

Writing and the Specificity of Place

Kooh-Seda: Here, I Sit.

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Diné Institute for Navajo Nation Educators (DINÉ)

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Author Note:

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## **Context**

The Navajo Nation, a fully recognized independent reservation for the Native American tribe known as Diné, sits on three of the four cornered states in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. The school where this unit will be implemented is the public high school that serves the capitol of the Navajo Nation. The students are mostly of Navajo birth with very few other ethnicities present. The school enrolls approximately six hundred students in grades nine through twelve. This classroom is the eleventh grade American Literature class with various levels such as A.P., Honors, and students with individualized education plans included. There are on average between twenty to thirty students per class period.

The school has struggled with national and state testing mandates and has been on school improvement measures for many years. At this school, four years ago, the new administration team and faculty members embraced a new approach to teaching and learning that has turned the school around. Due to the implementation of Scout PRIDE (the cornerstone for the positive behavior support system [PBIS]-described below) the school has grown from several years of an “F” rating up to a “C” rating. The students and community have worked extremely hard to overcome the idea of being a failure; therefore the school is no longer on an improvement plan from the Arizona Department of Education (ADE). ([azreportcards.azed.gov/schools/detail/4717](http://azreportcards.azed.gov/schools/detail/4717))

Window Rock High School has been the home for the “Fighting Scout” mascot since the school was first created. It was a natural development to include the Scout in the PBIS. Scout PRIDE is an acronym for the character development of our students. The faculty came together five years ago to define what “SCOUT Pride” means. “P” is “Prepare for Success.” “R” is “Respect School and Community.” “D” is “Dependable and Responsible Actions.” And “E” is “Enthusiastic for Learning.” We then, as a team, put into motion an improved plan of professional action to inspire the students for growth and achievement. We measured each step along the way, nurturing and encouraging the students and what began as a difficult challenge to completely overhaul our instructional systems turned into a journey filled with beauty. Through the implementation of *Teach Like A Champion 2.0* (Lemov, 2015) strategies and effective academic coaching and support for teachers, the students rose to the challenge. We observed what once was a tepid and bland atmosphere of struggling for student engagement became a warm, spicy, bubbly stew of fresh perspectives and a renewed interest in what was going on up and down the halls across the campus. Students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community at large embraced Scout PRIDE.

## **Rationale**

The students in my classes during my first year at Window Rock High School taught me a Diné word to add to my limited linguistic abilities. “Koooh-seda (here- I sit)” was their response to the typical roll-call for attendance. The first student to share this concept with me was a young man of traditional Dine’ upbringing. Little did he know that I would accept this concept and in typical biligáana (white person) fashion, run with it. It caused many moments of contemplation on the idea of where you sit as it connects the thoughts of “bloom where you are planted” and the permanence of impermanence. These years (2013), there were many new teachers. Due to policy changes, there were a large number of empty positions resulting in many students ending the year in study-hall types of classes with long-term substitutes or janitorial staff as overseers. This time frame, for the district, led to the further decline in academic status of this school and

district. The students were all too eager to share their frustrations about the lack of teachers in the most recent previous years and many expected me to leave after the first year.

Some teachers have believed that the students here are difficult to teach; therefore teachers are often transient, impermanent. Teachers come and go, moving in and implementing their educational philosophies for a year or two, then moving on to the next location. This has been the pattern from the classroom teacher all the way up to the highest level of school administration. The students, over many years of this, had taken this transience at a personal level. Combine this mindset with the continued ‘failing’ status from state and national educational ranking systems, and you have a student body that has believed it is a failure. The energy to stop that downward spiral and swing it into the other direction was monumental. Yet, coming together as administration, faculty, staff, students and community stakeholders, the school has been on the redemption path. We have the high hopes and expectations that this school will become an “A” school and refuse to consider any other status.

Students here are less typical than they realize. They embrace learning. They are, for the most part, curious. They seek to understand the world that we live in and their particular place in this world. As Diné young adults, their position is one that sits in two worlds. Part of them sits in the modern world and all of its fast conveniences. This part of them seeks adventure, searches for a way to become a part of the world at large. Yet within their being, a part of the traditional world and culture, sits a deeper resonance of ancestry. The Diné heritage within their DNA continues to seek a modern expression. The ever-present sense of calm stoicism of the multitudes of ancestor coming before them from time immemorial is what we see on the surface. But it has been my experience that when given the right conditions of a safe place, the beauty that is the Navajo way can be allowed to bloom. Diné youth are respectful, kind, generous, compassionate and loving.

