

Philosophy, Literature, and the Moral Imagination

Creating an intimate Navajo connection to US History and Government

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Context & Rationale

I am a Navajo male and Iraq War veteran, starting on my 12th year of teaching at Window Rock High School in Fort Defiance, Arizona. We are adjacent to the Navajo Nation capital in Window Rock which is four miles to our South. Half of my entire teaching experience is at my current site. WRHS is also where I graduated high school, so one can say “I’ve come full circle and returned home” to teach. My life experience is an asset when I teach. My classes are U.S. History for Advanced Placement U.S. History and general US History classes, all for sophomores. A’hehee to those who guided and helped me from the Dine Institute at Northern Arizona University, professors Julie Piering and Angie Hanson and Fellow Irene Jones from the Kayenta Unified School District. It’s been a pleasure working with all the fellows in putting this together.

Who is this lesson for?

These lessons within this curriculum are for students to make an authentic connection to history and government. If there is no connection, there is no learning. These connections are through emotional bridges, familiarity through the land, societal norms, etc. I’ll try my best to make these connections.

The Window Rock Unified School District is home to about 2,000 students, mostly Navajo. There are a little over 550 students at Window Rock High School itself. The WRUSD serves the communities of Fort Defiance (site of WRHS), Window Rock, St. Michaels, Oak Springs, Red Lake and Sawmill, in northeastern Arizona. There are four other schools within the district: Tsehootsooi Primary School (K-3), Tsehootsooi Intermediate School (4-6), Tsehootsooi Middle School (7-8) and Tsehootsooi Dine’ Bi’oltah (Navajo immersion school for grades K-6). The ethnic make-up is about 98% Navajo. Most of the students are English speakers, with a high percentage with English as a Second Language. I do not have the current statistics on this figure. Although some of my Navajo students are ESL, that does not mean they are fluent in the Navajo language. It’s more of a combination of not being full in knowledge of Navajo or the English language.

A simple view of the student body and community make-up is one of a homogenous Navajo community. The town has had very little change over the last forty years, with less private businesses operating than in the 1980s and a largely unchanged infrastructure.. Yet, there is a long and storied history here. Fort Defiance was named for an outpost for the US Army in 1851. It was established in an effort of the United States government to deal with Navajos not wanting to be part of the expanding United States of America. The local school was among the first of public schools on the Navajo Nation. Nearby Window Rock is the capital of the Navajo Nation. Their ancestors, like that of my family, largely took part in World War II and the Vietnam War. When reminded or informed of that, they tend to put forth more interest. They wonder. They apply knowledge to the existing issues of today, such the recent rulings by the Supreme Court dealing with the Indian Child Welfare Act and the AZ v. Navajo Nation ruling with water rights in this summer of 2023. They get to know that they are intertwined with American History.

WRHS has former students who have gone on to study and earn post-secondary degrees at institutions such as San Diego State, BYU, Notre Dame, Dickenson College, University of Denver, and the US Air Force Academy to name a few, as well as most nearby universities in Arizona and New Mexico.

Reading is essential with any topic or subject. In a required US History or Government class, sometimes the topic can be deemed as uninteresting. Reading can bridge the gap and bring relevancy to these students.

Teaching at Window Rock High School, rated a “B” school by Arizona, WRHS has strategies to boost its reading and comprehension with RACES (Restate Answer Cite Explain Sum it up) writing strategies. However, with my Advanced Placement classes, US History and US Government and Politics, I use Document Based Questions from the SHEG website (Stanford History Education Group). DBQs utilize strategies like corroboration, cause and effect, resourcing, as well as techniques for closer reading. The APUSH students are tested every May via the AP Exam and they will have DBQ questions. Also present are Short Answer Questions (SAQs) and LEQs (Long Essay Questions).

As stated before, bridging the gap between reading or hearing lecture can be further driven home with the aspect of adding relevancy to their lives. How does US History or Government work for them? How can they get deficiencies within the community or reservation changed or improved? As the students come to understand this more, they are more apt to learn. Navajo history (or any history) can be one with which they make an intimate connection if they read something that they can relate to via examination of something they are familiar with. Discussions can then be done using a variety of methods, such as philosophical analysis, debate, or a Socratic Seminar where the students work together in analyzing the presumptions and implications of topics read.

