

The Blending and Understanding of Indigenous Cultures in the Middle School ELA Classroom

Tina Daponde

Culturally Responsive Schooling with/in Indigenous Communities Professional Development
Program

2022

Author Note:

Tina Daponde is a middle school ELA teacher at Kingman Middle School in Kingman, AZ. Correspondence about this guide can be addressed to T Daponde, 1969 Detroit Ave, Kingman, AZ, 86413. Email contact: tdaponde@kUSD.org.

Context

Kingman, Arizona is located about an hour outside of Las Vegas, Nevada and about three hours north of Phoenix, Arizona. Even though it can be considered close to both towns, the educational systems vary greatly. Kingman Middle School is one of two middle schools located in this town. Kingman Middle School is home to many general education and special needs students while the other middle school is dedicated to a Cambridge (Honors) Program. The population of Kingman Middle School is approximately 600 students. Seventy-four percent of the student body is considered poor.

I began my adventure at the district in 2016 as a paraprofessional and transferred into a Certified position within a month. I previously taught English in suburban Massachusetts, so moving to rural Kingman, Arizona was quite a culture shock. The students I taught previously were upper middle class and in high school. Now, I teach seventh and eighth grade students. Another difference between the two is the culture within the classroom. In high school, the students are more dedicated to their studies and the preparation for their futures. However, middle schoolers, in my experience, are dedicated to their social lives and are not as involved with their studies. There is little curiosity to know anything outside of their social circles making for a decrease in intellectual curiosity, active participation in class, and the desire to learn more and become more engaged with the material which has damaged student engagement. Furthermore, with the pandemic interrupting traditional schooling, and with many of the students, both on the reservation and within the local community, not having access to the internet outside of the classroom, students' schooling has been delayed even more.

The largest struggle that the school is facing currently is the State Standardized Test. More specifically, the informational text and comprehension of literary text. All students struggle with comprehension of these texts but the marginalized communities of Indigenous students and those with English as a second language seem to have difficulty with this area. This is a huge challenge for me because I am the Dean of the English Department and am looked at from both administration and fellow teachers for guidance on how to fix this. To overcome this difficulty for all involved I am desirous to incorporate text material that will be of interest and provide the most teachable moments. To address this situation, I introduced the text *Code Talkers*. This book was selected because of the connection to the Navajo tribes and the historical information on the Mission schools and World War II. Kingman is about 45 minutes outside of the reservation named "Peach Springs" home to members of the Hualapai Tribe. There are many students, and family members, who can connect with the Navajo main character's transition from boyhood to adulthood and his entrance to the military during World War II. This is one of the school's first attempts to reach directly to these students and help to balance the level of engagement.

Rationale

Student engagement has been one of the toughest obstacles throughout the year. Many of the students that Kingman Middle School serves are below the poverty line, so knowing where the next meal is coming from or helping the parents by working a side job to make the rent is a thought that clearly distracts them quite often. It is not that their education is not important to them, it is just that their mind is clearly stuck somewhere else in Maslow's hierarchy.

In an attempt to counter this obstacle and reignite the spark in literature, the book *Code Talkers* was selected. I had noticed students really enjoyed *The Outsiders* with its tough main character and action filled plot, but that the Indigenous students were not as intrigued. I ransacked the bookroom hoping to find a novel that would hold them and involve them as much as the previous novel had done. This book was approved by the school district but had rarely (if ever) been used in the classroom. After reading the book, the class dynamic completely changed. Students who used to fall asleep during reading were asking to take the book home to show their parents and discuss it with their families. They would come back with stories from home about how their grandparents and even great grandparents could recall World War II and share with them their experiences. The Navajo students in the class were interested in the book as they felt it was about them and their history. The consensus, based on the end of year class reflection, was that this was probably the most impactful piece of literature that we had read in the class.

