

Ecology: Connecting with the environment through historical and traditional stories using
photography.

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Dine Institute for Navajo Nation Educators

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Abstract

This Ecography unit will introduce photography skills and explore the historical ecological context of homelands or landforms within the students' home community by learning through photography medium, visual journaling, and Din4 language stories. The curriculum focuses on note-taking, small group discussions, photography compositional techniques, mounting, and project-based learning. Students will research environments or major landforms within the community to learn about landscape and history pertaining to the community to understand history of environment they reside. Designed for a 5-week timeframe, the unit concludes with a project-based assessment that is adaptive to varying ability levels of readers or writers. The unit is ideal for students with some writing and research experience, and it is flexible and suitable for grades 9-12 at the secondary level using art photography curriculum.

Context

Monument Valley High School is located on the southern border of Utah, the most northern edge of the Navajo Nation and considered a stronghold of the Din4 People, also known as Ts4 Bii' Nidzizgaaí (valley of the rocks) or Monument Valley, Utah.

Monument Valley High School services 7-12 grade students with a population of 205 for the 2023-2024 school year and is located in the southern portion of San Juan County in Utah. The history surrounding the construction of the school began with some dissenters within the county who hoped to be responsible for building a school for Navajo students in the southern portion of the state within the Navajo Nation boundaries. The suit filed by the Navajo Nation in 1974 accused the San Juan school district of spending more money on the education of non-Navajo students than the education of American Indian students in the county. That lawsuit ended with the two entities agreeing to build schools in Montezuma Creek and Monument Valley, Utah, to serve Navajo students on the reservation. In 1993, Navajo parents filed a new lawsuit against the San Juan School District after a judge declined to change the agreement from the 1974 lawsuit to include constructing a high school near the Navajo Mountain community to serve students in the southern portion of the district. The new suit alleged the district did the same to prevent equal educational opportunities, it said 19 years ago. "District schools in southern San Juan County with predominantly Native American student population have inadequate curriculum, inadequate bilingual and bicultural programs, inadequate equipment and supplies, inadequate facilities," the lawsuit states. The superintendent, Gerald Mikesell, claimed that the district spends more on American Indian students than Caucasian students. Mikesell also said that the difference between northern schools, which are predominantly Caucasian, and southern schools is the experience of the teachers. "Teachers in the northern half of the district have an average of 10 years' experience. Living conditions in the south end are such that teachers there don't stay very long," he said. "We have a high turnover. I'm sure the quality of our education program suffers because

of that.” In this new lawsuit the Navajo Nation stated to U.S. District Judge Bruce Jenkins to order the San Juan School District to construct a new high school for Navajo Mountain students.

All three communities currently have a high school serving 7-12 graders. One part of the agreement to the 1997 suit was to address the cultural awareness component, “The district agrees to continue to incorporate a Native American cultural component into its curriculum”(Funk, M. 1993), which allows me to have the cultural component included in many of my lessons. Much of the student population at our school is 98% Navajo students, and they have access to a program that allows them to transition to post-secondary or technical schools. More than 90% of the school's students are considered economically disadvantaged, and 69% have been assessed as English Language Learners. Our school uses assessments each spring to measure student progress. Students are assessed based on the concepts and skills taught in the classroom, measuring student learning according to the Utah State Standards. The achievement shows the percentage of students who demonstrated proficiency on grade-level standards in each subject using Utah Aspire Plus for grades 9 and 10. At the same time, 11th graders are assessed using national ACT assessments used by other high schools in the nation. Our 22-23 school year data shows that 6% of our students met proficiency in English Language Arts, well below the state average of 46% of the state student population meeting standards. In Mathematics, our school average is 2%, which have met the standard, while the state average is 31% who meet Utah standards in Math. The last assessment is the Science component and Monument Valley High showed some improvement with 9% of students reaching the standard, an increase of 1.6 % from the 2022 School Year. The state average for science assessment is 35% for all Utah students who took assessment in 2023(USBE, 2025).

Rationale

Living among relatives in two communities on the Navajo reservation during my adolescence allowed me to be immersed in traditional ceremonies and dialects handed down through many generations of Navajo medicine people. Maternal and paternal grandparents insisted we helped with chores when we visited their homesteads and speaking Navajo was synonymous with instructions on accomplishing tasks or chores. Not only was the Navajo language used during conversations, but procedural tasks, behavior, and beliefs were learned by repeating songs, prayers, and instructions while helping as assistants. The language was used as a teaching tool to help us visualize or relay stories important to family members and the environment. Acquisition of Navajo language skills significantly improved our ability to adapt to any situations we might encounter in the future.

