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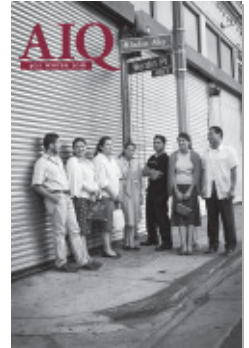
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## Basic Empowering Strategies for the Classroom

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## EDITORIAL COMMENTARY

### Basic Empowering Strategies for the Classroom

DEVON A. MIHESUAH

I have been teaching about Native history and culture since 1988, while I was still in graduate school and after I had completed most of my PhD requirements. I was allowed to teach first-year American history classes and to guest lecture in the American Indian History Survey course while I studied for my comprehensive oral and written exams. In retrospect, it is clear that teaching helped me to study and pass my exams, but teaching others also taught me more than a few things about how students of different racial and cultural backgrounds respond to lecture material.

It was my perception that the majority of students were upper-middle-class whites who had little knowledge about people of color. History professors were traditional, that is, they taught facts and figures and never discussed controversial issues. The American Indian history courses were “safe” in that never once did professors mention the terms “decolonization” or “empowerment,” nor did anyone ever talk about author bias, theory, or the importance of considering Native voices. Anytime I mentioned controversial topics in my lectures, such as repatriation, colonization, the disastrous colonization policies, or even racism, I was challenged and informed on end-of-semester student evaluations that I was trying to be “politically correct” and was “making things up.” Indeed, unless the students were already aware of the realities of racism, prejudice, and territoriality in academia (and in real life), then many of them expected to receive an education that made them feel comfortable in their positions as privileged citizens of the United States. It was taken for granted that Indians lived in the past and that the white (male) professors know best.

I then taught for ten years in the history department at Northern Arizona University where I created and taught thirteen courses on Native

history and culture. I always received above-the-college-mean evaluations, but I also never failed to receive a few comments similar to patriotic ones I got as a graduate student (in addition to nationalistic students, I also had to deal with territorial professors, but that story is addressed in *Indigenizing the Academy*). Although a professor can try, he or she cannot expect to win over every student, especially if those students hold deeply ingrained racist attitudes or have never before interacted with anyone outside their cultural group. Changing everyone's reality in the classroom is pretty much impossible. You may not want to be that intrusive, anyway. But you can try to educate.

After I moved to the new Applied Indigenous Studies (AIS) department, I encountered completely different receptions to my lectures. I basically taught the same material I always have, but only in AIS have I seen almost across-the-board enthusiasm. There is an obvious reason for this: The majority of the students enrolled in the AIS courses are Indigenous who, unlike mainstream students who feel like they are being "force fed" information about Natives, want to hear the information because it directly impacts their lives. Many Native students face serious problems and any encouraging remark and empowering strategy is welcomed with open ears. Properly managed AIS courses are unique in that we can focus on the needs of tribes, not just areas of interest to students with no intention of using the information for greater good. I am able to put my array of works on stereotypes, methodologies of writing about Indians, repatriation, women's history and feminism, activism, history, education, and literature to good use in my lectures and class discussions.

Those professors concerned about tribes retaining culture are the ones most appealing to Native students, but they are the least appealing to most non-Natives. Why is that? One reason may be that many non-Natives feel like the professor is attacking them for past and present events. I have learned that some argue this stance regardless of how inclusive the instructor tries to be. Some students think that "Indian topics" have no bearing on their lives, and therefore they have no interest in them. If you end up with these people in your class because they could not find any other course to take, it is up to you to make certain that you follow your personal ethics and teach honestly and energetically.

Non-Indian students often feel out of place in courses in which many Natives are enrolled. Honestly, it is difficult to speak to a class designed for Native students when the room is full of students who are not im-

pacted by the realities of tribal life. Ironically, even if the class is full of Natives, the task still might be challenging because not all Natives are from the same tribe, nor are they from the same socioeconomic group. This has made for some tense moments, especially during discussions about inter-and intratribal factionalism, Christianity's influences, and racism in the United States. Still, they at least have an inkling of the ideas I bring to the table.

Many studies have previously explored alternative ways of teaching Native students. That is not the purpose of this article. Rather, I draw on my sixteen years of teaching courses on Native history, culture, and current events to bring together ideas and suggestions based on what has worked for me. I define success as having the majority of students—both Native and non-Native—say they feel inspired, enthused, and eager to learn more.

