

From Empathy to Advocacy

Find Your Passion, Find Your Purpose

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Diné Institute for Navajo Nation Educators (DINÉ)

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Introduction

As a child, I dreamed of being a teacher. Through many twists and turns in my early adulthood life, after ten years of being in and out of college, I completed my degree in secondary special education. I worked for a decade as a special educator in Mississippi. In 2013, I moved to Arizona. Shortly after moving here, I accepted a position here on the Navajo Nation. I was inspired by the challenges of teaching in such a rural setting and at the time did not understand the entirety of the calling. I have learned much more from my students and living here than they may ever comprehend.

Context and Rationale

The high school that this unit is developed for is the only public high school to serve students in the capital of the Navajo Nation, Window Rock High School. It has a student enrollment between five to seven hundred students from the communities of Window Rock, Fort Defiance, Sawmill, St. Michael's, Hunter's Point, Oak Springs, and many other smaller hamlets. The classroom is eleventh grade American Literature of which I am the sole teacher. The classes range in size from twenty to thirty. This will be my eighth year to teach this subject.

During 2020, the communities were ravaged by the COVID19 pandemic. The Navajo Nation President, Jonathan Nez, has led the reservation valiantly through this unprecedented challenge. Some extreme measures were taken to protect the population from this biological threat. Many weeks, weekends, and months were seen in strict lockdowns and precise mitigations of protection such as: mask mandates, temperature checks at local businesses/stores, and no indoor dining at local restaurants.

For the duration of the 2020-2021 school year, our district was on virtual assignment. With more than fifty percent of students without internet or access, the district also provided paper take-home packets for student educational continuance. During this time, the virus was quickly moving through our communities. Many students experienced loss and grief. The families were pushed to their limits physically, emotionally, psychologically, and personally.

Within weeks, the Navajo Nation gained global attention for its fight against the pathogen. The news coverage and international attention brought various factors impacting the area prior to the global pandemic to international awareness. The fact that many families here did not have running water nor electricity was surprising to the world at large. They could not understand how anywhere in the United States of America still resided without these common benefits. Therefore, many people across the planet became aware of the continued disparities of being Native American.

During this seminar, we read, studied, and digested so much information about social justice, oppression, and education. I knew that the students that would return to Window Rock High School would not be the same students that were sent home on lockdown at the onset of the pandemic in March of 2020. Unsure of how to proceed with the planning of this important unit, I knew that I would have to expand my own abilities to help mitigate the stressors that returning to school would bring.

I have lived and taught here for eight, almost nine, years. I have seen the struggles of life here and learned so much about Native American heritage and culture that were not known previously. For example, the truth of the Native American boarding schools during the assimilation era. Additionally, the effects and generational trauma from the Navajo Long Walk which occurred in the time of the Trail of Tears from the eastern tribes. I have also learned of the laws and regulations that still affect everyday life here with no idea of how this can be changed. The technicalities between tribes and the national government are monumental and daunting to consider. When the systems in place seem insurmountable, the systems need evaluation and change.

As the research for this seminar included important texts on social justice, I came to realize that oppression needs further study. In *Reading and Writing for Social Action*, we learned that “social justice requires confronting the ideological frameworks, historical legacies, and institutional patterns and practices that structure social relations unequally so that some groups are advantaged at the expense of other groups that are marginalized. (p.3)”

On discussing this Diné Institute’s topic with a Diné coworker, she voiced her concerns about encouraging advocacy and social justice to Diné youth. Her explanation was that for her traditional upbringing, the concepts of advocacy and social justice were not encouraged. Her point of view and discussion were very informative for me, personally. It was so foreign to me, to NOT want to help make things better. However, I do understand her concerns and will be extremely mindful of how this unit is implemented for my Diné students. I would not ever want to put them in the position of being seen in the community as a rebel nor as disregarding traditional teachings.

Also, during this time, people’s attention was heightened to other disparities in this modern-day society in the United States. The “Black Lives Matter” movement regarding racial injustices perpetrated in our country was broadcast internationally and citizens took notice. There were protests in the streets of many locations across the country. People of all races, genders and ethnicities felt empathy for the injustices that were covered front and center on the news outlets. This led to my decision to participate again in the DINÉ Institute. Through participating in this fellowship, much has been gained in my personal and my teacher perspective regarding the Native American story untold by the history texts.

When the research began for this project, my first question was, “What is empathy?” I feel many people understand sympathy and often confuse it for empathy. This is where the unit will begin. The students will study empathy and gain a sense for what this term implies. We always study the Rhetorical Triangle and persuasive techniques used in historical documents and speeches. We will extend this study of pathos into a deeper understanding of the emotional pull we often feel at various times for various causes.