Learning English to communicate became apparent while attending Head Start, where only English speakers were present in Bordertown communities of northern New Mexico. While being immersed in the Navajo language at home and learning how to use English at school was a

transition I dreaded each day. Accepting a new language was difficult because my siblings and relatives did not use English as a form of communication, making me question our school's instruction in only English. Finally, after continuous instruction in the English-only curriculum, I became fluent enough to speak to other bilingual or monolingual students. I understood the importance of English in maneuvering myself easily within the Bordertown community and its residents, but becoming fluent in second language also had a negative effect while negotiating traditional Din4 settings. I recall starting to code-switch when speaking to my elderly grandparents, using words that became slang among my Navajo peers off the reservation mixed with traditional Navajo language.

Introducing novel methods and incorporating them into our classrooms are sometimes overlooked because of our educational goals addressing failing students. Being overwhelmed by administrative initiatives or mandates to become a superior school can help some students but a majority will continue to fail. From the article, *Culturally Responsive Teaching for American Indian Students*, authors state the importance of teachers becoming experts in Native culture to provide "caring, trusting, and inclusive atmospheres" for native students to succeed and to be challenged (Pewewardy, Hammer, 2003). Believing that our students are going to trust a system that adapted boarding school educational methods into our mainstream educational system can be far-fetched. Trusting educators who continue to use similar methods without including their cultural ideals or respecting their ways will cause some hesitation to fully embrace mainstream education. Agbo states in *Enhancing Success in American Indian Students*, American Indian students still foster psychological wounds of the American government's assimilation practices causing low self-esteem among generations of native peoples (Agbo, 2001). Even after many years of reversing indoctrination policies, Native students are being taught that success comes only after forgetting past history of their community. Since the inception of addressing the "Indian Problem" it began with the removal or extinction, cultural assimilation, and homogenization by promoting a pan-Indian remedy to keep Indigenous groups in line with mainstream education policies (Werito; Vallego 2022) causing rifts between home and school environments or teachings.

As descendants of the Dine people, we must continue to develop new solutions to problems we face while researching the underlying problems. Forced acculturation practices used throughout reservation communities continue to hamper our ability to change the negative stigma that educational institutions have created since inception. Economic status or attainment of a mainstream lifestyle by our culturally rich people should not matter because Indigenous knowledge still has value within our communities. Still, continued acceptance of views that the Dine lifestyle or knowledge diminishes status in mainstream culture will further erase our Dine identities. Our ability to engage Dine learners with cultural assets or knowledge encourages our responsibilities to address problems and find solutions for a continued decrease of native youth involvement in the classroom. Once our youth feel involved in learning process and are an asset because of knowledge they bring to class discussions we will have met our goals as teachers of Indigenous youth.

Content Objectives

I want to plan a project based on research on the location and history surrounding an area where students or family members reside. In *Peoplehood: A model for the extension of sovereignty in American Indian studies*, Holm, Pearson and Chavis expand on the idea of Peoplehood and its four components, Place/Territory, Language, Sacred History, and Ceremonial Cycle. All components of this Peoplehood Matrix work together to describe how important each area is to communities or Indigenous groups who rely on place in their history (Chavis et al., 2003). This Ecology unit will encourage students to learn about historical events that have occurred within their local community and research importance of ecological relationships with the land. Students will be first exposed to photography compositional techniques, slowly developing creative tools that successfully compose black and white photographs. The content standard will focus more on landscape photography and analyzing various types of historical images with some understanding of ecological environments. Developing images that recreate historical photographs which represent their community will allow for historical recreation of imagery or an art style in their final project. The definition of what entails successful landscape compositions will also be discussed to identify how their identities are connected to the environment or homeland. Most artists assume the creation of self-portraits always shows the individual that becomes the subject, but Minor White states that “all photographs are essentially self-portraits.” White’s view is that all photography is art, and anything an artist creates shows personal and emotional subjects surrounded by the environment they choose to depict their persona. Another well-known photographer, Alfred Stieglitz, speaks of the symbolism connected to items or subjects within a frame, also called portraiture (Tjintjelaar, 2009). Students will look at their homeland as an extension of their persona and understand the relationship between their family lineage and location's historical significance. In Diné lineage, stories connected to clan names are essential, sometimes describing landforms or environments that describe the origin of clans and allowing students to display work that shows knowledge of location with historical compositions.