#### HOW WE ARE SLOWED DOWN

Teachers must recognize that there are obstacles to teaching topics dealing with Natives. Indigenous studies exists within the academy but usually within a colonialist structure. The program in which I teach is no exception, but at least I have the freedom to teach according to my style. You may have problems yourself with your chair or colleagues who expect you to teach in a certain fashion in order for you to receive tenure and promotion. Still, you can provide provocative and informative lectures while operating within the parameters your department sets for you.

Even if the classroom is yours to manage the way you see fit and even if you have a large Native enrollment, you will still have a variety of students in your classes, each with their own set of baggage. Native students, especially, bring with them an array of issues. Problems faced by Native students in universities are similar to what Natives faced at federal boarding schools. Unless professors are well-versed in tribal happenings, they usually will be unconcerned with the troubles Native students face on or off campus. For them, it is “business as usual” and the students who cannot “cut it” are left behind to drop out or fail. Until they get to know you, many Native students will indeed expect you to behave in the same prejudicial manner.

One of the major problems facing Native studies is Boarding School

Syndrome (BSS). Another is that professors concerned about proper teaching also have to deal with university bureaucracy. Many universities are eager to advertise their Native programs. The problem is, just because a university has a “Native Studies” department or major as part of its curriculum does not mean that program benefits Natives. It sometimes does not mean much even if the professors are Native. Unless those Native professors are knowledgeable about and dedicated to decolonization, then you may as well have a non-Native representative of the status quo in there. Indeed, a Native who behaves just like the colonizers can actually be worse than a white colonizer. I have witnessed situations in which Native professors were staunch advocates of fighting anyone who had a desire to help students with decolonization and empowerment strategies. They epitomize those Natives who have found a comfort level in their roles as token minorities in a white system.

As Tewa educator Gregory Cajete has said, “The chair an Indian individual, tribe, school, or organization gets depends not only on how well you have learned to play the game, but how many compromises of spirit and authenticity you are willing to make to appease the political, bureaucratic, and industrial controllers of the game.”<sup>1</sup> Vine Deloria Jr. concurs: “Professors stand more chance of getting their ideas accepted if they are immensely popular with their peers than if they actually have something to contribute.”<sup>2</sup> On top of that, many AIS and Native American studies (NAS) programs have become “dumping grounds” for those professors and instructors who, because they cannot succeed in their home departments, are allowed to join an AIS department (often because the home department wants to get rid of them). As a result, some students receive an inferior education.

An administration that pretends to admire tribes’ cultures by incorporating many classes about Natives into the curriculum does not mix well with the reality of academic racism and ignorance, which is why we see so many potentially useful programs fail. Many professors are so caught up in theorizing about Natives that they have no idea what life was, or is, like for Natives.

We have read much about the importance of retaining cultural knowledge. We also know that mainstream education does not promote that goal. Many universities want window dressing, that is, Native faculty and staff on display, but they do not want Native ideologies included into the curriculum. This is why we see white professors on many campuses teach-

ing American Indian studies courses who refuse to ask Native scholars on campus to speak in their classes (at my university, for example, the work of Native faculty on the campus is rarely, if ever, used).

Native studies programs are a boon to the university because they create the illusion of just how “sensitive” and “concerned” the university is to Native people. In reality, many of these schools have no commitment to quality; their only concern is to have numbers in the classroom. If they can fool grant-giving agencies into giving them money so they can perpetuate the programs, then so much the better. These programs exist because they cater to those professors who need jobs and to students who want to know a little bit about Natives’ history, literature, and religion, what Yuchi educator Daniel Wildcat refers to as “educational tokenism.”<sup>3</sup> If these Native studies programs cannot fit Native students’ needs and wants into the Western discourse, then we have nothing more than the same old curriculum that does nothing to promote tribes’ well-being.

Political intrigue in the academy is complex, and there is not enough space here to explore the various problems in the ivory tower. Regardless of the tough realities that Native professors, students, and our allies face, we must keep in mind that Native students are hungry for inspirational words. They want to hear that they have rich histories and cultures and that the mean stereotypes they see and hear everyday are fabrications designed to make the colonizers feel better.