As far as 10th grade Advanced Placement United States History (APUSH), this LMI reading can also be part of the class curriculum. The APUSH students do additional reading such as Document Based Questions (DBQ) as part of AP curriculum. The study of history is more appealing if students can find relevancy to their history, in this case that of the student body being primarily Navajo.

The broad topic of westward expansion can be easily enmeshed with the Navajo Long Walk (which is part of the AZ state standards), the Progressive Era with Navajo/Native boarding schools, World War Two and the Navajo Codetalkers, and Civil Rights from a Navajo/Native perspective.

The following classes which this may be applied are as follows (by what is in the course catalog at Window Rock High School for the School Year 2023-24):

Advanced Placement US History (APUSH). This is a two-semester course for sophomore students. Rigorous reading is essential in this course, as well as writing. An AP Exam is given at the end of the year nationwide.

U.S. History). This is a two-semester course for sophomore students. Although not as rigorous as APUSH, the students will still take part in the essential reading in this course, as well as writing.

This curriculum will be geared towards these classes. The reading and curriculum will bridge the gaps in connecting with the students as far as relating to topics the students might feel disconnected.

Why focus on literature and the moral imagination?

Most students gain in-depth knowledge of their studied topics from reading first-hand accounts. These could be fictional or not. Reading from a first-hand perspective can give the student an intimate feel for the topic at hand. This also adds relevancy to the studied focus.

For example, my students will learn about the forced Navajo livestock reduction of the 1930s as part of the US Government's relationship to Native People. The students know that many families lost much livestock, mainly sheep, in what took away the livelihood of many Navajo families. Those are the general facts and can be very "dry" information. So, I would give the students a passage to read from Chester Nez's *Codetalker*. The students would read from his memoir as he recounts what it was like to have federal government workers with Navajo laborers arrive at his family's home site and they were made to stand aside as three hundred head of sheep were herded into a pit freshly dug by bulldozers. The federal workers then sprayed the sheep with gasoline from a fuel truck and set them afire. He describes the sounds of the sheep being burned alive as they screamed. He was a little boy and he cried. He also recalls the charred stench of the sheep as they were then buried by the bulldozer, and some were still alive. Although this example is somewhat intense, this does bring the students to a different, more intimate sense of the reality of the livestock reduction practices and invokes emotion. It is a prime example of how literature can enhance their moral imagination in relation to history.

With various links to readings of subject and first-hand accounts, the students can experience a better understanding of the topic, thus learning in the process. This could easily turn into a class discussion or activity such as a Socratic Seminar.

This reading could be the center point of discussion for moral discussions. Examples to be discussed could be the issues having to choose in a moral dilemma (lesser of two evils) or remorse or guilt as outlined in *Moral Residue and Dilemmas*. History is looking back and analyzing many of these events and asking if they were the "right thing to do". Hind sight is 20/20 as they say. I'd like the students to arrive at the thought of 'why do we keep repeating these same mistakes?' Is there a way to really not just analyze but apply some of these observations as lessons so similar mistakes are not made in the present or future?

Luckily, I'm able to get an assortment of books from the Federal Projects office within our district and have a choice in what we can order. I can utilize these books as supplemental material or as required books for the students to study. Sometimes students are even allowed to keep books of their liking.

Content Objective

Students will participate in ways to to:

1. Understand US History at a level they comprehend.
2. create a correlation of the subject matter to the student via moral teachings (Navajo)

Classroom Activities:

History:

1. Get students to read daily and analyze their reading topic.

Focus on one piece of literature and how it correlates with a particular historical topic and its connection to Navajo history. The students will get assigned reading:

- a. Bighorse the Warrior- American expansion and the Indian Wars, the Navajo Long Walk.
- b. Code Talker- the Great Depression, Navajo livestock reduction, and Navajo participation in World War Two.