My area of focus is commercial photography, which gives students the skills to compose images using digital equipment and photography techniques. In this class, students can engage in realworld experiences through on-the-job opportunities. The Career and Technical Education (CTE) Pathways option prepares students to gain some experience with industry employment and/or successful transition to post-secondary education with credit in a technical field. Students who participate in CTE courses gain valuable occupational skills and explore career options that interest them before graduating high school. The CTE curriculum also exposes students to the practical experience needed to succeed through classroom instruction, hands-on lessons, and on-the-job training opportunities. By initiating student careers early, our Career and Technical Education program prepares students to begin training in high-skilled, high-wage, and high-demand occupations while concurrently enrolled in high school classes. The school believes that following a CTE pathway encourages students to be ready for college or their careers, thus giving them the option to continue their career paths after graduation. Most of my students in

Commercial Photography class are in grades 10-12, but it is open to other high school students if they need elective credit (CTE, 2025).

Performance skills are essential to develop a basic understanding of composing a photograph to show an understanding of the layout within the perimeters of a device. Content standards help to encourage students to demonstrate compositional elements and use strategies like triangle exposures, but each standard also addresses analytical critiques of their work. Standard three, which explores meaning and context, will be a vital standard when developing this curriculum unit. This standard addresses the idea development procedures to compose a successful photograph but ensures narrative exploration to give viewers meaning about their artwork. Storytelling is also embedded in the standard, and my curriculum unit involves the location or history of landscapes, so students understand the importance of land and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), which “involves many elements related to caring for the environment and learning about the natural world.” TEK ensures the inclusion of spiritual elements, cultural practices, values, language, and relationships with the environment using science content as a method to incorporate local knowledge into learning plans (Paul et al., 2020). Sequencing the process of developing an idea will allow me to practice the same strategies while introducing TEK elements so students learn about their communities. Still, the most critical part of the content standard would be the reflection and evaluation of artwork according to rubrics given to students. I want students to understand their personal history, be self-aware, and build on the issues of global environmental challenges they might encounter in the future.

Standards

The first content standard I will address in my curriculum will be Strand 4: Connect. Students will develop ideas connecting to other photographers and their work, inspiring the student's photographic interest. Many artists who use landscape photography to show environmental issues using various mediums will be introduced. The students will show an understanding of the photography content by composing images according to the assignment rubric and analyzing techniques. The second standard from the Career and Technology standard will be Strand 6: Portfolio. Students will construct a digital portfolio to demonstrate their development in aesthetic literacy and curate their work using compositional elements. Standard 2: Printed Work. Students will display their work through local events during the semester to show final photographs. This content of unit will also cover Dine History Standards, Concept 3; PO 1. I will interview and research historical homelands. The final project will also encompass their writing about each image and an essay describing the history and ecological issues through family oral interviews, periodical research, and personal or peer critique of their work. Using Dine Character Building Standards, Concept 1: I will use critical thinking to establish relationships with the environment; students will be able to describe the landforms or environments. The analytical research into oral histories and contrasting contemporary views will help them understand the importance of

relationships with the environment and other individuals within their community. Students will also cover RI.9-10.1 Common Core standard that covers key ideas and details standard. Cite strong and through textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from text.

Assignment Description

Monument Valley High School is on a block schedule with 85-minute classes and an advisement period at the end of the day for advisors of cohorts to assist students with their other courses. The A-B schedule alternates classroom instruction for all teachers and allows me to focus on either junior high or high school students for that day. The schedule also allows for teacher professional development at the end of the week, giving students a shorter class period every Friday. Students are given fewer days exposed to content and can miss more instruction if they are absent for a class period during the week, so attendance is another factor when developing practical lessons for students.

My initial idea about this unit will encompass environmental artists that use the natural environment as part of their composition using photography medium. The students will work in groups with their peers to help them become familiar with student critiques when they will be able to use critiques to create a response. I want students to be comfortable with future critiques or analyses of their work and their classmates to encourage group work throughout the whole process of project creation. Peer critique rubrics will allow students to create fundamental knowledge on analyzing peer work using established norms. The peer critique will be another graphic organizer that aids their ability to speak appropriately and critique effectively using proper responses for feedback.

Students will work in groups at the beginning of the lesson to photograph their school ground landscapes to introduce them to a few design principles and the rule of thirds compositional technique which emphasize balance in photographs. They will be given initial assignment to understand the possibilities of landscape photography through two observation activities: writing their responses to a sampling of photographs and becoming a “human camera.” Each group will then a photographic display of their school’s landscape and interpret the work of others, culminating in a discussion on art elements used to describe visual characteristics of their school environment. The first few lessons will be about compositional techniques to allow students to compose a subject using various techniques successfully. After each concept, students are given five criteria to compose 5 to 10 photographs that show evidence of compositional technique. At the end of each lesson, students will conclude by providing feedback and critique of a peer’s photographs.