So how can concerned instructors, professors, parents, tribal leaders, and elders help Native students in becoming empowered and inspired to seek out more information about decolonization? The reality is that there is only so much we can talk about in the classroom. We are often handicapped by curriculum committees and departmental regulations. Certain topics such as religion and other culturally sensitive information is not appropriate for professors to discuss. But there are plenty of other topics to address. Students cannot be taught everything about Natives, mainly because no one knows everything about Natives. But even if professors possess have a vast amount of knowledge stored away, because of time and especially because of moral standards, we cannot tell them sensitive information anyway. What students can be taught is that tribal histories and cultures are unique, rich, and diverse. They can be taught how to look for author bias and how research should and should not be conducted. They can be taught ways to recognize stereotypes and bias in writings and conversations, including their own, and methods used when

writing about peoples of other cultural, racial, and gender groups. They can be given enough information so they can consider how to mesh their tribe's needs with their own.

Knowledge is power. I tell my Native students that even if they do not agree with the versions of history they read, or if they do not like a certain professor, they are still gathering knowledge. Nothing is wasted. After reading a variety of works they will be more capable of discussing topics with authority and having points of departure for their arguments. They should be made aware of not only the topics of author bias and manipulation of information strategies but also of how historical events put them in the situations they are today.

There are certain topics that I discuss in every class I teach, whether it be about politics, literature, or history. One is that all the various areas of Native studies—policy, Indigenous rights, identity, health, literature, history, religion, philosophy—are intertwined, and I tell students at the onset that there is no way that I can see to discuss one area without bringing in aspects of the other areas. Another focus topic includes effects of colonization, and another deals with decolonization strategies. All of these topics are appealing to Natives, but using this strategy opens the eyes of non-Natives who thought they knew everything there is to know about Indians from watching *Dances with Wolves* and reading Tony Hillerman novels. And they are topics complex enough to be discussed throughout the semester in a variety of lectures.

After teaching Native and non-Native students for many years, it is my belief that if we are going to teach about Indigenous histories and cultures, it should be honest, useful, and provocative. Very few people can tolerate listening to a professor who drones on about dates and places. The human factor is what people like to hear about, and that is what they can relate to.

Hearing only negatives about the past and present does not get us anywhere either. Hawaiian behavioral health services director Poka Laenui says that “Some people are happy to go no further than mourning, finding sufficient satisfaction in long-term grumbling. People can be ‘stuck in the awfulizing’ of their status as victims. Some build careers on it.”<sup>4</sup> So, our goals should not be to focus on negative events and histories. We need to get to work to solve problems that face us today.

The ideas here are designed to build self-confidence, to inform students about their contributions to society, and to place them on the path to find more knowledge in order to assist their tribes. In the process, stu-

dents gain inspiration to help themselves. We should strive to create survivors, not victims who depend on others to bail them out of tough situations.

What follows is not a true course syllabus. Lists of reading materials, test schedules, and so forth are omitted. What I have here are topics that I have found to be not only among the most important concepts about Native studies for students to learn but the concepts that my students have responded to the most enthusiastically.

No matter what courses I teach, whether it be history, methodology, writing, women's studies, policy, or a general Applied Indigenous Studies introductory course, I always include the following themes. Some of these issues are courses in themselves, and all of them can be molded to fit into the course topic. Keep in mind the comment made by Daes, that "Victims of oppression not only lose interest in self-preservation but also find it difficult to maintain their relationships as parents, friends, and neighbors. If you have been made to feel irrelevant, you cannot understand why anyone could possibly love you, and you anticipate betrayal from anyone who tries."<sup>5</sup> It is up to us to help students respect themselves so they in turn can assist their communities.

Professors who teaches courses on minority issues may not always have minorities in their classes. In those cases, it is crucial that the teacher take great pains to treat very student with respect. Hopefully, we are all doing this already, but keep in mind that many white students become immediately defensive when any topic of racism, oppression, or injustice arises. Many students will believe that you are picking on them regardless of how evenhanded you are. Some actually hope that you really do insult them so they can take you to task.

I have talked with many professors who teach Native history and culture courses who complain about how white students treat them with disrespect and bash them on end-of-semester evaluations. They say that no matter how careful they are not to say that "whites are guilty," students will continue to claim that you are prejudiced against them. I have had students do this to me on evaluations, but in the past ten years and after teaching hundreds of students, only a handful seemed to want to criticize me. Those who do, however, have a planned agenda, and they are intent on making a point.