Reading List

How can reading of historical or fictional books create a connection to Navajo identity and Navajo moral imagination? Below is a list of books that can be used in conjunction with various lessons in my Dine Studies class. I can add a few other books if they are found to be pertinent.

For students:

What in this book(s) make it easier to relate to Navajo history?

How has this reading made history relevant to you?

What makes up Navajo/Southwest culture?.

What did you read and relate to that stuck out to your emotions? Why?

Teaching Strategies

- 1) Lesson One: the Manifest Destiny via Bighorse (THIS WILL BE MY SHOWCASE LESSON)
 - a) Introduce the lesson concept. In American history, the renowned part of history begins with the Mexican War in the middle 1800s. The lesson can begin with the intro, "With America's westward expansion came the popular notion of America's 'God given right' to any and all lands held by Native Peoples. The infamous Cherokee Trail of Tears was one of the first mass relocations of Native tribe(s). War and forced relocation would happen to the Navajo People as well in the 1860s". This goes along with lessons from *Chapter 11, Manifest Destiny: Expanding the Nation 1830-1853* and *Chapter 16, Conflict in the West, 1865-1912* (Pearson, 317-344, 474-487). More than just a collection of

geographical places, there is also the expressive aspect of what the story conveys. What feelings are invoked with the students exposure in this reading? How do the students feel reading this book?

- b) Navajo survivor Gus Bighorse's first hand account begins in this era. Born in about 1846, he lived and experienced the tumultuous events of the Navajo Wars with the United States in the 1860s. He lived until 1939 and told his story to his daughter, Tiana BigHorse, who relayed his story to Noel Bennet, who published the experience. Pages 3-8 are BigHorse's years of growing up (told in the first person). What is also interesting for the students is that most of his locations mentioned are geographical places they know today.
- i) **Strategy One-** Questions will include:
- ii) What are his Navajo clans? Are you related to him?
 - iii) Where were his journeys? What places have you been the most? Where are you favorite places on Navajo? Ask them to discuss these answers in class. Outline his journey, starting from Grants and Mount Taylor, New Mexico and westward to the vicinity of Flagstaff AZ. Also mentioned in his story are Monument Valley, Farmington, Albuquerque, Fort Defiance, and Tuba City.
 - iv) An illustrated map will be part of his journey, with summaries of each geographical area. There is a book that can be used in conjunction with this, *Navajo Places*. This textbook summarizes the significance of almost all Navajo settlements today and its history, along with the Navajo names.
 - v) They can relate stories of their family if any. For instance, there is a Navajo bandit who preys upon his own people during the height of the last Navajo War. His forays came from the Grey Mountain area near the Grand Canyon. He was killed by other Navajos protecting their own. (Interestingly, my father told me stories told to him from his youth of Navajos raiding the Ganado/ Cornfields area).
 - vi) There are other portions of the book, Bighorse, which students can read. From this they can summarize and create a poster board of these events.
 - vii) This book and the accompanying stories they illustrate take place during the time of the Navajo Long Walk.
 - viii) Students will read the following chapters from *BigHorse*:
 - a. "Why I Tell My Story" pp. 1-3
 - i. Ask/Discuss
 - Do they notice the way the English language is used (noted in the author's note as well as "Red English")
 - Are related to Mr. Bighorse by known family link, through clan or having family in the Tuba City area.
 - "My Parents' Background"
 - Are they familiar with any of these areas Bighorse journeyed?