Once they begin to feel comfortable with peers, CTE students will be able to acquire speaking skills to allow their views, opinions, or questions to be heard throughout their educational

experience. Adapting to situations requiring some peer review will reassure students that they are part of a community or workplace. Understanding the subject and gaining knowledge through writing or reading strategies allow students to confidently speak about their topic to other students and answer questions on their personal knowledge about their final project.

Strategies will cover photography content objectives, including Din4 culture standards, which explicitly cover Culturally Responsive Assessment of Indigenous School (CRAIS) principles (Castagno et al., 2021) used in my lesson. I know that many content objectives in photography are based on skills or knowledge concerning photography. Still, the main content covered in my class will cover project-based assessments that cover CTE standards. Most instruction will encompass the use of slides to introduce new concepts about photography content, with students using the Cornell note-taking method to allow them to summarize ideas and views about content at the end of the lecture. The same note-taking method will be used when introducing Dine language content so students can continue practicing it at the end of lectures.

At the beginning of the school year, CTE classes were assigned because art is a significant topic in programs throughout the school. There were two classes in the program with no materials to teach the class except online cloud programs, limiting the time needed to finish art projects. Students were given time to work with a program that was not consistent and frustrating because of our internet speed and devices that would not keep materials saved on the hard drive or inadequate or unreliable connection. My attempt to use materials and devices according to the needs of the program showed me the limits of what students can do using online cloud programs, causing me to rethink how to teach content, which required another avenue of approach that relies on technology less than most schools. Because of some of these challenges, my options to give students knowledge will depend on established norms concerning writing. The R.A.C.E. (Restate, Answer, Cite, and Explain) strategy supports students to become adept at citing text about photographers using text during each class period. Students will be able to support their ideas through the use of informational text and develop a strategy that will reinforce and improve their writing abilities by citing evidence. Informative text about environmental artists and photographers will be used, but most art movements will encompass artists connected with mainstream art movements dealing with global issues about environment.

The first week of unit will encompass the introduction of photography instruction and developing writing skills through the use of R.A.C.E. strategies. Depending on skill level of students, some basic skill instruction using design principles can be introduced before unit implementation. Each lesson begins with a writing prompt introducing different techniques to represent landscape and environmental art examples using Scholastic Art text. Students will be given an article to read and answer a DOK 2 question about a certain artist or medium used by well-known environmental artists using R.A.C.E. strategy. After allowing student to be exposed to an environmental artist and their techniques, composition content about art elements will ensure students start to learn about successful composition of images using photography techniques. The first artist that will be introduced is Lucy R. Lippard, who wrote *Undermining*, an award-winning author, art historian and social critic. Lippard uses text and full color images to explore

the relationships between the environment and politics through over two hundred color images. Another exhibition dealing with the changing environment will be *The Altered Landscape* where photography collections “examines human interaction and intervention with environments” (Zaki, 2011).

The unit was developed using a high school art curriculum template that was research based and aligned with National Core Arts Standards which includes diverse learning objectives, providing creativity and cultural exploration as well as TEK elements to cover CRAIS principles. Photography medium will be introduced to enhance skills and critical thinking two-dimensional projects fused with cultural components tied to local environment and its’ historical connection to students.

Strategies

R.A.C.E. Strategy

The R.A.C.E. (restate, answer, cite, explain) strategy is an acronym that describes four parts that are needed to construct a response to a question. Restating a question in your own words to ensure that students understand what is asked of them in the question. Answering the question is the second element needed to provide a concise and clear answer at the end of restate sentence. Citing from a text allows students to respond using a source of information which will help to strengthen argument of the response and give credibility to a student’s answer. Finally at the end of their response they will explain or elaborate on their answer and demonstrate knowledge about question. The majority of the information about environmental artists and ideas will be introduced using this strategy daily before classroom instruction.

Graphic Organizers

Technically this first method is not really a graphic organizer but a note taking method that allows my students to summarize ideas introduced in class to help when they are working with a partner or group activity. Using the Cornell Note taking method allows students to use a strategy that gives them to actually practice the physical act of writing so they can remember content instead of just listening and reading. Research shows that this method of writing by hand is more effective than using a keyboard to transfer knowledge into a document on a device. The most effective way to write good notes stems from including meaningful abbreviations and symbols about main ideas with diagrams and or definitions. Creating good notes stems from developing methods that will work best for each individual student, and this method allows for adaptation (Pauk & Owens, 2010).

The Key Comprehension Routine graphic organizer allows students to use strategies to find main ideas, using text structure, top-down webs, two column notes, summarizing and developing of questions to include in summarizing ideas about topic. By emphasizing main ideas with supporting sentences students will be able to take notes and create a structured summary.