Being inclusive is the best strategy for teaching classes that contain volatile lecture material and white enrollment. Learn everyone's name. Call on all students, not just the Natives. Do not assume that non-Natives are racist or that Natives are all victims. Making assumptions about their



values, motivations, and intelligence will only get you into deep trouble. Be positive, not negative, and you will win over the hardest hearts.

#### INTRODUCE YOURSELF AND THE PURPOSE OF THE COURSE

Most professors introduce themselves and tell the class their office hours and how their grades will be calculated. Instructors who work with Native students must do more than this. Native students are used to hearing racist and stereotypical information from teachers, and they want to know from the start where your allegiances are focused. If you are a member of a tribe, then introduce yourself as such.

Many professors believe that politics should stay out of the classroom, but with Native courses, especially those populated by Native students, politics is the classroom. I would say that anyone teaching “minority” courses, especially, needs to make it clear from the first day that all students—regardless of race and gender—are welcome and that the instructor wants to thoroughly educate the class on the course topics. Students must be made aware that included in the canon of the field is much work that does indeed “bash” white men—and women. There is a growing literature about how history and culture has been written and how Natives are treated by those with little concern for tribes’ well-being. One way to get the point across is to present a brief exposé of stereotypes of Natives on the first day of class and make it clear that Natives have been forced to deal with these images for hundreds of years.

Included in your introduction should be a statement about the responsibilities of Native scholars. Tell them how you perceive yourself and why. Are you an activist? Then tell them what you teach and write about. Among the comments that one can include are the price of doing nothing to empower oneself and one’s tribe; the duties Natives have to tribe, self, and family; and the realities of tribal life. I tell my students about the university structure and how courses are approved (and disapproved), the statistics of how many Indians are scholars and professors, what many of us believe are our responsibilities, statistics of Indigenous peoples in school, and dropout factors.

You also can include a few comments about American Indian studies as a discipline and the politics surrounding who studies American Indians and why. I want students to understand that social, political, religious, and economic aspects of Indigenous life are interconnected and

that tribal histories and cultures cannot be understood without an awareness of the fields under the heading of Native American or Indian studies. This introduction sets up the context of the class and lets students know about the complexity of Native studies. This also allows those racist, close-minded students to leave your class and your life.

#### POLITICS OF NAMING

Names are identifiers. Naming and labeling is political, and students must know the controversies over the term "Indian." Explain to the class why it is that you use "Indian," "Native," "Native Americans," "First Nations," "Indigenous," or whatever. Students also should hear what it is that various tribes call themselves. For example, "Navajos" say "Dineh," "Choctaws" say "Chata," "Winnebagos" say "Ho Chunk," "Papagos" use "Tohono O'Odham," and so forth. Names can be empowering or insulting to Natives, and teachers must attempt to be respectful. A useful exercise is to write these names on the board and ask the class what they use and why. Most of my students laugh nervously at this exercise because other than saying "It's the term my parents use," they have no clear reason as to why they prefer one term or the other. Be sure you tell students why you use the terminology you do. I prefer "Indigenous" or "Native" because both imply that the people of this hemisphere were created here and did not migrate from the Old World. It is an activist statement that directly challenges anthropologists.

Most students have not heard the terms "colonization," "decolonization," "ethnocentrism," or "sovereignty." While they may have heard of empowerment, racism, stereotyping, and nation building, they may not know how to define them. Write the terms on the board and ask students what they mean and why they are important words for a Native person to understand and use. For the lecture on labeling, talk to students first about the terms they use, then have them read Michael Yellow Bird's "What We Want to be Called" and ask if the essay changed their thinking.<sup>6</sup>

#### CYCLES OF WRITING AND STUDYING ABOUT AMERICAN INDIANS

A study of almost any topic dealing with Natives involves a look at history. A discussion of the cycles of history is imperative to students' understanding that history is often an author's creation of stories of past

events. Students should be exposed to the current theoretical debates over what constitutes legitimate source materials (such as oral histories and written stories), researcher responsibilities and ethics, methodologies of interpreting of tribal cultures—including gender roles—and the benefits of cross-disciplinary inquiry.