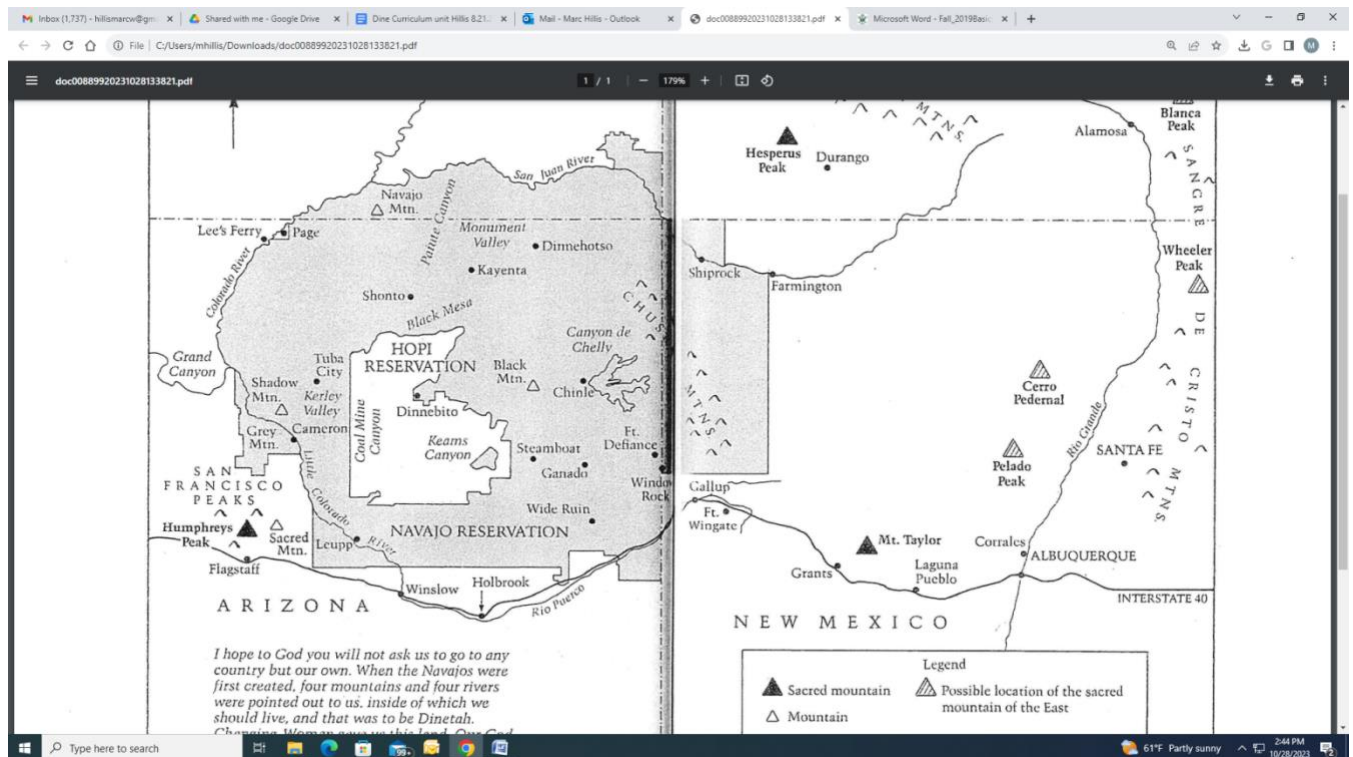
The students will create a map of Navajo land that BigHorse mentions.

Strategy Two-

They will use the book, *Navajo Places* (Linford 2000) for reference. They will create a map of where Bighorse journeyed or mentioned. This will be a group effort, 3-4 students per group.

Students will create this map using eight locations. They will use the English name and the Navajo name. Example: To Naneesdizi (Navajo)/Tuba City (English). They will include a short summary of each place regarding its significance according to Bighorse. Summary should look similar to this: *Gus Bighorse settled near there in his later years as an older man. He married twice and had many children. The surname is known today in the community of Tuba City.*

- The map can look like today's Navajo Nation map or a generalized area of the Four Corners region of the US.



(Bighorse 1990)

- The map can include all of the geographical areas above. Visibly absent from the map is *Hweeldi*, Fort Sumner, NM,
- Students will present a map similar to this scale to the class.
- Their maps should have at least eight of these areas that Bighorse mentioned in his story. Mount Taylor, Hweeldi, Fort Defiance, Leupp, Tuba City, Many Farms, Farmington, San Francisco Peaks, Mt. Hesperus, Blanca Peak, Monument Valley, Ch'ooshgai (Chuska) Mountains, Shonto.
- Include both English and Navajo names, and their significance in the story. For example, Flagstaff/ Kin Lani

Dook’o’sliid Biyaagi (Linford 77). If they need to add more info than just the story, they may use the *Navajo Places* book. When using the book, use the proper context of the story when writing a summary. For example, if Albuquerque is labeled, have the students state how Bighorse might have perceived the village, it was not the sprawling metropolis of today (171). An example could be “Navajos from Bighorses’ band from Mount Taylor would have systematically raided Albuquerque”.