According to Merriam-Webster, empathy is defined as the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of another of either the past or present, fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner (Merriam-Webster). So, you may wonder why this skill is important to understand at this time. Berkely’s Greater Good website article on empathy identifies it as the “vital first step” towards

compassionate action. (Berkeley. (n.d.). With the world focusing more and more on social justice and advocacy, the first step is to identify your empathy and understand your “Why?” When you identify your why, the spark of inspiration through empathy will bloom into advocacy.

It was not my intention in developing this unit to inform my students on the issues that they must be empathetic to. I wanted the students to decide. If I were to teach this unit to a younger group, I would most assuredly focus on one single topic, such as clean water or sustainability. In the excerpt of our studies from *Being the Change Lessons and Strategies for Social Action*, we learned that newsworthy topics are engaging for students. But also, we learned that when you utilize sensitive or impactful news, we need to have the strategies, knowledge, and empathy to engage in these topics with compassion and understanding of the effects of these stories. To quote the author, “Giving kids the time to pursue the news they care about in their lives leads to meaningful knowledge construction... A necessary component to implementing these meaningful lessons is to have the tools necessary to respond to it that doesn’t negate the identity of others.” Educators can counter the biased story lines with truths around the stories that media pundits avoid sharing. An integral step in empathy is to make connections with the characters in the stories, be they humans or other life forms on the planet (plants and animals).

In order to move from empathy to advocacy, we should understand the concept of advocacy. Again, Merriam-Webster defines advocacy as the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal. Without advocacy, some major social movements would not have occurred, such as the Suffragettes (women’s rights), Civil Rights Movement, and even today’s LGBTQ movement. It will be important to include historical advocates and modern role models such as Martin Luther King, Jr, Mother Teresa, and many more. While these are very notable historical examples, there are the quiet daily behaviors that are also advocacy. When you stand up for a friend against a bully, that is advocacy. When you help neighbors complete a task that is too much for them, that is advocacy. Also important, the idea that a person should not advocate, and why that is the Diné traditional way of being. The students will need to know and understand their own unique perspective as they walk the path of beauty in this ever-evolving modern era. So, just maybe, when we put the idea of advocacy into an individual’s right to assist another, we can accomplish this unit without offending the elders.

Content Objectives

Within the content of American Literature at the high school level, there may be a certain amount of freedom in planning. To adapt this unit for a lower grade level, the teacher should reflect on what they hope to achieve with this concept. It is my belief that even younger students can gain confidence in their ability to affect change. When embarking on such a grand conceptual idea for teaching this content, you really must consider the student population in your planning. Our main objective with this unit is a student awareness, in a sense, of their personal and internal calls to action. While this seems to be a far-reaching and possibly too altruistic of a notion, we must proceed. There should be a sense of caution, coupled with a strong desire for success. As educators, our highest calling would be to empower our students to become the best that they can achieve.

The goal for students in this unit is to effectively use rhetorical strategies in an argumentative or informative essay to advocate for their cause. For us to achieve this, students will need to have a firm understanding of rhetoric and how to implement its use effectively. A subgoal for this unit

is to increase student awareness of how to become an advocate for the cause that they feel compelled to pursue in the future. For the younger students, the teacher may decide to focus on a predetermined cause to present to the group.

Arizona's Department of Education standards for eleventh grade English includes many vague and broad conceptual ideas along with concrete evidence of language mastery (i.e. grammar, punctuation, and spelling). The goal of this unit is an informative essay. I have combined the narrative perspective to this writing as well under the genre of narrative nonfiction. The final outcome is that the students write a traditional five paragraph informative essay with a storytelling aspect that will be supported by research and citations from sources. (AZED.gov) The students will also read informative texts on their chosen topics for use as sources for supporting their writing. The students will view informative videos on YouTube on the topics of empathy, advocacy, and social justice. Most of the chosen videos are from the well-known Ted Talk series. We have discussed a few times over the years about organizing our own Ted Talk, but it has yet to be accomplished.

The Diné Department of Education standards will also be incorporated to include Diné Culture standards Concept 1, "I will recognize and value my thoughts and personality." Diné Character standards Concept 1, "I will use my critical thinking to establish relationships with the environment." And finally, Diné Oral Language standards Concept 4, "I will communicate effectively by making connections to personal, social, cultural, and historical experiences." (Belin, E. G., n.d.)

