

Writing and the Specificity of Place

Changes in the Season: Our land and Medicine

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## **Introduction**

Expressing our thoughts and stories through writing, poetry, oral sharing, and pictorial stories of any culture is priceless. There is an art to settling down and listening to anyone who shares these thoughts and stories. In the earlier days, Navajos embedded this art onto the younger generation to preserve our Navajo history and culture. Today our younger generation uses other means of telling and sharing their versions of these generational stories. However, the speed with which they tell and share stories, often through social media, does not do justice to the art of listening.

In the technology-obsessed society of 2020, it is refreshing to connect with relatable essays. The promise of a more holistic education, one that integrated nature and culture, came to a halt. Technology and information are available the stroke of a finger. Small towns like Kayenta were redirected physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually to two-dimensional technologies. But for many, the pandemic awakened the lost trait of listening to nature. Not surprisingly, some Native people reverted to nature. Nature provided helpful instruction during the pandemic, leading to reexamined stories of "red horizons" and "red-colored sunset" in the west which told of upcoming disease. The disease reminds us that we are humans and subject to nature. The arrival of the "red dawn" made many elders retell the stories of bad events to come. Only the lucky ones were able to hear the story from living elders again. With no elders at home, the rest of us had to remember the stories through histories.

What constitutes "living" is defined differently in each ethnic groups. Indigenous people teach what constitutes "living" through stories. Histories reveal accounts of different tribes who traveled and used mother nature's resources helped them to survive. These stories were retold to each generation of Indigenous people to learn the qualities of mother earth's living resources.

The Navajo people are blessed with living resources. Resources like sage, chaparral, pine needles, juniper pines, and roots from herb plants. Klopfenstein of Cameron, Arizona, states, "Every living thing has a spirit, and we consider these spirits to be holy. This is what is meant by Dinyin Diné'e, the holy spirits of every living thing. While we pray and give offerings to those Dinyin who possess the ability or character that we desire to help us, we must respect all life" (Klopfenstein, 2019). These blessings are gifts from the Holy People. Blessings that the Holy People gave to us with rules. Rules we call natural law. Within our creation stories, mountains within the Navajo land symbolizes different cultural importance. For this reason, all mountains, buttes, and hills are to be respected. These stories help us stay humble and mindful of mother earth's resources. How we take care of it and how it is regarded as being strong and sacred is important.

## **Rationale**

Creative writing has ways of speaking to all types of readers and especially the younger generation. The younger generation responds to poetry in music. They play music and can understand its messages with beat, rhythm, and tone. In this curriculum, students will begin to recognize the beat, rhythm, and tone with objects written in sync with the author's history of life—the need to feel how essays and poems make the reader paint their picture of life around themselves.

Vivid detail also catalyzes listening. Writers like Leslie Marmon Silko and Manuel Munoz build upon their own visual perceptions (Walker, 2020). In Silko's and Munoz's writings,

they make their readers envision their childhood perceptions. Seemingly inspired by their childhood, When Silko and Munoz write about the objects they paid strict attention to. The essays and poems they wrote were inspired by the details from community events they attended or home awakenings; they create a personal connection with their readers by describing vivid, visual details with significant cultural events. As readers, we connect to those events through those vivid, visual details.

It is a positive thing for students to read poetry and essays by Native writers. Students will identify with writers from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. When they read Leslie Marmon Silko, *Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective*, the younger generation will understand why the traditional storytelling is told with many intricate subsections (Silko, 1996). Also, students can look at video clips of Manuel Munoz's short stories and listen to a Q&A about his writing process (Walker, 2020). Manuel Munoz's incorporates his personal experience of looking at objects and how certain important details convey his culture to other readers. However, to another individual, the details might drive the meaning in a different direction. Depending on the reader, the experience can be analyzed within the individual's own experience. The meaning can be slightly different, but writer's ability to combine details within certain cultural contexts means that the reading will resonate in a direction the author intends.

The Navajo wedding basket provides a good example. The basket shows symbolism of mountains, rainbows, the deities, and the universe. The same basket can be used to teach the beginning of life to the end of our journey. Today we teach our children to cherish the basket because it symbolizes the importance of home and keeps all valuable to family and family stability. In ceremonies, we used the basket to bless and use it as a cleansing object for a girl or boy. The basket holds purity and can cleanse one's mind, heart, soul, and thoughts to clarity. So to read about baskets from a Navajo perspective, one would gain cultural understanding of the significance of a particular detail, like baskets.