Topics to include under this heading might be the trends in studying Natives, how incorrect history damages present-day peoples, the different ways history data is collected, and the politics of historical interpretation. Students need to be aware of these different views of how Native history should be written. There is much racism and territoriality swirling about in the field of Indigenous history. It also is an exclusive field in many respects because those in charge often refuse to use Native voices in their attempts to assess what may have happened in the past. Have students read Angela Cavender Wilson's essays, "Grandmother to Granddaughter" and "American Indian History or White Perceptions of American Indian History?" for dynamic discussions of the major issues in Native history today.<sup>7</sup>

#### STEREOTYPES

Within the first two weeks of class I include a slide show of stereotypes of Natives. For my courses on Native women I have a full carousel of slides that focus specifically on stereotypes of females. Discussion of stereotypes teaches several lessons. It reveals how ignorant mainstream American culture is of tribal cultures, and it shows that students have been mis-educated in the past because they believe what they see in the movies and on television. It informs students of how damaging stereotypes are to the self-esteem of Natives, especially youth. I have taught entire history courses to great effect by following stereotypes. Some of the most common stereotypes that never fail to get either laughs or outrages, but always good conversations among the students, are that Indigenes:

are all alike  
were conquered because they were weak and powerless  
could have prevented the European invasion if they had banded together  
had no civilization until Europeans brought it to them; Euro-american cultures were and are superior to Indigenous cultures  
arrived in this hemisphere via the Siberian Land Bridge

were warlike and treacherous  
had nothing to contribute to Europeans or to the growth of America  
did not value or empower women  
have no religion  
welcome outsiders to study and participate in their religious ceremonies  
are a vanished race  
are confined to reservations, live in tipis, wear braids, and ride horses  
have no reason to be unpatriotic  
get a free ride from the government  
have their affairs managed for them by the Bureau of Indian Affairs  
are not capable of completing school  
cannot vote or hold office  
have a tendency toward alcoholism  
are all full-bloods  
all have an "Indian name"  
know the histories, languages, and cultural aspects of their own tribe  
and all other tribes  
are stoic and have no sense of humor  
like having their picture taken  
all make money from casinos  
have oral stories that are merely "myths" and "legends"  
Indigenous scholars are unable to accurately chronicle their histories and cultures because they are "too close to the topic" and cannot be objective

Each one of these stereotypes has the potential to branch into numerous other discussions, especially the effects of colonization. A way to facilitate discussion is to ask about the pros and cons of each stereotype and image. For example, my slides on "Indian Maiden Art" show paintings by white artists of Native women in various stages of undress, usually with an animal (wolf, owl, or horse) and they invariably look like white women with dark skin. Some Native students have been furious and insulted at the images, while others see them as "beautiful" and have asked me how they can get one of the paintings. Another issue that students are particularly interested in is a comparison between the nations, that is, they want to know how tribes differ historically and in present day in regards to language, religion, gender roles, dress, shelter, economies

(what they ate and how they procured food), political systems, and so forth. Many Native students have no knowledge about tribes besides their own, and even then they may know little about their own culture.

#### THE EFFECTS OF COLONIALISM

Because this large heading is the foundation of the current state of Native America, these topics also are the foundation of most of my courses. Native students must learn this information in order to understand how they arrived at their present conditions. Those who express interest in Native history and culture need to know the following aspects of their history in order to understand why some Natives may appear to be angry and defensive:

- loss of land
- loss of population
  - war, sterilization, disease, policies of genocide, and low birth rate as a result of poor health, changing cultures, and removal/relocation
- dependency on material goods that resulted in competition between tribes
- alcoholism and other forms of self-abuse
- competition among tribes for material goods
- change of environment—loss of plants and animals
- gender role change
- factionalism within tribes or inter- and intratribal differences that lead to “culturalism” and “ethnocentrism”
- extreme change in health conditions (obesity, diabetes, heart disease, etc.) from regressing from a diet of vegetables, fruits, and game meats and an active lifestyle to a processed, fatty, salted diet and sedentary lifestyle
- dilution of cultural knowledge
- dilution of “Indigenous blood”
- depression and other mental problems associated with being disempowered
- internalizing colonial ideologies (BSS is part of this)
- feeling confused about identity
- continued subjugation of Natives because the ideology of manifest destiny is still in effect

loss of intellectual rights  
stereotyping  
continued monitoring of tribal governance policies and procedures  
by the federal government  
the colonial power structure stays in power because of all of the  
above; as a result Native voices are subsumed, dismissed, and/or  
devalued in politics, academia, the entertainment industry, and  
publishing