I had to ponder why this book was so successful. After reflection, I realized that, when planning many of my lessons, I failed to use the students' interests and backgrounds to my advantage. As a teacher with twenty years of experience, I tend to use the same lesson plan year after year, but my students are not the same year after year. I need to learn to build the relationships with these students so that I can identify their interests and, once identified, bring them into the classroom materials. I need to make my class connect with them.

This reflection was then strengthened by the video called "The History of American Indian Education." Dr. Lomawaima described that the goal of education should be to create "competent, caring, and engaged individuals." When my students can see themselves in the novels and identify with the characters, they will begin to understand the point of English class: it is not just about being able to know grammar or to just read; it is meant to help one comprehend and understand. Just like the students who participated in the Bloomer Rebellion, I was asking students, and their family members, to be active in their education instead of passive.

This idea was evident at one point. Many schools used to teach the piece *Walk Two Moons* by Karen Creech but stopped as it does not portray the reality of the "Indian situation" and the author's background has come into question; however, it does provide a door to start to relate with students from these backgrounds. The lack of trueness of the plight of the Indigenous Americans can be supplemented through historical accounts and students can discuss the reality versus function of the book. The book is a way to open the door to connect and engage these students. So, with this thought in mind, the search began for a book that had more truth and allowed the door to be opened even farther. What I found: *Code Talkers*.

Topic Summary

Why representation matters

When the offer to take Culturally Responsive Schooling with/in Indigenous Communities was proffered by Northern Arizona University, I knew I needed to take it. It would add to my toolbox that I have built since stepping into the first classroom of my career. Working with a student population that was made up of a substantial number of Indigenous students was something new to me. The apathy and disconnect that Native American students appeared to feel to the English subject matter and the supplemental materials is undeniable. This was a new problem to me;

however, it is not new to the education system. This class became a tool I knew I could use to connect to the Indigenous students I have in my ELA classroom. By finding a way to acknowledge and include their diverse backgrounds within the course curriculum I could reach them and make their learning more valid. Thus, by taking the class, I was reaching out to the experts to be able to create a culturally responsive tool to address this problem.

Starting the class with the readings of how the government and religious groups invaded Native Americans lives based on the belief that Native American ways were too primitive to be successful completely shocked me. These articles removed what I thought I knew about the history of Native Americans and replaced it with how Native Americans must have seen it. It reminded me of newspaper articles. Depending on which side of the politics the paper supports, the article's content will be presented completely differently. Furthermore, the same evidence can be used to support both sides. I had to start questioning everything that I thought I knew about the history of Native Americans. As I started to empathize with the people in these articles, I had to start to question if this was why my students were disconnected from the topics discussed in the class. Was all my material presented from one perspective instead of being neutral like I had once believed? Do Indigenous students not see the value in attaining an education due to the external struggles they, and their ancestors, have endured?

Once establishing these questions, I returned to the literature hoping to find answers that might help me to correct these issues. Some experts would argue that just asking the students would be the best approach. I, unfortunately, have to disagree. This direct approach could lead to an even bigger wall being built between my students and myself: it may come off threatening despite my best efforts to avoid it. So, I turned back to the Culturally Responsive Classroom materials for answers: more specifically, the literature. The literature assigned describes a connection between language, territory, ceremonial cycles, and sacred history (Holm, et al., 2003). Dr. Brayboy's video titled "Indigenous Knowledge Systems" is one of the best examples. His concept of relationships and its reciprocity is something that I needed to include in my curriculum. The material needed to help establish a relationship with the student. I needed to understand it and be willing to teach it from a new viewpoint. Education, between all the "have tos" and all the boxes that needed to be checked, has lost its individuality, and forced students into being molded into what those in charge believe is the best mold.

