing grades in the exams despite not taking notes because of their previous Spanish experience. They also navigate the Internet efficiently when in need to pull down information required to study for an exam. Native Americans greatly benefit from keeping their notes stored in an organized manner for study purposes.

Immersive Cultural Activities and Conversation (Diné Concept of iiná, Living):

The second segment of the class, typically lasting about 25 minutes, is dedicated to practicing Spanish through conversation activities and culturally immersive experiences such as singing, dancing, drumming, or role-playing. This corresponds to the third step of Diné pedagogy or iiná (Living), which implies having experiences with the knowledge. This interactive conversation phase operates more smoothly with minimal reliance on dictionaries or questions. To facilitate this, students are asked to move the tables and chairs to the sides of the room, creating a spacious central area. While standing, they engage in conversations with random classmates. It's expected that students use Spanish during this conversation practice, but they are also allowed to engage in small talk with their peers in English. This casual English interaction serves the purpose of fostering social connections and building confidence.

Some of the more traditionally-oriented Native American students may not readily engage in spontaneous small talk. In response, I decided to introduce a prompt that encourages them to include some English in their interactions. For instance, when discussing daily routines using the present indicative in Spanish, students would be prompted to provide in English additional details about a particular routine. They can expand on what they said in Spanish by adding some event that broke their routine, and they can use English to tell this story. This adjustment helps Native

American students gain confidence in using English to establish social connections with their peers. They gradually improve conversational habits with students of all ethnicities, but they notably prefer to engage with peers of their same ethnicity.

I create all practice conversations on small pieces of paper as fixed templates with various levels of complexity to choose from, following principles of Universal Design (Thousand et al., 2015). Students stand in an outer circle and another circle within it. The students in both circles face one another. The inside circle moves in one position, so everybody gets to speak with every other person. This way, students have the chance to interact with speakers of all levels. All students focus on verbs for their own level while being exposed to other kinds of verbs as implied in the list.

An example of a conversation template is as follows:

> A: *¿Cuándo* (=when) ______________ (add a conjugated verb in you-form)?
> B: *Yo* (=I) ______________ (add a conjugated verb in yo-form) ___________ (add an expression of frequency).
> *caminar* (=to walk), *dibujar* (=to draw), *trabajar* (=to work), *estudiar* (=to study), *bailar* (=to dance), *manejar* (=to drive), *correr* (=to run), *barrer* (=to sweep), *hacer deportes* (*yo* form=*hago*; to play sports), *escribir textos* (=to write text), *jugar* (=to play, U turns to UE) and *dormir* (=to sleep, O turns to UE)

I circulate around the classroom to observe that students develop translanguaging (García, 2011) strategies to deal with a speaker of higher or lower proficiency. Some grammar does not require a separate language lesson since they are implied in conversation: possessive pronouns, preposition selection, or number and gender agreement.

While the conversation templates are readily accessible on the Open Access textbook, I recently introduced a new method involving physical handouts in the classroom. Each student receives a compact sheet of paper containing the conversation content for the day. They can make notes or annotations on it as needed, and then participate in the conversation circle using these handouts as references. Subsequently, students store these conversation sheets in envelopes provided by me, which they place on their respective tables. I collect these envelopes and return them in the following class for review. They collectively go through all the conversations included in the handouts. As a result, by the time they stand up for the conversation activity, most students have already memorized at least a portion of some conversations and replicate them in front of their peers with variations and creativity, even when it is not mandatory to do so. One student mentioned that her Diné instructor on the reservation would offer small paper slips matching predetermined conversational structures. These slips were then collected, arranged, and affixed onto paper, forming a compilation of dialogues kept in a folder: “pretty much as you do in your classes with the envelopes,” he said.