These topics meld into each other; for example, when I talk about the impact of missionaries, that leads to discussion of tribal cultural change, the rise of patriarchal thought, the dismissal of women's once valued places in traditional cultures, and modern-day abuse of females. A discussion about forced education leads to an exploration of BSS. I have discovered that if you plan on delving into the issue of religion you must go slowly and be prepared to back off; some Natives in my classes are Mormons with an exalted sense of morality, and no amount of discussion about racism based on skin color can reach them. Discussion of the power structure today leads to talks about who writes history and modern culture, from what perspective and who is respected as an authoritative voice and, importantly, who is not. The Siberian Land Bridge debate reveals how it is used to the benefit of anthropologists who still insist on studying skeletal remains of Natives.

#### EMPOWERMENT STRATEGIES AND RECOVERING TRADITIONAL INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

Indigenous communities must preserve their social, political, economic, and religious knowledge in order to pass it to the next generations. They also must protect it from misuse by others. A tribe's traditional knowledge defines that community's uniqueness and explains its relation to the world. For Indigenous people, knowledge of the past is crucial for their identity growth and development, pride, problem-solving strategies, and cultural survival. Studying the Native past offers solutions to current problems such as food production, human and animal health, education, natural resource management, understanding treaty rights, and land claims and ultimately, is indispensable to keeping that culture alive. One way to impress upon students the enormity of the topic is to

have them log onto the informative Development Gateway page that provides information about Indigenous knowledge in a global context.<sup>8</sup>

An inclusive view of the past can educate readers about the contributions of Natives to the world. Discovering their contributions to the world's diets, to the arts and sciences, and to the U.S. political system is empowering to Natives and can help establish pride and self-esteem. Because the portrayals of peoples and historical events directly impact how their descendants are viewed and treated today, more accurate presentations of the past help to counteract movies, television shows, literature, and cartoons that often portray Natives as savages, buffoons, environmentalists, or supporters of colonialism.

Depending on what you are teaching, you can always incorporate aspects of recovering Indigenous knowledge and empowerment strategies that students can use immediately. In my classes, for example, only brief discussion of the following gets students enthused. Many students have been waiting for that “light bulb” to go off that gives them inspiration and a reason to stay in school; others take it farther and have decided to make careers in policy, environmental science, economic development, or critical writing. Rarely will they not want to learn more.

### *Egalitarianism*

Today we see unprecedented abuse of women in tribal communities. One of the strategies used by women's shelters and substance abuse programs is to teach clients about tribal traditions so they can regain pride in themselves and their cultures. By gaining self-confidences and a strong identity, they lose the need to lash out at others. Women tend to be especially enthused during class discussions about females' traditional tribal roles. After teaching two policy courses I have had two female students declare that they plan on becoming the first female Navajo president (one is in her sixties and another in her early twenties) and one says she will be the first female Hopi chairwoman. Other females have become interested in politics and have either completed their internships in the Arizona State Legislature and Washington DC or are planning to.

### *Decolonizing Your Diet*

The study of how Natives' diets changed from meals of fresh fruits and vegetables and game meats to processed, salty, and fatty foods can assist students in understanding why Natives suffer from an epidemic of diabetes, obesity, and all the problems associated with these diseases. A mental exercise for students that can lead to physical action is to ask them to keep a diary of what they eat for one week. Then have them use a nutrition book to make a chart so they can determine how many calories and how many nutrients each item contained. They also should document how much exercise they get per day and calculate how many calories they use per exercise. This is an intensive assignment and can be confusing, but it gives them a reality check as to not only what nutrients they are and are not taking in but also how many calories they are ingesting versus how much they expend. I did this for one month in high school—that was over thirty years ago—and I have never forgotten how important it is to keep close tabs on what you eat and drink.