Holm, et al. (2003) further prove this point in their article "Peoplehood: A Model for the Extension of Sovereignty in American Indian Studies". These authors describe how schools, especially those stuck in the trend of traditional learning, "tend to compartmentalize and fragment knowledge." (p.20). In other words, they tend to believe that there is only one way to teach and one way to comprehend that knowledge. But that is not true. Students, no matter the race, are going to learn differently. What they learn in the classroom will be different than what they learn at home. It is the teacher's responsibility to find ways to provide facts to students so that they may intertwine them into their own outlook in the world in a way they see fit. It is the difference between indoctrination and teaching. Thus, to do this and create a more holistic approach, I will set a meeting and travel to the local tribal elders and try to incorporate the value system and the lessons learned from them into my future lessons. Just making this gesture, ideally, will also help to create that route to establishing a relationship with my Indigenous students and show them I am willing to learn as much as I am willing to teach.

Another one of the assigned materials that really made me think was the video presentation by Dr. Tsianina Lomawaima. Dr. Lomawaima focuses on engaging, including, and encouraging students to become competent, caring, and engaged individuals. She forced me to consider how I was doing this within my classroom. The sad truth was I am not. I acknowledge a need to balance the hardships and trauma my students endure and bring to class, but I have not thought about how these are re-triggered by some of my material. For example, for Indigenous students, if the class was reading a piece on the “Trail of Tears,” is it possible that my students may have gone home thinking that this may happen again? I could not imagine a student coming onto campus the next day with this fear and then wanting to actively engage in the material. So, my new question was how can I present this material without creating that fear? Thus, I read the subsequent reading assignments with anticipation.

The assignment titled “Indigenizing Education: Playing to Our Strengths” helped to answer that question. This assignment encouraged me to create an inclusive classroom that focuses on a holistic approach that included the criteria presented by Dr. Brayboy. Dr. Brayboy argues that the empirical data instead of summarization or annotation is more significant to the Indigenous student. For example, if my initial assignment was to read about the “Trail of Tears,” then the subsequent assignment could be “Do you think this could happen again? Use empirical data to defend your position.” This will allow students to be able to bring their own backgrounds and beliefs into the classroom. Who knows, it would be possible that I would be taught something that I did not know. There is nothing wrong with that either. If the student is able to teach both the class and me something, that means that the assignment went beyond what I believed it would.

Now, in an attempt to truly apply this to a group that I have contact with, I looked up the Hualapai Tribe, the People of the Tall Pines. It became clear that a holistic approach is something of value. Their tribal seal is an image of two native people whose braids intertwine at the end. The canyon in the background reminds them of the land that cares for them, and they care for it. There is a picture of the reservation, but more symbols that represent their heritage, their history. The most important part, however, is the saying imprinted on the bottom: “Through hard work, determination, and education, everything is possible.” This tells me that the tribal leaders do not fear the educational system that these students attend. They support it. It is then our responsibility to find ways to support their beliefs too. This is how I decided to create the culture within my classroom: the culture needs to be built off of the ideas of hard work, determination, and education.

Seeing the connection between the past and my classroom was extremely difficult for me at first. The students weren’t there to see it firsthand, how can it be affecting them this harshly? What I forgot is that learning does not just take place in the classroom. It takes place at home and in the activities that students participate in. When it comes down to it, these students are going to be more engaged with those that they have constant contact with and those who they highly respect. That is probably not going to be the teacher that they see for an hour a day who just states facts. But, if the ideas of the elders and these people matched mine or at least I could show an attempt to make them match, I will have a higher level of engagement in the classroom and a higher level of respect from the students. The more I can do to include students’ cultures and diverse backgrounds into the classroom the higher my success in teaching will be.

Student Engagement

The most common statement that I hear from my students when presented with English reading material is “Another story by an old, dead white guy?!” While this statement is short, it communicates so many things. For example, the material does not feel relevant or interesting to the students; so, I know engagement is going to be low. To counter that, my first goal would be to find material that the students can relate to (whether it be a character or an event or a setting). The more the student relates, the better the understanding will be. This leads me to the second goal of having the students be able to recall reading strategies and techniques that were introduced in previous classes. I believe that the more relevant the information, the longer it will reside within the students. My final goal is to show the students that learning extends beyond the classroom. The stories that they read about in class can be taken home and discussed with parents or guardians. There are so many different interpretations of the same statement that this will allow all students to pull their backgrounds and successfully connect with the students.