- This will be done on poster board. An illustration should accompany each location noted on the map.
- One student will be a speaker for the group. Rubric will include: **Map elements**, is it clearly defined? (1-4 points), **Labels and features**, are the Navajo and English names included? Are they accurate in its significance? (1-8 points). **Neatness**, is the map legible and easy to read? (1-4 points). **Visually appealing**, is the map illustrated and colored? Is it colored and all of the sheet used with no dead space? (1-4 points). **Mechanics and Spelling**, Are the places properly labeled, with proper capitalization? Are the summaries written correctly? (1-8 points) **Presentation**, Are all students presentable and with proper posture? No fidgeting. Is the speaker vocal? (1-4 points)
- All students in the same group will get the same grade. 32 points will be the maximum for this project.
- The time frame will be seven school days. The top two groups will be showcased for the NAU Dine presentation on December 2, 2023.

2. Lesson on Boarding School era, the middle 1800s to the 1970s.

a. Introduce the Boarding schools by simply asking who’s family went to such schools? From this current time, it may not be their parents’ generation but that of their grandparents and generations before. Ask, “What local schools are left over from that era?” (answers: Wingate schools in NM and Many Farms High School and Tuba City Boarding Schools in AZ).

b. The famous Navajo Codetalker, Chester Nez, recalls his experiences in boarding schools near Gallup, NM in the 1920s and 30s. As one of the “Original Twenty-Nine”, Mr. Nez talks about life in the schools and differences between Navajo and English.

i. Reading will be from Chapter 4, pp. 41-52.

ii. Questions will include: Where was his school? Was his experience at the boarding school positive or negative? Explain your answer. Was there any irony you recognized? Explain your answer (Native/ Navajo students not allowed to speak Native language at all but US Marine Corps wants Navajo Marines to speak Navajo for code... both the boarding schools and USMC controlled by the federal government).

iii. Small lesson: have the students write a personal journal entry over a week's time. They would put themselves in the place of a Navajo boarding school student. They would specify the time, place, and identity of being a student in that same time Chester Nez went to school (late 1920s to 1942).

iv. Larger lesson: Write an essay

1. Take a position on the the moral ambiguity of the Boarding Schools for Native American children who were forced to go. There is almost nothing in either textbooks my history classes use, so they would have to research elsewhere, online or other books.
2. Outline the hardships of students and their families.
3. Tell a story of one person who went through this. This could be someone they researched or even a family member.
4. Use citations
5. Include compelling language, grammar, and spelling.
6. Length should be 2-3 pages and done in a week's time.

3. Introduce the War years and Navajo Codetalkers.

a. Introduce the reading by asking who has military family members? Explain that there are thousands of Navajo war veterans and many more from WWII itself. Only 534 were trained and only 420 went to war. Two were killed in the Pacific Theater. Over fifty Navajo servicemen were killed or are missing in the Pacific, Africa and Europe.

i. Complete a small activity on how the Navajo Code worked. Give the students a sheet with the Navajo phonetic alphabet that was used. Have them try to decipher a code.

Use the Navajo code provided on: Central Intelligence Agency's website. Code Challenge. <https://www.cia.gov/stories/story/navajo-code-talkers-and-the-unbreakable-code/>

ii. Students will read Chapter 14, pp. 163-175 out of *Codetalker*. This is a close read and they could read in groups of four. From this they will take the interesting or important parts and discuss in a Socratic Seminar.

iii. From their reading, we would discuss what they found. To persuade the students along, the following questions could be asked: First, where is Bougainville? (near the Island of Papua New Guinae) What was the mindset of the Marines there on Bougainville? Discuss 'fratricide'.

iv. Write an essay based on the six-traits of writing.