N. Walker's *the Braided Essay as Social Justice Action: Between the Line*, shows that, like basket weaving, we can bring together stories of our personal experience and our natural environment together to create vivid stories that have cultural context. The vivid stories compel strong listening skills. Walker explains how an individual's mindset can revisit and define how nature and its symbolism can take a deeper meaning. The article shows reexamination that allows personal stories to be revamp in the mind. By interweaving nature and its representation, Walker takes a simple observation to the next level of listening to the "life" of any object. An object with a simple English name begins to evolve beyond its status as mere thing. The play-by-play description of the word's development begins to emulate human communication.

For example, this type of translation gives plants an ability to express themselves—as much as humans might empathize with the life of a plant, perhaps a plant has the capacity to empathize with human. Before we just looked at medicinal plants as an herb. During this pandemic, the medicinal plants like sage becomes a healer. A healer that tell us to select them to overcome burdens in the body. This captures an individual deep meaning of identification. Identifying from herbs to human becomes braid as a strong person with strong will and mind to overcome even deadly viruses.

As a teacher, this is a great writing experience which all students from middle school and high school can explore. For my 6<sup>th</sup>-grade students, I will read Walker's story about Salt Lake City, Utah and articulate the analogy she makes: The personification of the mountains, a short insert of how mountains are made, and the cultural symbolism of mountains becomes one. Students can begin to see, hear, and feel the movement of the mountains, and the personification

of human's glorious feeling of conquering and overseeing big vast of land can illustrate of how Salt Lake mountains are proud protectors of their people. Writing a woven writing piece would make other students see all objects as valuable, perhaps even "living," things.

## **Content Objectives**

In this unit, stories and essays will be analyzed from an Indigenous perspective. Authors like Leslie Marmon Silko, Manuel Munoz, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and Joy Harjo can open the eyes and ears to expressing from mind, heart, and soul. For each other, students will look into the author's background. The students will read the author's biography, study the environment an author writes about, and will begin discover how a writer expresses their unique identity and culture through the details of the "living" things around them. Through these stories, students will study history from individual stories.

The teacher will create a timeline of how the people and events were intertwined with people's lives. Examples of how the current pandemic has made an impact on an individual's day-to-day activities. This writing project will show how living through the pandemic, "sheltering in place," submitting to fourteen-day quarantine, experiencing the media try to make sense of complex science, and losing a family member are each examples of how individual experience makes history. The outcome by events and social behavior triggers emotions. Writing permits students to express troubling thoughts.

To create a larger context for the current pandemic, for example, the teacher can educate the students about their history of a specific disease in the Navajo Nation in the early 1900s can tie their ancestry stories. A collection of a Navajo family's story about tuberculosis could be a great example of how our Navajo people band together. Standing together as a community can provide insight about how to manage the disease can conquer family loss. Again, the teacher will go over the history of the disease of other native tribes. How does it affect the native people? The students will look at families' anguish and compare them to today's pandemic from this topic. How are the families dealing with the aftermath of illness that ranges from loss of loved ones, isolation for fourteen-days, inability to comfort family, social distancing, getting basic medical attention other than the virus-related illness, and plain and simple breaking of the family togetherness? Culturally, what were some of the teaching that embedded our natural plants? Children will learn the basic rules and understand that plants around our land are approached with humility. As the teacher ties together cultural understanding and listening, the teacher can show how many cultures understand how every plant can hear and feel your need to get better.

Once every object's concept is alive, a student will investigate how basic Navajo cultural stories are connected to all living things we learn about in science and social studies. Hubbard says, " ... I hear lots of stories from people and learn about their surroundings. It is also very satisfying to talk about spiritual issues. You can pick up much information by just listening" (Hubbard, 2019). The challenge will be the understanding of the object that helps native understand self-awareness. For example, sagebrush that covers the flatlands on the Diné Land has many purposes. Students will learn that in traditional Navajo that sagebrush will help you cleanse your body and replenish your thoughts. Some Sagebrush even has the humility effect of respecting self.

The history of the Navajo tradition as good keepers of the earth will serve as an introduction to write down ideas. I'll encourage students to focus on objects in student's lives. Then, the student can pose questions about the object, for example, if the object is technological

in nature, the writing may begin with answers to the question: How is technology made? What type of raw materials are extracted from the earth to make all the bits and parts of a gadget?