Teaching Strategies

The strategies utilized by educators can make or break a student's learning experience. At this school, as a unit, we have been implementing *Teach Like A Champion* strategies for some years now. This is an overall schoolwide positive education environment. Personally, for this unit, along with these current supports, the students will receive direct instruction (I do.), guided note-taking (We do.), small group academic discussion (Y'all do.), and independent study (You do.). This is known as a gradual release of responsibilities. The students are informed of the desired outcome from the beginning. Then they move through the activities with an increase in self responsibility for the end results and product, in this case an informative essay. Some of my staple strategies from this resource are threshold, cold call, circulate, targeted questioning, no opt-out, board agenda (which includes minutes of the class period) and stretch it. Other strategies that I implement from prior teaching experience are interactive notebooks where students have a journaling section and a student glossary section. In the student glossary, students use the Frayer Model for vocabulary development which includes a doodle section. The journaling section can include a reflection on life experiences or a response to literature piece. In each of these styles of entries, the students are not graded on grammatical accuracy, and this encourages honest responses where they are not worried about the technicalities of what they have to say. The journals are not shared with peers, and I am the only one reading them. This element is implemented during the first week of school and students are familiar with it's use. As with all classroom studies, these strategies are important for our school culture. By utilizing these strategies across campus in most/all areas, the students receive stable instruction and scaffolded implementation. This dependable structured environment has truly changed our school atmosphere from one of resistance to one of engagement. Students are able to implement their curiosity with the content because delivery methods are known. (Teachlikeachampion)

Classroom Activities

Students will view several informational videos on empathy, advocacy, and social justice. They will update their student glossaries with the relevant vocabulary concepts of: empathy, advocacy, social justice, nonfiction narrative writing, and five student choice words (from their personal research).

We will start with empathy. Students will view “What is Empathy” from *joeytalks* on YouTube (Joey Talks). I chose this video from the plethora of videos available because of Joey’s vulnerable story. He is also a young man that doesn’t take a position of power, but rather shares his story. I felt that students would respond favorable to this.

For advocacy, I discovered a TedTalk video from Xiomara Torres. (TedX Talks) She is a Latin American immigrant that overcame her challenging beginning to become a lawyer, eventually being appointed as a judge in Oregon. I chose this video on advocacy because she recognizes the importance of her own advocates in life. I felt it was important for students to gain an awareness of all the different ways that we can be advocates for ourselves and others in life.

The final video will be one on social justice. Zohra Moosa presented “The Power and Promise of Social Justice Activism” (TEDxAmsterdam). I chose this video for this topic because Moosa presents a unique point of view that may resonate with my students. She went on to create a foundation for women in Pakistan for their benefit.

Students will complete mini research projects on their choice of social justice topics that pertain to our location here on the Navajo Reservation in Northeastern Arizona. For three days, students will access the school’s computer lab to conduct their research. They will create Cornell Notes on their topics using 3 reliable and credible sources from online research. Students will utilize the school’s online essay submitting program to create their essays. Time and constraints allowing, students will informally present their essays to either the class or a designated small group. Some of the topics the students may choose from are water, water safety, environmental pollution (uranium, coal, etc.), public services (or lack thereof) such as mental health, physical health, and law enforcement, two-spirit equity, substance abuse resources, and more. I did not want to limit their options, so they had the opportunity to choose whichever topic they felt most compelled to represent. There were some surprising topics and the students gained much knowledge of the resources available off the reservation as compared to resources on the reservation.

Student Assessment Plan

A formative assessment will be conducted throughout the unit using responsive journaling, small group discussions, and student note taking. The informal strategy of responsive journaling offers the students the opportunity to dive deep into their thoughts and feelings about topics affecting the reservation. They will also be able to verbalize without saying it out loud, what issue is most important to them personally. After viewing the informative and personal videos, the students will hold small group discussions where they can share their thoughts and ideas about each of the main topics of empathy, advocacy, and social justice. They can also use peers as sounding boards for their top choices of concerns and receive support from peers in their endeavor.

As a formal strategy, Cornell Note taking has been used by the district for some time. (I have been here nine years and we have always used them.) By having the students create their own formal notes on their topics, they can begin to organize the thoughts into the informational essay that is expected. Through prewriting, the students will brainstorm what they already know about their topic, then develop the questions that they need to answer. This is where they will also identify the terms that they may be unfamiliar with to update their student glossaries.

A summative assessment will stem from the student's final formal essay submitted through the online program. The students will write their essay which must include a minimum of three sources of information. The students will develop their thesis statements which can be formatted as persuasive. Through merging persuasive and informative writing styles, the students will gain experience in using rhetoric. They will gain confidence in taking a stand for what they believe in while also learning how to support their beliefs with facts from credible sources. There is no right nor wrong opinion, merely one that is supported or not. My teaching style tends to be based on growth mindset principles where every step in the process has merit and value. The final products should reflect growth towards the conceptual development of the student rather than a regimented formal expectation.

Alignment with Standards

As this unit evolves during the implementation phase, the students will be given the opportunity to learn exactly what the standards are because that is the first step to growth. When students have an understanding of what is expected from them (the goal) they can actively move in that direction. The final product in this unit is an informative essay.

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