Alignment with AZ State Standards (grades 9-12)

History:

The development of civilizations, societies, cultures, and innovations have influenced history and continue to impact the modern world.

- HS.H1.2 Explain and compare how social, cultural, and environmental factors influenced state-building, expansion, and dissolution

Cycles of conflict and cooperation have shaped relations among people, places, and environments.

- HS.H2.1 Explain multiple causes of conflict.

Economic, political, and religious ideas and institutions have influenced history and continue to shape the modern world.

- HS.H3.1 Analyze how societies, leaders, institutions, and organizations respond to societal needs and changes.
- HS.H3.4 Evaluate how societies have balanced individual freedoms, responsibilities, and human dignity versus the common good

Patterns of social and political interactions have shaped people, places, and events throughout history and continue to shape the modern world.

- HS.H4.2 Explain how artistic, philosophical, and scientific ideas have developed and shaped society and institutions

Disciplinary Skills and Processes

Chronological reasoning requires understanding processes of change and continuity over time, which means assessing similarities and differences between historical periods and between the past and present.

- HS.SP1.3 Evaluate the significance of past events as they relate to their own lives and the world.
- HS.SP1.4 Use compelling questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context

Thinking within the discipline involves the ability to identify, compare, and evaluate multiple perspectives about a given event to draw conclusions since there are multiple points of view about events and issues.

- HS.SP2.3 Demonstrate historical empathy when examining individuals or groups in the past whose perspectives might be very different from those held today.

Historians and Social Scientists gather, interpret, and use evidence to develop claims and answer historical, economic, geographical, and political questions and communicate their conclusions.

- HS.SP3.2 Gather relevant information from multiple sources representing a wide range of views while using origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the source to guide the selection.
- HS.SP3.3 Analyze the relationship between primary sources and the secondary interpretations made from them including possible limitations in various kinds of evidence and differing secondary interpretations.
- HS.SP3.4 Evaluate the credibility of a source by examining how experts value the source.
- HS.SP3.5 Use questions generated about multiple historical sources to pursue further inquiry and investigate additional sources.
- HS.SP3.6 Construct and present arguments using precise and knowledgeable claims, with evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging counterclaims and evidentiary weaknesses.
- HS.SP3.7 Construct and present explanations using sound reasoning, correct sequence (linear and non-linear) examples, and details with significant and pertinent information and data, while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the explanation.
- HS.SP3.8 Present arguments and explanations that feature ideas and perspectives on issues and topics to reach a range of audiences and venues using print, oral, and digital technologies

References

Fictional books:

Anaya, Rudolfo (1992) Albuquerque. University of New Mexico Press.

Alexi, Sherman (2007) The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian. Little, Brown and Co.

Historical books:

Avila, Judith S. & Nez, Chester (2011). Code talker: The first and only memoir by one of the original Navajo code talkers of WWII, Dutton Caliber.

Bighorse, Tiana & Bennett, Noel (1990). Bighorse the warrior. University of Arizona.

Linford, Laurance D. (200). Navajo places: History, legend, landscape. University of Utah Press.

Papansky-Werner, E., Levy, P. B., Roberts, R., & Taylor, A. (2016). United States History. Pearson Education.

*Other books that could be used with similar readings and lessons for extra resources:

Bird, Kai & Sherwin, Martin J. (2023). American Prometheus

Estes, Nick & Dhillon, Jaskiran (2019). Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NODAPL movement. Univ. of Minnesota Press.

Fraser, James W. (2024). By the people: A history of the United States. Pearson Education.

Grann, David. (2017) Killers of the flower moon. Vintage Books.

Roberts, David (2012). Finding Everett Ruess. Crown Publishing.

Sides, Hampton (2006). Blood and thunder: The epic story of Kit Carson and the conquest of the American West. Anchor Books.

Taylor, John Lewis (2019). Navajo scouts during the Apache Wars. The History Press.

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(2023) 21-1484 Arizona v. Navajo Nation https://www.supremecourt.gov/oral_arguments/argument_transcript/2022

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