While this class has presented a lot of useful skills, one thing that I am better able to understand is the need to allow my indigenous students the opportunity to create and provide a sense of identity in the classroom. By doing so, I hope other students will begin to pull their own style and background into the classroom and help to create a new culture of understanding and growth. Below is only one example of the activities that I would like to do with my middle schoolers. For focus purposes, the Arizona ELA standards I will focus on are:

8.R.RI.01: The Highly Proficient student can apply thorough textual evidence to support a deep analysis of the text and complex inferences drawn from the text.

8.W.04: The Highly Proficient student can produce a clear and coherent piece of writing that is appropriate to the task, purpose, and audience.

Teacher Modeling

The teacher will begin with presenting an example of each type of informational texts: descriptive, compare/contrast, cause and effect, problem and solution, and chronological/sequential. The instructor will not tell the students which essay should be labeled what; instead, the instructor will read a list of criteria off (i.e. this type of essay presents a historical problem or this type of essay uses key words like “first” or “second”). Once the criteria are read, the teacher will take a class vote on the identification of the type of essay the students believe it is. If needed, students can politely debate why they think one is over the other. After two minutes of class conversation, the instructor will reveal the label for the essay and explain why it is correct. After the conversation, students who may still be struggling in the topic (i.e. didn’t vote on a topic title or didn’t participate in conversation) will be placed in small groups for further support.

Student application of information

To aid both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in gaining a sense of identity, along with understanding different tribal cultures, students will choose one tribe to focus on from a list of several of the southwest tribes. After selecting a tribe, students will be asked to find specific information regarding life, history, culture, and language. Students will be asked to present this information to the class in a medium of their choice (i.e. essay, PowerPoint, etc). However, the medium must follow one of the criteria that was listed above and the final product should be identifiable as one of the informational texts. Students who are not presenting at that time will be taking notes on guided sheets.

Another assignment that will help to increase the understanding of indigenous cultures in the classroom and incorporate the understanding of informational texts will be a comparison of understandings through a moment in history. Students will be broken into small groups and will read and discuss several important events from Native American History. Students will discuss, in their groups, how they think the situation impacted the timeline of the Native Americans, how they would have ideally addressed or approached the situation if they were present during that time, and how the world would look differently if their presented solution had worked. Once this is completed in the groups, the students will present their answers to the class and there will be discussion about what the best answers to each of the questions were.

From these two examples, my goal is that the students will be able to create a basic understanding of the background of Native Americans and empathize with them. Then, I will drive the point home by introducing and reading with the class *Code Talkers*. Amongst reading the book, the class will discuss mission schools, contributions of the code talkers, and the background of the war itself. The hope is that those who have an indigenous background will take more pride and share what they know from experience and elders talking with them to the class. By hearing their friends and classmates speak, the goal of moving material from a book to real life will definitely be accomplished. As suggested during seminar, I will try to get a tribal representative to come and speak to the class.

Student Engagement

The usual introductory lesson to informational text will be used to remind students of the seven types of informational texts. The five pieces that will be used for analysis will focus more on Indigenous issues and people as a way of maintaining and encouraging the students to be actively involved in the class. We will move into learning and researching tribes of the Southwest in small groups of three or four. Each group will present their materials in a PowerPoint or poster format. For example, if the students chose the Wampanoag tribe their first piece would describe the Wampanoag beliefs and character. Their second would focus on the history of the Wampanoag tribe. Their third would identify an issue the tribe faced and how the tribe was affected by it. The fourth would identify a problem the Wampanoag tribe faces or faced and explain how it could or was resolved. The fifth piece would be a comparison between the tribe chosen by the group and the people of Kingman. I would like to add a language component to this project by asking for five words in the tribal language if discoverable. I would ask students to try to find words for home, school, friend, family, food. Students will be scored based on the depth of their analysis and gathering of information.