It has not been this teacher’s experience to have students that are difficult to teach. The students that have grown through my classroom and moved on into the world have been excited to learn. They want to grow. They put forth such effort and enthusiasm to reach their goals. The new generation of Window Rock Scouts in recent years has risen to the challenges for becoming the best Diné future leaders possible. They seek the bigger picture and are excited to create viable solutions to current problems. Their critical thinking and inherent desires to build a better future for the Navajo Nation is nothing short of inspirational.

Recently, some concepts began to mesh through this inspiration (which is also an alternative word for inhalation). During the personal journey to become a certified yoga teacher this year, the importance of sitting correctly became a focus of mine. The first pose that you learn in yoga is sukhasana, or easy pose (seated pose). Its earliest written inscription dates back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century text, *Dharshana Upanishads*. It is identified as “finding your seat” by many yogis. What this pose allows the practitioner to accomplish is a seated connection of the body’s primary life force energy (prana) with the energy of the planet, Mother Earth, and the energy of the universe, Father God. Many people around the globe have this sitting style within their indigenous cultures. As the yogi in India sits in sukhasana, he or she withdraws the external senses and tunes in to the internal sensations of breathing. If one can sit long enough, tuning in, it is believed that enlightenment occurs. (Bhattacharyya)

The Diné frequently sit in this fashion for their traditional ceremonies. The traditional family members gather in the Hogan for spiritual ceremonies for a multitude of reasons and sit in the

circle over the course of the night (or many nights depending on ceremony purposes). They sing, pray, meditate, and commune with each other and those from the spirit realms. There is a connection in Diné tradition to the spiritual practices in other parts of the world. The concept of oneness with the universe and faith in a divine presence in everything resonates with many of the Asian beliefs and philosophies. (Norton-McBride)

*Kooh-seda. Here I sit.* In an attempt to put the grand ideas and concepts for the far-reaching narrative writing unit being created, the notion keeps expanding, along with my awareness of the connectedness of it all. Storytelling is such a personal thing, especially in the form of personal narratives. The delicate intricacies of putting the words of our experiences into written form seem to solidify their truthfulness, with the outside inkling that to do so will somehow make them more real and permanent. Many cultures around the world use storytelling as a form of preservation of the ancient ways of living, being, and bringing the distant past into current awareness. These stories have morals, ethics, and well delivered points. These stories have survived across time, being woven in and out and around the very acts of living where they sit when they are told, shared, engrained into the souls of those listening.

In the modern time that we find ourselves, many have stopped listening. The old ways seem irrelevant to today's society of technology, instant gratification, and disposable comforts. Looking along the side of the roadways in much of the nation, you can see the disposable comforts tossed out of the window of cars rushing past. Plastic water bottles, fast food bags, and any other number of items litter the roadside along the highways of life. You may also see signs pleading not to litter, to save Mother Earth, or to keep America clean. It is a concerning contradiction for many youths today, this modern dichotomy of living. Climate change has been a part of their education for years, yet they see the older generation continuing to disregard what they have been taught because it is inconvenient to refill a water bottle, cook at home, and dispose of trash in the numerous receptacles. How can they bloom amidst such toxic conditions?

## **Content Objectives**

*Kooh-Seda: Here I Sit. The Importance of Place in Narrative Literature* is a narrative writing unit focused on the setting (place) of storytelling. The students will learn the meaning, importance, and use of descriptive details, figurative language and narration. The students will experience short stories and essays from a variety of locations in the Four Directions from around the world and specifically, the United States of America. The students will also experience the historical aspect of narrative writing from Native American viewpoints. They will write journals, diaries, blogs, infomercials, comparisons/contrasts, expository presentations, informative brochures, and finally, their own personal narrative essay. This unit will take some time to accomplish.

Oftentimes, in the world of American Literature, the focus tends to be on historical documents, speeches, and the foundation of the United States. A Native America's perspective is often completely left out. In history classes and literature classes, the curriculum focuses on the dominant history. Through this unit, the students will identify and explore the other sides of the story. Students will share their voices, thoughts, and any ideas surrounding the current state of affairs for Dine' culture as it has been enmeshed within modern US culture.

The cornstalk is embedded in our school district's seal for education. Recently, another teacher in the Diné Institute for Navajo Nation Educators described herself as the cornstalk, growing straight with leaves pointing in all directions. This was a beautiful analogy of how to present this unit to the students and it will become the centralized idea for our explorations.

The direction from where to begin this unit should follow the Diné way by beginning in the East. The introductory set for the unit will include "The Danger of a Single Story" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie that originates in South Africa (Adichie, 2009). This introduction will focus the students' attention to universal experiences, global storytelling, and inspire them with courage to tell their own stories. The students typically participate in a philosophical chair discussion of the students' response to Adichie's speech. The students will journal about their experiences with the concept of "a single story" and reflect on the typical Western education that includes mostly bilagáana stories versus the traditional Diné stories. This will also connect the concept from an American history perspective and the missing Native American stories in history books. The literary piece that will accompany this direction is the African traditional story, "Looking for a Rain God" by Bessie Head (Head, 1977).