Among strategies that help Native American students this research shows that culturally-relevant content does not necessarily play an important role in fostering achievement for students of such ethnicity. My course provides opportunities to compare and connect tribal cultural practices from Latin America to Native American cultures in the United States since fall 2019 and has remained that way until the present, and achievement gaps have still occurred. In addition to that, such content has triggered numerous requests for assignment dismissals due cross-cultural conflict. I list some examples below:

- In one assignment, students had to pretend they were performing a magic ritual and provide in-video instructions for the purpose of practicing telling directions. One student asked me to be dismissed from this assignment because he was not allowed to perform spiritual endeavors. I asked him to perform a ritual that did not involve magic like boiling a cup of tea. He followed the adapted guideline, and his work still fulfilled the goal of the assignment.
- One discussion board asked to students connect lyrics from Colombian cumbia music to aspects of their own folk tradition. One Diné student started her contribution clarifying that she was disallowed to tell folk stories during fall. Winter time is the period of story-telling because then the animal spirits are hidden and wouldn't listen. She wrote that, despite that prohibition, she would tell at least part of the story.
- Pueblo cultures celebrate the Day of the Dead, but this breaks cultural prohibitions for the Diné students. I proposed students two options to substitute full participation: 1) to produce a written essay on the Day of the Dead and a comparison to dead rituality in their home culture, or 2) to still be present during the activity and observe quietly while not being required to actively participate. All students prefer the second option.

In all cases, my response involved some adaptation of the assignment in a way that still met the overall purpose of such activities. In the spring 2022, I added the following trigger warning to my syllabus:

> This course deals with sexual abuse, grinding, violence, witchcraft, drug and alcohol consumption, demonic references, pagan rituality, among other triggering topics. The videos and lyrics may suggest nudity, victim blaming, violence or incitation to violence, or racial slur. You're required to find culturally-appropriate ways to address these issues when required in an assignment. You can email me if you need guidance on how to address a triggering topic, but you're still required address every issue and respond to all assignments in the same level of difficulty as for your classmates.

Requests to be dismissed from assignments have totally stopped since then. Effective pedagogical support for Native American students of various cultures does not include especial accommodation. However, I am aware that culturally-relevant content to Native American students in the first semester may add unexpected complexity to an assignment, and would require additional scaffolding.

Accountability and Flexibility through the Diné Concept of Sihasin (Assuring)

This approach entails students taking ownership of their learning journey by being accountable to me as their primary source of guidance. Within this framework, the utilization of traditional written exams for midterms and finals demonstrated effectiveness. Concurrently, incorporating explicit areas of flexibility within a reasonable timeframe enabled students to navigate challenges and persevere with resilience. This entailed providing alternative deadlines when necessary, prioritizing face-to-face communication over email, enforcing strict attendance policies coupled with occasional opportunities for makeup assignments, and clearly articulating differentiation strategies for varying skill levels. These explicit areas of flexibility provided students with Sihasin, which may also be translated as "hope."

Classic Written Exams for Midterm and Final

In the fall of 2021, instead of traditional midterm and final exams, students engaged in two TalkAbroad conversations as part of my effort to create a more experiential learning environment. Native American students were hesitant to participate in these conversations, and just one out of 11 in 2021 produced the assignment despite the significant weight in their overall assessment. In the spring of 2022, I introduced conventional written exams for the midterm and final, and in the fall of 2022, I eliminated the high-stakes conversations altogether. Even students who had previously shown signs of disengagement in class took the written exams, and some exhibited improved attendance rates afterward. This is consistent with previous school experiences as reported in literature: the program called Success for All in Baltimore reduced the achievement gap for African Americans and Latinos by incorporating exams in 8-week intervals (Slavin & Madden, 2001). While the program included other measures such as one-to-one tutoring, examinations and grades serve as a means of holding students accountable while also fostering active engagement.

The examinations in my class are customized per student's proficiency levels, whereby the majority of Native American students are Beginners 1. Such strategy serves to the purpose of reducing insecurity in their ability to perform well in the exams, and to produce an assessment tool that addresses entry proficiency levels with equality. Even after such customization, Beginners 1 take longer to respond to the exam than students with higher entry proficiency levels. When I started introducing such customized exams, some students would approach to me seeking reassurance with question of the type: "Do we only have questions for Beginners 1?" Their relief is notable in their facial expression when they confirm this. Such students would decide to take the exam before considering to withdraw from the class.

Before the onset of COVID, I used to administer oral exams in my office, where students engaged in conversations with their peers with an open-ended prompt. While differentiation was not explicitly emphasized, Native American students were generally willing to participate in these tasks more than after COVID. It appears that, in the post-COVID context, Native American students require additional support and guidance to feel comfortable with such open-ended prompts, as they may now be more inclined to withdraw from such interactions.