After they have completed their chart, the students should then investigate their tribes' traditional diets. For example, the Choctaws of Oklahoma are now suffering from diabetes and obesity and all the problems that result from those illnesses. The tribe traditionally ate a variety of foods: corn, squash, beans, melons, acorns, peas, onions, cherries, plums, pecans, walnuts, potatoes, deer, bear, ducks, turkeys, fish, rabbits, quail, turtles, and other animals. Now they are eating a high-carbohydrate, high-fat, and high-salt diet. Trans fat (partially hydrogenated oils that act as the catalyst for artery clogging) has posed a tremendous problem because it lurks in everything from crackers to coffee creamer to Oreos. In combination with a lack of exercise, the "modern lifestyle" has created tribal Nations of overweight and unhealthy Natives who die before their time. Students who consider themselves to be aware of nutrition are still shocked to have this reality brought to their attention.

If students are non-Native, they can research the diets of the tribes closest to them. This assignment sounds daunting. If you have ever considered your diet or have calculated what you are eating and drinking, it is daunting and humbling (not to mention scary); however, we must take responsibility for our health and for the health of our children and those who cannot make reasonable choices for themselves.



### *Health Care*

Many Native students have experiences with Indian Health Service hospitals and clinics. What they do not know are overall health statistics within tribal nations. A discussion about inadequate diets, alcoholism, mental and emotional problems, and the various physical ailments Natives suffer, in addition to the need for more Native health care professionals, can spur students to explore careers in mental or physical health care.

### *Language Recovery*

Indigenous languages are being lost at an alarming rate. You can encourage students to regain their language. Begin by asking a few uncomfortable questions: If you do not speak your language, why not? What are the barriers keeping you from learning? Often, students do not want to learn because they do not think it is important (these students may have a parent suffering from BSS). Suggest ways that they can learn. Tell students that they do not have to become fluent, that learning basic words, greetings, conversational sentences, and prayers are greatly empowering. If they have no family members or friends who can teach them, they can investigate language programs at their university. Tell them to find out if their tribe has language tapes or books available. The Choctaw language, for example, is available through Internet classes and on a variety of tapes and in books. Have your students read *How to Keep Your Language Alive*, which gives ideas for learning and teaching language.<sup>9</sup> The authors write that whenever you learn a new word, teach it to someone else. This is greatly empowering and can help start a “chain reaction” of family and friends wanting to learn more.

### *Policy*

My students are always intrigued to hear about policy as it relates directly to them (and most policies do). It is helpful for students to hear an overview of traditional tribal politics and why the field of policy is of critical importance to Natives. Give them examples of traditional tribal politics of several tribes to press home the point that tribes are not only different, but they had effective systems of governance prior to colonization. Mention treaty rights that include land, water, fishing, and tribal governance

issues. Treaties agreed upon and signed by the federal government and the tribes guaranteed—depending on the arrangement—food, shelter, clothing, lands, and/or education and farming monies. Many of these treaties, however, have been broken, and it is up to Natives to fix them.

Most students are surprised to hear about the European intellectual trends that were influential in creating ideologies and policies that were (and still are) applied to the colonized Native peoples. One way of impressing upon students the direct connection between past and present events is to tell them about the “Doctrine of Discovery,” which, simply put, has been used by the colonists in this hemisphere since 1492. You recall that in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the Crusaders swept into the Holy Lands and territories of the Middle East where they felt they were justified to wage “holy wars” against the “heathens and infidels” (non-Christians) in the name of God. This same ideology is the basis of federal Indian law. That the “discoverers” of this land have a right to develop and refine it according to their culture. Our Founding Fathers acknowledged that Britain was the first discoverer of America and because those who were to become Americans defeated the British, they inherited that acquisition. Read the Declaration of Independence.

Taiaiake Alfred argues in his *Peace Power and Righteousness* that an understanding of traditional political processes and values will enable tribes to “restore pride in our traditions, achieve economic self-sufficiency, develop independence of mind, and display courage in defense of our lands and rights.”<sup>10</sup> All students should make the time and effort to take an “Indian Policy,” “Criminal Justice,” and “Governance” class in order to understand how laws affect them and their tribes.

### *Environmental Science*

Most students are aware of pollution at least. What they may not be aware of are the impacts of environmental problems (pollution, deforestation, etc.) on tribal lands and on the people who live there. Discuss tribes’ responsibilities to the environment (be careful about being stereotypically mystical), the state and federal governments’ responsibilities to tribes, careers in environmental science, and specific examples of what tribes are doing currently to protect the environment.