The next phase of this direction (east) will bring the students back to this continent and focus on Native America tribes from the eastern United States. The students will choose one tribe and complete a mini-research project about their tribe of choice. This individual choice will result in a plethora of stories from a variety of tribes. The students will do a gallery walk style of presentation of their research projects that includes information about the tribe and what became of the tribe, one folktale or traditional story from their chosen tribe, and any similarities or differences that are discovered during their investigation. This process will duplicate with each direction and there is not one singular story for this section of the unit.

Then the students will return to where they sit. They will write a journal reflection on the East direction that includes any personal traditional narratives that they may know. They will keep a bibliographical log of potential resources for their future braided essays. Upon further study, the students will keep this running record of their threads for braiding in a three-column note format. The first column will be their narrative, second will be resources discovered along the way, and the last column will be connections to traditional stories that they know.

The second direction to be explored is the South. For the southern direction, students will read an informative article regarding the true story, *Lost City of the Monkey God* by Douglas Preston (<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2015/03/150302-honduras-lost-city-monkey-god-maya-ancient-archaeology/>). In this direction, students will begin to form their claims about the sacredness of ancient civilizations and the concept of conservation. As a comparison to the Honduran jungle quests, students will explore more famous indigenous tribal landmarks from South and Central America. The students in small groups will complete another mini research project on their choice of famous locations (i.e. Amazon rainforest, Machu Pichu, The Pyramid of the Sun, Lake Titicaca, etc). The product of this project is a travel brochure. The students will work together to create an informative pamphlet on their location that includes conservation efforts to protect the site from further damages that may be a danger for it.

Then the students will bring their attention back to this continent. They will investigate indigenous tribes of Northern Mexico and Southern United States (Texas specifically). The individual mini research projects will be the second individual investigation. The students will

create and present posters on their chosen tribe with them, “Where are they NOW?” The students will investigate the effects of European influences and colonization practices on the tribe. The students will utilize technology (if available) to create informational slideshows that delve into their tribes story.

After the exploration in the southern direction, the students will return to where they sit. They will reflect on the information and stories gathered. They will add to their bibliography, dictionary, and diary. This will include any personal narrative regarding Diné stories about the south direction.

The third direction will be West. We will venture out to the far west going all the way to Australia. The students will read, “Australain Aboriginal Dreamtime”, a piece from Pearl Fincher Museum of Fine Arts ([peralmfa.org](http://peralmfa.org), 2020). The students will view an informational YouTube video, “The Rainmaker-Ularaia Stories”. The students will access the internet to investigate the history of Aboriginal Australians by accessing Working with Indigenous Australians First Nations People (<http://www.workingwithindigenoustralianinf//>, 2020) The students will create a comparison with each of the other directions. We will create a five bubbled Venn diagram, one bubble for each of the four directions and the center bubble being Diné.

Next, we will bring our thread back to the US. We will stop in Hawaii to investigate Native Hawaiians. Just as in the other directions, the students will work in small groups. They will conduct mini research projects and create presentations from their research. To have a more direct instructional approach, anyone implementing the unit could do the preliminary research and present the findings to the class. However, my junior students truly enjoy and embrace the technique that I use where they get to decide.

Continuing along the spiral, students will return home to where they sit. They will reflect on the journey and summarize the trip thus far. They may choose to add to their bibliography, dictionary, and diary. They should be able to add to the three column comparison chart as well.

The final direction is north. The North direction symbolizes ancestors and the place from which we came and shall return. If we go out to the far north, we would reach the North Pole, so we will have to bring it back in just a little. We will look to Alaska and the theories of the land bridge, ancient migration patterns of humans, and research that has been conducted on indigenous Americans (North and South) to determine common DNA.

### **Teaching Strategies**

In an effort to engage students in storytelling, the first strategy will be journaling. The students will be given prompts to evoke a connection with where they sit. Then as we branch out into the four directions, the prompts will extend where they sit into those locations. The students will also add to their vocabulary and knowledge of those locations. As we read narratives and informative texts in those directions/locations, the students will employ the CLOSE reading strategy. Cornell note taking will be their running record of the experience and will become a founding document for their exploration and ideas.

Part of the students’ experiences will include informative and thought provoking YouTube videos, small group research and presentations, and Philosophical Chairs to enhance their argumentative/informative stances in regards to what is being experienced. This will strengthen

their abilities to cite evidence from text to support their claims and allow them to interact with peers/groups from an academic point of view.