At the sixth-grade level, this investigation becomes a science awareness of the natural resource. Students will understand that all human-made objects were once earth's material, and yes, it should be respected as well. If students can comprehend this concept, we can see objects as alive and help or harm them. Knowing the positive and negative effects, students can begin to write how an object looks and makes them feel. This content's entire goal is to show that every object gives us feeling, and we react to it.

## **Teaching Strategies**

The first week of teaching this unit will ensure students have a shared and strong background knowledge of how Navajo culture intertwines with science and nature. Cultural influence with science can be of the Navajos or any other ethnic group's culture. Teaching and reviewing the Navajo history of tuberculosis and how the people of the 1940s and 1950s dealt with the disease. Since this curriculum will be taught in the fall of 2021, students can compare today's pandemic effects to tuberculosis. Thorough research can help explain how our historical effects of diseases to native is a process of Mother Nature acting to us as humans to listen. Students can incorporate stories elders tell of respecting the disease and asking it to be gentle to the people and go about its way. Students will hear from the elders about how a disease moves through a community and how some elders learned to tell the disease to go back to its homeland. After the disease retreats, the elder stories will show remind the listener that to appreciate all resources as potentially healing ones. As these stories are heard, students will merge how feelings of appreciation can be transferred to writings.

Writing can help the younger generation of accepting the negative and positive impact of life. As mentioned before, this curriculum's science and social studies will be the basis of gathering information. Our current 6th-grade science book and the Arizona State test in science will help students understand natural resources. This approach's logic is to let the students organically understand how the difference between natural and human-made materials is important. These can become topics to writing or expression. The affects of every object in life have a statement to make. Matter makes us understand the existence within mother earth. A brief overview of each topic could be covered within the first week of the unit. However, if students are having trouble grasping the concept that objects and their relationship to humans are good fuel to writing poetry, I will show video and documentary of famous individuals who influence their generation and inviting local traditional practitioners to explain how vehicles are considered alive and symbolize a horse. A horse represents our daily lively hood to travel in safety with protection. A vehicle is an object, but it is considered Mother Earth's mineral or material, and its existence is viewed as alive. After tying the two concepts, a student will be ready to start their poetic thinking. It is then I will be able to complete writing activities.

The second part of the curriculum will be sharing essays and poetry within classrooms, and possibly even outside the classroom. The curriculum could even open the platform to essay reading contests at local events. Our community hosts talent shows where students could read their work aloud. This portion of the curriculum will encourage students to display their work and, as audience members, to showcase their listening skills.

The last part of the curriculum is to help preserve the stories of our elders. Many elders left this world with important stories of our existence. Essays and poems can be utilized to say some teaching of our Diné culture. If the student population consists of other native tribes, students have to research their culture and embed their new learning to Diné culture. This closure might open a new unit about native plants and their uses.

**Classroom Activities and Student Assessment**

Student learning will be assessed through various activities, and assessment will seek to evaluate multiple outcomes.

The first primary outcome is the development and presentation of a student-authored poem. After reviewing Diné's history of tribulations of surviving disease using Mother nature's resources and meditation, students will follow a template of the five senses to express how sickness or negative vibes can be overcome. Within the poem, there must be some plant, element, or resource from Mother Earth, which shows healing to a person. Any traditional regalia or traditional symbolism of the four mountains can be used to show everything is living. The summative assessment will consist of figurative language, comparing any symbolism to humans, and at least three out of five senses of our human body. The first part of the assessment is to prewrite some ideas that will introduce the idea to be written about. Students should take about 15 minutes to brainstorm and plan their poems. Next, students will use the template using the five senses of how Nature can cure and protect humans from disease or pandemics. By allowing children to use past events, students will share their own thoughts on healing.

After completing their poems, students will participate in a Read aloud Poetry activity. Students will be grouped and present their poems to each other. Classmates will give at least two statements of positive feedback. After the feedback, the entire class will gather and explain how the symbolism works in their poem. The discussion will entail some basic awareness of nature—Word choice of how the mind interconnects with their natural surroundings' sounds. The description of the environment displays a setting. The aroma of healing plants displaying the celebration of life or awakening, the touch of nature overcoming or allowing the writer and listeners to stop and think. Lastly, the poem has the presentation of fulfilling the thirst to become strong. The table below will assess these key features of each student's poem and presentation of the poem.

	It does not meet the expectation.	Meets expectation	Exceeds expectation
The poem includes at least one plant, element, or resource related to human healing.			
Traditional regalia or traditional symbolism of the four mountains is used to show everything is living.			