Implementing this strategy at the beginning of the lesson provides students a basic understanding of what is expected from the teacher by including a rubric.

Visual Journaling

The visual journal is an artifact created by students that combine both visual and written elements. It can be kept by artist and non-artist alike that can include but not limited to a sketchbook, notebook, daily planner, idea book, scrap book, journal, doodle pad, experiment log, etc. Students will use the journal every day to take notes, to work out projects, to complete sketches and designs, to doodle, and to include compositional photography techniques introduced in lessons. This strategy to draw and visually recreate final photograph which entail all elements and techniques needed will be practiced for each activity. Students will become familiar with the importance of journaling ideas and have notebook with them at all times while working on this project.

Portfolio Assessments

Using portfolios as an authentic assessment tool would allow you to communicate student performance visually and state the objectives of each assignment within the landscape compositions. Students who are limited English speakers in my community need to learn how to showcase their growth and improvement through other methods by allowing different methods to show improvement. Some Navajo students at my school do not possess the academic knowledge, speaking, or writing skills they need to show teachers what they learned from lectures so this would be another tool for them to show content retention. Visual interpretations of their knowledge give them another outlet to effectively display their progress through this unit's assignments and assessments, so this strategy will be used to show final set of photographs. Students will create 5 different photos using various angle to recreate an historical photograph showing how environment has changed using parallel comparisons and contrast.

Assessments

The Navajo philosophy regarding the learning process introduces a concept broad enough to integrate into any subject or curriculum. In Benally's article, *Navajo Philosophy of Learning and Pedagogy*, Navajo pedagogy states that all learning processes should possess some reflection after the acquisition of knowledge. Navajo learning methods are cyclical, encouraging personal planning, growth, learning, and reflection. Many interpret Navajo philosophy as a means to influence religious beliefs and trample on secular teachings, but Benally introduces the learning philosophy to provide holistic improvement to any individual. To improve self-image through "inquiry-oriented, experience-based instruction that enables students to attain knowledge in ways that promote spirituality, reverence, self-actualization, and happiness" (Benally, 2004). This article introduces a philosophy encouraging growth in diversified subjects, grade levels, and ethnic environments. Applying these principles in our reservation classrooms would aid in developing an initiative for academic growth and achievement among our Dine students.

Many students from unfamiliar cultures adjust successfully to curriculums that allow them to be proud of their heritage. When a school embraces their abilities, a more comfortable learning environment encourages parents to participate in their child's academic career. Allowing students to know that those abilities are welcomed in the classroom allows them to ease into the classroom environment and begin their educational advancement. By developing a comfortable environment, students will not feel like failures when they attempt to use their limited English abilities. Using some Navajo language mixed with English to educate mispronunciations, misuse, or spelling errors can aid educators by gauging their student's speaking and writing abilities. Creating this type of comfortable environment for students allows them to address questions or ask for help.

Educational institutions need to create a comfortable transition for limited-speaking students to accept new methods of instruction, and creating a practical assessment element allows them to become less anxious about the transition. Dr. Michael Garret provides examples of the importance of using the visualization abilities of native students in *"Two People": An American Indian Narrative of Bicultural Identity* to establish an effective program that uses personal skills. To cross cultural boundaries, many students must foster their abilities to succeed in bicultural environments. Introducing narratives is an essential form of inquiry about experiences, realities, and students' understanding in today's educational system (Garret, 1996).

Standard	Learning Objective	Assessment	Assessment Format
Commercial Photography Standards. Strand 4: Connect: Analyze, evaluate, and critique photographic works.	I will critique peer photographs using rubric and requirements for landscape portfolio.	Group Work Discussion, Rubric Worksheet	Critique Rubric
Commercial Photography Standards. Strand 6: Portfolio: Student will display their work through local events.	I will create landscape portfolio using environment, landmarks or traditional ceremonies using compositional techniques.	Cornell Notes, Photographs, Portfolio	Note Summary (3 Sentences), Assignment Requirements Rubric
Din4 Character Building Standard: I will develop and apply critical thinking to establish relationships with environment.	I will research Din4 history about land or landforms using historical photographs and interview questions.	Interview Worksheet, Clan Graphic Organizer, Research Literature	Worksheets
Din4 History Standard: I will interview and research historical homelands.	I will create a summary using a graphic organizer of homestead history using interviews, research and literature.	Summary Format, Summary Draft and Summary Final	Writing Rubric

CC.09-10.R.L.1 Key Ideas and Details: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.	I will answer questions using RACE strategy about environmental artists.	Writing Responses	Grading Rubric
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