The Secondary Deadline

Deadlines are well established on Canvas, but they're just symbolic references to time. I grade every submission at full credit no matter when the students turn it in, and I grant every request for an extension. During the spring of 2023, I implemented something I called a "secondary deadline." When students don't submit an assignment, I use the Gradebook function on Canvas to email students with no submissions, and I tell them they have one week more to submit such an assignment. I don't closely monitor the fulfillment of such secondary deadlines, but providing a time frame helps the student expedite their submission. If a Native American student asks me for an extension, I grant the extension with a specific deadline I decide. Usually, after that secondary deadline, students don't request a further extension and take full responsibility for their missing work.

In their first year, Native American students rarely seek extensions for missed assignments unless they have specific ceremonial obligations. It is often more effective for the professor to take the initiative and offer an extension, as there are instances when they miss assignments for reasons

they might not consider legitimate. Navigating a complex schedule during their initial year in college can be challenging, leading to missed assignments. In my view, this is a valid reason to request an extension, although students may not always realize it. When I proactively offer an extension, I do so with a demeanor that is not overly accommodating but rather serious and firm, which tends to be more effective in motivating students to submit their missing assignments.

The In-Person Communication

In my experience, first-semester Native American students tend to be more responsive to in-person communication rather than to email, which may be due to an underlying cultural issue (Brown & Lopez, 2021). In the spring 2023 I had a group of Native American students who always worked together. When one of them was missing an assignment, I asked: "You didn't submit the quiz. Please submit it on Saturday" and the student indeed submitted the quiz after the in-person request. This may involve discussing grades in the classroom while other students may potentially overhear the conversation, which may compromise the student's right to privacy. The notion of privacy may be an individualistic-oriented concern for the White professor, but the Native American student may not be perceiving the interaction within the mindset of privacy. In fact, the Native American may value sense of visibility in the classroom when the professor initiates a discussion on their academic performance.

Discussing grades may also happen in casual interaction outside the classroom. Being a Hispanic professor, I personally value lunchtime as a precious moment for relaxation and socializing. That's why I choose to have my lunch in the student dining hall. During this period, I greet familiar students and gently remind them about attending class. This interaction doesn't feel like an additional obligation to me.

I have noted that Native American students tend to be reverent and obedient to my authority. If I honor my role as an elder to the Native Americans in a consistent manner, the students seem more engaged in the classroom activities. The appearance of rigor (even as a theatrical artifact) provides students with a sense of safety in a predictable environment that abides by certain rules, which, in turn, creates confidence in their own ability to learn. Native Americans in their third year of college, in my experience, have most commonly acquired protocols of email communication and navigate flexibility with more confidence. However, first-year students need fixed in-person communication strategies to build confidence.

Explicit Attendance Policy

During 2022, some students still missed class for COVID-related reasons, so I kept the make-up assignments in place, and I didn't allow zoom attendance substitutions when the class was delivered in-person. I worked with more detail on the creation of the make-up assignments that included video, Spanish speaking, structured grammar drills, and culturally immersive activities. I didn't require students to provide evidence that their absences were due to COVID, but the assignments are still more challenging than coming to class. Native American students, however, tend not to complete video assignments when they miss class, and they do better with occasional written assignments. I reached a middle point by creating short written assignments to make up for Friday's attendance.

Such method works like a strict attendance policy rather than as a flexible policy because the make-up assignment is difficult to overcome. However, this reduces anxiety for overachievers

in the occasional cases they need to miss class, and helps the failing student take full responsibility for their results. I also enjoy not being engaged in sterile attendance negotiations with students. Requesting official notes to excuse a student's absence may require extensive email exchanges and tense conversations, especially when the student did not compile the official excuse note. Granting excuses for students have not obtained an official note may result in lack of equity. The professor's time maximizes its value when focused on pedagogical activities such as classroom planning, and revising and providing feedback on student's work.