## **Classroom Activities**

### **Student Journals/Dictionary**

The students will begin the unit by creating a diary. In the diary, they will reflect on the previous day's exploration, adventure, activity, and lesson. They will also write about what they anticipate for the 'today' session. This may include guided questions to help them determine what they should focus on and to build their unique opinions and analysis leading up to the summative essay assignment at the end of the unit. They will use their diaries as reference points in support of the research thread and being able to remember important realizations along the way.

On day one, the students, using the traditional bound composition notebooks, will create their unique and individual diaries. They will use the front page to create the title page using their names and any doodles or graphics that they wish and are personal to them. Then, in the back half of the journal, they will create their student glossary (dictionary). They will include the Frayer Model handout so that they may refer to it as needed. This journal diary dictionary will become their writer's tool. They will visit and update it daily.

### **CLOSE Reading Strategy**

For every reading that we complete, the students will use the CLOSE reading strategy. There has been much ado about this strategy over the years. There are numerous ways that teachers can choose to implement it with their unique styles. I combine CLOSE reading and Cornell note taking strategies for using them simultaneously. My pattern is first, students read the selection entirely, just to read it. Secondly, they read the selection a second time using a variety of highlighters to mark unknown words, important statements, and interesting ideas. The third reading includes annotating the margins where students interact with the selection/author/characters. The Cornell note is created from the highlighted information.

### **Small Groups**

Group work is an integral part of my classroom. At this school we implement a 30% or less of lecture and 70% or more of student led activities. This means that of an hour class period, there is less than 18 minutes of teacher led instruction and more that 42 minutes of student led activities. Therefore, small groups and the management of small groups is imperative. In my classroom, I spend the first week of school each year establishing all of the norms we use, or better yet, the students identify and sign the social contract for the year after they establish and vote on the most important ones. I have very little to do with it other than telling them what I expect them to do to create a safe learning environment.

For most small groupings, I have found that allowing the students to self-group results in a more interactive group. Only in matters of classroom management, do I step in and rearrange groupings, and this only happens rarely during the first part of the school year. The students learn that as long as they behave and accomplish the group assignments they get to stay in self selected groups. Therefore, they do get busy and complete the activities.

I use placemats to determine group member roles. There are four assigned roles: moderator, secretary, time-keeper/researcher, and presenter/docent. The placemats with either numbers or letters (1-4 or A-D) which are preprinted and in plastic sheet protector sleeves are placed at the center of the groups and whichever seat the students choose is their assigned role in the group. Then as the groups complete the activities, students fill the roles.

### **Student Assessment Plan**

At the beginning of the unit, the students will complete informal writing assignments in the forms of journals and diary entries. They will receive a brief introduction to narrative writing and the rubric will be explained. The Arizona Department of Education writing guide and rubric will be used for this. This can be found on the ADE website.

They will practice narrative writing informally on a nearly daily basis. Their journals will become the baseline for a formative assessment at the end of the unit. Students will read a variety of narrative essays through the unit as examples of narrative texts.

The students will learn the Dine standards for education that relate to storytelling as well. As this is an integral part of traditional teaching, students will incorporate the concepts of storytelling and narrative writing.

Students will also learn to support their narratives with informative texts. This is the concept of the braided essay. The students' final product will be a formal three-to-five-page braided informative narrative essay that follows both the Dine' storytelling standards, Arizona state narrative writing standards, and the Arizona state informative essay standards. The narrative should provide an insight into their foundation of being. As Dine' youth, the focus should be on an event or story that helps them identify with what it means to them to be Navajo. Then the informative thread should include evidence to support the narrative. They may also choose to weave in a thread of a handed down story that is relative to their story. Students will also be encouraged to include supportive reasons for why it is important to them to maintain their self-identity from a conservation and activism point of view.

### **Alignment with Standards**

#### *DODE Standards*

9-12<sup>th</sup> Dine' Character Building Standards

Concept 2: I will maintain the sacredness of self-identity.

9-12<sup>th</sup> Dine' Cultural Standards

Concept 1: I will recognize and value my thoughts and personality.

The main objective of this unit is to be culturally responsible. The concepts of self-identity and valuing thoughts and personality are intrinsically woven into the daily activities; however some direct instruction and inclusion of these standards alongside the ADE standards will occur on a daily basis. The goal is to empower the students' in support of sharing their stories and voices. The unique perspective that they have as world-bridgers is an important facet of their self-realization in this modern society.

#### *ADE ELA Standards*



11.W.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content (a-f).

11.W.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences (a-e).

11.W.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

The secondary objective of this unit is to provide a necessary scaffold for students to combine their traditional storytelling abilities with formal English standards. By providing the necessary links between storytelling and essay writing, the students will gain confidence in putting their unique voice into written form.

## Resources

Arizona Department of Education, AZ School Report Cards, Window Rock High School,  
<https://azreportcards.azed.gov/schools/detail/4717>

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