Students will then be provided readings on the Treaty of Hopewell, the Indian Removal Act, the Trail of Tears, the Indian Appropriation Act, the Dawes Act, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the living conditions on reservations including medical issues, economy, and educational systems. Students will summarize the information to locate the main idea and supporting details. Based on the information students accumulate they will craft a memoir as someone living or who has lived on a reservation. This will help satisfy the writing standard and allow students to be somewhat creative in their interpretation and application of the material. I am hoping to allow them to showcase their skills, background, and knowledge as they write. This will be scored using a rubric.

The last component of this unit will be the novel *Code Talkers*. This is a memoir of sorts that focuses on Ned Begay and his entrance into a mission school, his growth through high school, and his enlistment into the military during World War II. While class will still focus on the informational text aspect of the work, students will be analyzing the character of Ned Begay as he endures the trials of school and war and its aftermath. Assessments include written responses and comprehension questions as well as a comprehensive final assessment.

Between the lessons and the active student engagement through assignments, the students will gain a clear understanding of informational texts and how Native American culture fits into both history and today. In addition, through these assignments, the students will get to learn more about each other and I will get to learn about them. There is a lot of interpretation in the assignments and in the material itself. By allowing the students to verbally, written, and kinetically (their choice really) share what they have learned, there is a high likelihood that all students will learn about indigenous cultures and appreciate multiple cultures.

Cross Curricular Activities

Mathematics- Relate the distance from the Trail of Tears into different metric components.

Social Studies: Enrich the discussion on the Treaty of Hopewell, the Indian Removal Act, the Trail of Tears, the Indian Appropriation Act, the Dawes Act, the Bureau of Indian Affairs

Science: discuss the different environments encountered as the tribes were relocated across the United States

Assessment

<p>To establish a sense of identity for my indigenous students and aid my non-indigenous Indian students with their knowledge of tribal communities</p>	<p>Formative</p>	<p>Presentations on tribal information</p> <p>Tribal information to include: description of beliefs and character, history of the tribe, identify an issue the tribe faced and how the tribe was affected by it, identify a problem the tribe faces or faced and explain how it could or was resolved, comparison between the tribe chosen by the group and the people of Kingman. Additionally, students</p>
---	------------------	---

		may choose to find common words in English and their representations in the tribal language. Grade will be based upon successful written analysis of the required components.
To contribute to a sense of value for their cultural communities.	Formative	Presentations on tribal information Presentation rubric used.
The Highly Proficient student can apply thorough textual evidence to support a deep analysis of the text and complex inferences drawn from the text.	Formative	Research on tribes fit the required components asked for by the instructor Notes and summarizing of events and use of textual evidence.
The Highly Proficient student can produce a clear and coherent piece of writing that is appropriate to the task, purpose, and audience.	Summative	Write a memoir using the knowledge of the tribes and significant Native American events. This should be a multi-paragraph response that demonstrates point of view and synthesis of tribal information and history. Writing rubric to be used for grading.

Resources

Deloria, Jr, V., & Wildcat, D.R. (2001). *Power and place: Indian education in America*. Fulcrum Publishing. Pp. 7-28.

The Hualapai Tribe. (n.d.). The Hualapai Tribe Website | People of the Tall Pines. Retrieved June 15, 2022, from <https://hualapai-nsn.gov/>

Holm, T., Pearson, J.D., & Chavis, B. (2003). Peoplehood: A model for the extension of sovereignty in American Indian studies. *Wicazo Sa Review*, 18(1), 7-24.

King, T. (2005). *The truth about stories: A native narrative*. University of Minnesota Press.

Kingman Middle School (2022 Ranking) | Kingman, AZ. (n.d.). Public School Review. Retrieved June 15, 2022, from <https://www.publicschoolreview.com/kingman-middle-school-profile>

Kingman Middle School in Arizona - US News Education. (2022). *USNews.com*. <https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/arizona/kingman-middle-school-264733>

NAU (Director). (n.d.). *Indian Education and Schooling* [Film; mp4]. (Original work published, 2022)

NAU (Director). (2022). *Indigenous Knowledge Systems* [Film; mp4]. NAU.