

Amplifying Native Voices in the Classroom

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In fall of 2024, Altera's Associate Director of Programming, Tiffany Coulson was invited to participate in a focus group, learning methods for partnering with Native American Tribes to produce culturally responsive curriculum. The four-month workshop embraced the following Guiding Principles:

- *Know your own culture.*
- *Assume goodwill and learn from mistakes.*
- *Ask with genuine intent and listen attentively.*
- *Accept "no" gracefully.*
- *Use accurate and original sources from the past and present*
- *Embrace partnership and reciprocity.*
- *Allow the time needed for authentic growth.*

Feedback on Final Project – Curriculum Design (Below)

Jan 4, 2024

Fantastic lesson plan! Reading through your reflection, I was blown away even more with the Indigenous pedagogies and cultural principles that you had used as guides in your curriculum creation. I learned so much just in reading your work! Thank you for accepting stewardship of this knowledge and for sharing it in ways that communicate it so authentically!

- **Stephanie West**

As a curriculum designer for after-school programs, I always consider students first in any partnership. While designing curriculum in partnership with Native American Tribes, I assume there may be children who are tribal members in the communities where the curriculum is implemented. Culturally responsive processes in design must extend to teaching processes as well in order to fully realize the benefits of cross-cultural awareness and partnership for Native American students, and other culturally and linguistically diverse students. Many of these teaching methods extend to students the best practices employed in partnerships with Native American Tribes including knowing one's own culture, listening attentively to those from other cultures, and relying on primary sources for knowledge building. The following are principles of culturally responsive teaching I employed, taken from work by Zaretta Hammond (Hammond, 2015), Dr. Gholdy Mohammed (Mohammed, 2020), and New York University's Steinhardt Center ("Culturally Responsive Sustaining Education", 2023):

- Engaging all students in rigorous content for personal, social and academic growth.
- Grounding learning in place-based content which allows students to share their lived experience, values, culture, and language as funds of knowledge that enrich learning.
- Recognizing that important cultural references should appear in all aspects of curriculum design including use of primary sources.
- Ensuring that students have ways to contribute their own diverse perspectives to learning spaces.
- Prioritizing knowing students outside the learning context by connecting instruction to home, neighborhood, community, and culture for positive impact.
- Affirming collectivist cultural practices that encourage students to collaborate across grade levels, abilities, language fluency, gender, and culture.
- Valuing multiple perspectives during deep and sustained inquiry through themed content presented in multiple ways over time.
- Designing inquiry-based learning processes that center students in knowledge building and allow them to take ownership of information exchange.
- Building curriculum that is accessible to all students & attends to diverse student needs through visual, sound, and sensory experience.
- Presenting opportunities to elevate student voices in meaningful ways that reflect learning while allowing students to contribute to learning outcomes.

The primary design principle I focused on for building culturally responsive lesson plans was taken from a question asked by a member of the Snoqualmie Tribal Council during a curriculum presentation. “How will you honor the oral teaching traditions of our culture when tasked with designing curriculum that shares our history and values?” (M. Ross. Snoqualmie. Snoqualmie, Washington, personal communication, September 2023). This was my “no”. I chose to listen to his concern by making student discourse a priority in all learning spaces. Based on the research of Saunders and Goldenberg (Brazer, 2020), the 6 steps for engaging student learning through discourse was laid out, not in one session, but in six separate sessions in order to give students and teachers an opportunity to slowly become accustomed to relying on oral based instructional design (see Appendix A). Decolonized assessment in the form of storytelling practices are also valued in Native American tradition and are a natural outcome I will incorporate for this type of lesson design (Hesketh, 2022).

The most noticeable impact of course methods guiding my curriculum development may be my attention to student discourse as an instructional focus. However, the biggest change that will influence future design projects with Native American tribes has been an understanding of the concept of reciprocity and how it influences instructional choices.

While gathering primary sources for some future work with the Quinalt Indian Tribe, I began reading a book called “Gifted Earth: The Ethnobotany of the Quinalt and Neighboring Tribes”. The book was written by Douglas Deur and the Knowledge-Holders of the Quinalt Indian Nation over the course of almost 25 years. I anticipated incorporating this resource with my science content not only for interesting facts about plants in the region, but for the stories told alongside them from Quinalt tribal members. I was struck by a passage in the book’s

introduction which completely changed my perspective on “using” primary sources in my lesson plans.

“This book is a gift to the outside world. It is a gift that, by Quinalt tradition, must be reciprocated. How does a reader repay the full value of the book? This debt is repaid through respectful treatment of Western Washington Native peoples, their land, their waters, all the culturally important plants, and the living things native to this place. Reading and using this book is not a passive exercise; those who read are expected to honor this bargain.” (Deur, & Knowledge-Keepers of the Quinalt, 2022).

I realized my view of reciprocity was strongly related to my own capitalistic values that would associate a monetary amount with time, products, or services. However, I came to see that reciprocity is not just an exchange to discharge a debt; it grows from a sense of stewardship about what is shared. My organization reached out to the Quinalt Education Director, who enthusiastically approved centering the book as a source for the curriculum we develop together this year.