The Spiral Curriculum for Language Differentiation

My class integrates students of all entry levels of Spanish for which I use a spiral curriculum, suggested by Bruner (1977, p. 52 and 53), whereby the same topic is repeated across the curriculum with gradual outward expansion. For example, in the second week of classes, I introduce all three conjugations in the present indicative in Spanish, but I tell beginners that they'll need to learn only a small portion of the conjugation. By week 5 I teach again the conjugations with some irregularities for higher levels, while beginners 1 are told to master a greater portion of the material. Explicitly telling what I expect for beginners 1 seems to reduce anxiety in the students who have never studied Spanish, which are usually the Native Americans.

Native American students often experience intimidation when they interact with their White peers, as noted in K-12 settings (Masta, 2018). This is true in my own classroom experience, but because of the diverse proficiency levels they notice from the first class. This situation arises because non-Native American students most often have prior experience with Spanish from high school, while Native American students have been devoting their times to develop English and their tribal language. In response to this, I explicitly acknowledge these varying proficiency levels exist, and that it is due to outside schooling circumstances not connected to ability. I publicly recognize the extra effort it takes to start learning a third language with zero experience with such language from the beginning.

Conclusion

There is a consistent achievement gap between Native American and non-Native American students that widened once the effects of the pandemic were felt in fall 2021. The gap in my Spanish 101 courses is higher than college-wide but is narrowing faster than college-wide. In my point of view, such disparity between Spanish and other courses is connected to the language issue. Students spent their final years of high school experience in isolation from their peers, and this might have delayed the development of socio-linguistic skills. This situation seemed to be more intense for Native American students who also deal with territorial isolation and language insecurities. When I started applying more structure and accountability for the students, the achievement gap between Native American and non-Native American students reduced gradually until reaching college-wide levels. This may be due to the enactment of the Diné learning cycle (Fowler, 2022, p. 28): 1) Nitsáhákees (Thinking), long lecture periods where students only listen, 2) Nahat'á (Planning), which includes monitored note-taking, 3) Iiná (Living), structured conversation and immersive cultural activities, and 4) Sihasin (Assuring), written exams, explicit attendance policy, secondary deadlines, in person communication, and explicit differentiation. When class is predetermined by these stages not only the Diné students but students of all ethnicities and cultural backgrounds thrive.

Further research is necessary to determine how these findings may be applicable to African American or Hispanic students. Based on my own experiences, I have noticed that African-American students tend to respond more positively when I position myself as a friend rather than as an authority. In contrast, Native American students tend to be more responsive when I adopt a more authoritative role. I have observed that African Americans have a remarkable ability to absorb and process language information through listening, often requiring fewer notes compared to students of other ethnic backgrounds. Sometimes, African American students might be mistakenly perceived as disengaged because they are not consistently taking notes, yet even jotting down just five words per lesson can prove sufficient.

A great benefit of such findings is the simplicity of application. Implementing this response on a college-wide scale appears relatively straightforward and should not necessitate additional training for professors. Findings are contrary to a body of literature criticized by Castagno & Brayboy (2008, p. 954), according to which Native American learning styles are more holistic, hands-on, practical, and field-oriented. Native American students I have encountered in class tend to respond better to highly structured material instead of experiential material, which may mirror the stages of Nitsáhákees (Thinking), Nahat'á (Planning), Iiná (Living) and Sihasin (Assuring) involved in the silent path of knowledge. These students feel more confident in their acquired abilities if they have taken notes, reviewed their material, and made sure that they are going to use them properly, which aligns with Castagno & Brayboy (2008, p. 962). Native Americans highly value silence, attention, and listening (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008, p. 955; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Swisher & Deyhle, 1989), which sometimes white teachers misinterpret as disengagement. Experiential learning and culturally-relevant material may even add unexpected complexity to Native American students which is not playing a role in reducing the achievement gap.

It is also worth noting that the college-wide achievement gap was the lowest in the spring 2023, and this is when an efficient system of academic alerts was fully working. With this system, professors are able to communicate low performing students to a designated team including the Associate-Provost Kris Geer. The team initiates phone contact with the low-performing student. This system aligns with my findings whereby the Native American students tend to respond more positively to physical communication rather than email alone. This also increases accountability in front of an authority figure, and aligns with the concept of Sihasin (Assuring), by openly enacting a sense of responsibility.

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