The poem includes reference to at least three of the five senses.			
The student presentation includes an explanation of how symbolism works in the poem.			
Basic awareness of nature is evident.			
The connection between the mind and natural surroundings is evident.			
The setting is described through the description of the environment.			
The poem conveys a feeling of celebration of life.			
The poem conveys a desire to become strong.			

The related social studies outcome is for students to create a horizontal timeline to understand how they have repeated the cycle of illness. Students will conduct short research to build background knowledge about tuberculosis on the Navajo Reservation. The teacher's lecture and notes will account for some of the research. On the timeline, the hash mark will indicate important events in the Navajo Nation; the hashmark must include the latest information of Diné's existence according to science. The timeline will indicate the United States Government's order to march to Bosque Redondo, a plan to relocate Diné people. The Navajo Livestock reduction and the drought show the plants and nature of the rain cycle. Finally, the sickness and disease Diné people endured and persevere with Mother Nature's plants and healing sites.

The related science outcome is to understand the life cycle of both a virus and bacteria. Students will explain and display the virus's structure, and bacteria on a diagram or poster show the life cycle. Students will indicate how a virus or bacteria stops living. Students will provide an example of how viruses and bacteria enter the human body and begin the process of infection.

Speaking and listening skills will be modeled and interwoven during the reading of various authors. Students will use reflection journals to explain their inner thoughts and feelings. Lessons to listen to an open area environment provide the skills to listen to their classmates' thoughts and feelings. The student will learn to select specific descriptive words to contribute to the discussion.

Finally, the unit will conclude with the reading of selected poems to the Kayenta Unified School District Board Members. All board meetings are virtual, and the teacher will ask for two five-minute readings during board meetings. As the students' mentor, I will select a female and male student to represent our curriculum. Feedback from School Board members will be conveyed and acknowledge the successful completion of the project by students. Students who are not selected to present to the Board will read their poems to a virtual audience of our Kayenta Middle School

English Language Arts class. If time allows, a poetry reading contest will be added on in the spring of 2021.

### **Alignment with Standards**

For week one, students will be listening and collecting background knowledge about nature and climate change. Students will read short poem and article which emphasize the plant and weather life cycle. 6.RL.2 and 6.RI.2 After reading three or four reading materials, students will determine the central ideas and explain their understanding. The student summary will direct attention to nature's plants and the ecosystem's instinct of surviving, and its balance to all living organisms.

Using a strategy call 20/10, 20 minutes for student discussion and learning, and 10 minutes of teacher feedback, students will integrate information presented in different media or formats. The presentation should include a short essay and illustrations of how nature and climate change have affected our ecosystem. The short presentation will display students' understanding of how nature's voice is expressing attention. Attention to stay balance and learn to understand the need to stop and redirect our carelessness actions. 6.RI.7

Students will focus on a pose questions to keep the discussion focus. Students will follow the rules for productive discussion and review key ideas expressed with multiple perspectives. Students and teachers will engage in meaningful discussions to assist in diverse thinking. 6.SL.1

While students are reading collecting literature or informational text about nature's well-being and effects on the ecosystem, students will learn to paraphrase important details. 6.W.8

Using research skills, students will draw evidence from literary or informational text to support their research's opinions and reflections. 6.W.9

This curriculum unit also aligns to the following Diné content standards:

### **4<sup>th</sup>-grade – 6<sup>th</sup>-grade Dine' Standards**

Concept 2 of Dine' Culture Standard is great to use. This PO3 standard states an individual will listen to and retell stories related to elements of nature. PO3 standards is targeting the very action of how N. Walker is painting her idea of all living and non-living things has its place. The traditional stories of certain objects or land formation has something to say as well.

PO4 can tie into PO3 because the significant meant of mountains and object are brought to life with its sacred stories.

Concept 3 displays the importance of life and importance of all to make individual's life balanced. PO3 and PO4 fits the entire unit's purpose of teaching. The two PO allows students to recognize herbal and medicinal plants are special and should not be over harvest. Plants and herbs are on our land as resource to help us humans and other creatures on earth. We are the care



takers of the plant. However, if we should need the plants and herbs to be used as nourishment or medicine, we have to talk to it and offer to it.

The final Dine' standard would be concept 4, PO4. All is beauty and balanced. PO4 iterates that an individual will acknowledge the duality in nature.

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