Furthering my commitment to reciprocity was the idea of “land acknowledgement” as a way of showing respect and highlighting tribal sovereignty. As a curriculum designer for environmental science, I will regard the content I curate or create as directly related to my obligation to acknowledge and include Indigenous ways of knowing about the environment. Beyond wind power as a model for clean energy, students need to stand on the ancestral lands of local tribes and see and feel the wind. More than merely knowing the importance of trees to the environment, students need to walk the earth and smell, see, and listen to the trees on the land where they live. By centering the stories and experiences of Indigenous knowledge-holders, and by guiding students in appropriate interaction with nature, I will be able to draw students closer to land for which Native Americans have been stewards since time immemorial.

References

Brazer, F. D. (2020, October 1). The research: how student talk fosters learning.

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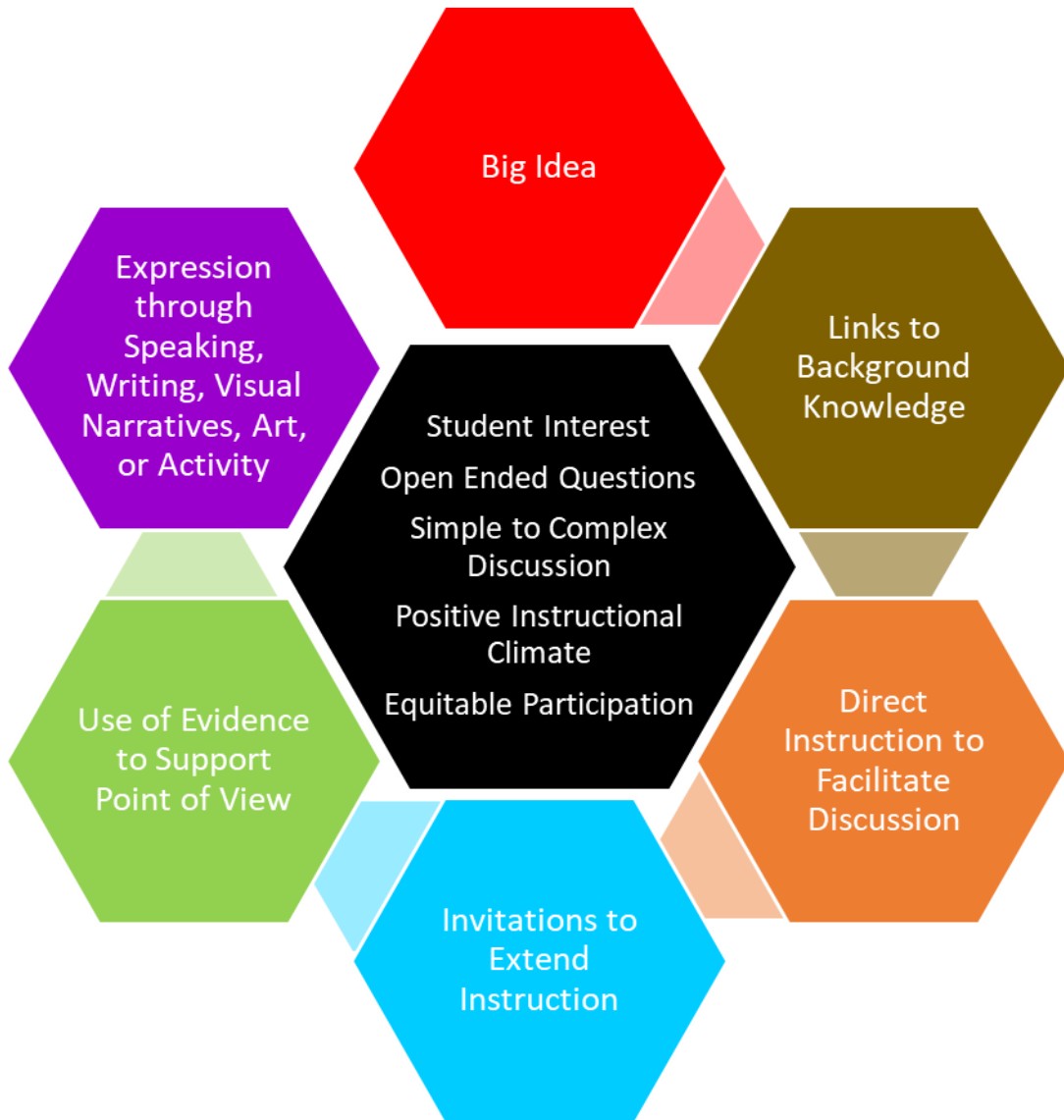
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Appendix A

The Beehive Learning Model for Supporting Student Discourse



Modified from the visual model found at Brazer, F. D. (2020, October 1). The research: how student talk fosters learning. <https://guides.himmelfarb.gwu.edu/APA/blogpost>