### *Economic Development*

While many tribes suffer from what appears to be terminal poverty, other tribes such as the Oklahoma and Mississippi Choctaws, Potawatomes, and Pequots have found ways to create money in order to take care of their elderly and their children. Many tribes have earned their own money for health care, language programs, environmental protection, housing, and education. A class debate about the pros and cons of casinos never fails to elicit arguments about Natives sponsoring gambling halls.

### TOOLS

#### *Journal*

Most students cringe at hearing that they must write at least one page a day in a journal, but a course journal is not the same thing as a “Dear Diary.” In the classes that I have required journals, many of those skeptical students commented at the end of the course that they found it a useful, soothing exercise. What they are required to do is write or type at least one page a day about what they think about the lecture or observations they have about television shows, movies, books, or newspaper articles that relate to classroom topics. Students may draw pictures and create short poems to supplement their writings. Students have remarked that writing down their feelings solidifies their thinking and they can better express themselves verbally. Some have happily realized their talents as poets or artists.

#### *Guest Speakers*

Students love to hear from knowledgeable Natives who live in the real world. They bring information about current events, and they can provide role models. Students are influenced by Native intellectuals who “practice what they preach.” After listening to guest speakers Angela Cavender Wilson, Michael Yellow Bird, Levi Esquerra, and James Riding In speak in my classes on language preservation, activism, decolonization, and political involvement in the spring of 2002, some students wept, and several remarked that consistent discussions of decolonization “changed my life.”

### *Empower Your Students*

Professors who disallow students to ask questions in class effectively subsume Native voices, which is the same as the racism those students probably face outside the classroom. Numerous students have complained to me for years about those professors who teach Native topics and who either sigh loudly when a Native student raises his or her hand, is curt with their answer to that question, or becomes angry when a student challenges their authority. While you cannot allow students to take over the classroom and argue every point you make, it is important that their questions be addressed. You can turn those questions into discussion points so the entire class can learn.

You must keep your cool. I have found that Native students and non-Natives who are truly interested in Native issues are mainly polite and are simply curious. Answering their questions is no problem. Where we run into problems are in the courses on Native history and culture that are composed mainly of non-Natives who want to challenge our lectures out of their concern for us being “politically correct.” Oftentimes these types of students want to argue out of spite, racism, and misogyny. It takes a great deal of effort not to become angry, but to become angry is only to the benefit of those racist students who can later use your behavior against you.

Empowering students also means to encourage them to express themselves, to question what they are being taught, and to try and apply what they have learned to a tribal setting. Many non-Natives will resent this, however, so you have to pick and choose your opportunities. Native students rarely get to hear positive comments about their tribes. Students rarely hear from professors that they have a right to question what is taught to them and that they can challenge, debate, and contribute to class discussions. After more than a decade of teaching Native students from a variety of tribes, I can also attest to the reality that many of them have never heard the term “decolonization,” much less a discussion about how colonization has impacted every facet of their lives. Giving them lessons on the above topics can indeed change their lives. Not every Native student will be appreciative of your efforts, but if you can reach only a few each semester, then you have done your job. It is gratifying in more ways than one to receive evaluations that show how much they appreciate it.

## NOTES

1. Gregory Cajete, *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education* (Skyland NC: Kivaki Press, 1994), 190.
2. Vine Deloria Jr. and Daniel R. Wildcat, *Power and Place: Indian Education in America* (Golden CO: Fulcrum Resources, 2001), 129.
3. Deloria Jr. and Wildcat, *Power and Place*, 129.
4. Poka Laenui, "Processes of Decolonization," in *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, ed. Marie Battiste (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000), 155.
5. Erica-Irene Daes, "Prologue: The Experience of Colonization around the World," in *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, ed. Marie Battiste (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000), 5.
6. Michael Yellow Bird, "'What We Want to be Called': Indigenous Peoples' Perspectives on Racial and Ethnic Identity Labels," *American Indian Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 1–22.
7. In *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing about American Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).
8. <http://www.developmentgateway.org/node/130646/>.
9. Leanne Hinton et al., *How to Keep Your Language Alive: A Commonsense Approach to One-on-One Language Learning* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2002).
10. Taiaiake Alfred, *Peace Power and Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), xii.