Understanding Diversity: Lessons Learned the Hard Way

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Abstract
Through experiences training teachers across the country, the author gains insight into the necessity to accommodate diverse Native American learners. Sensitivity to Native American learning styles and values enables the author to better meet individual needs and learn valuable lessons in diversity. The author tells the story of her experiences and the lessons she has learned from diverse learners.

As an early childhood teacher educator in Texas and an elementary consultant for The High/Scope Educational Research Foundation for the past 15 years, I have had the opportunity to train teachers across the nation in an active learning constructivist approach to elementary education. The opportunity to work with teachers all over the country has taught me many valuable lessons. One of the most important lessons that I have learned through my work concerns diversity. Being from Texas I have often experienced some culture shock as I trained teachers in Boston, or in South Carolina, or in Minnesota, or in Arizona. Each of these unique environments offers a richness of culture, diverse foods, clothing, and of course points of view. But most importantly, each environment requires adaptation of teaching strategies and techniques to meet the individual needs of the teachers I train.

This became clearly evident to me in one of my assignments for High/Scope. I was asked to conduct a training workshop on the High/Scope Elementary Approach at a Native American Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) school in the middle of a Navajo reservation in Arizona. I flew in to an airport approximately 100 miles away from the reservation and drove to the hotel on the edge of the reservation. The closest hotel was approximately 30 miles from the school through open range. Open range means that there are no fences or barriers to block access to cattle, horses, goats, etc. Livestock wandered across the road as I drove to the hotel and to the school each day.

The school was a boarding school and was accessed by a two-lane road that wound through the reservation. Many of the children who attended the school would stay in the dorm throughout the week and were bused home on the weekends and back to school on Monday. This was because many of them lived long distances from the school, and could not be bused home daily. All of the teachers and all of the students were Navajo. When speaking to each other they spoke their native Navajo language, a beautiful soft and flowing language. However, when speaking to me the teachers and children spoke Standard English.
The training was offered on the first week of in-service at the school. I drove out to the school to begin the training early Monday morning. I arrived early so that I could set up the learning environment and meet the Principal. When I arrived the room designated was not organized for training. The tables were all pushed to one side, and the bookcases were covered with paper just as they were left before summer break. There was no overhead available, no VCR nearby, and the air conditioner was acting up. As I tried to remedy as many of the obstacles as I could, I spoke with the Principal about his desires for the training. He explained to me that he would be having a meeting with the teachers prior to my workshop, and that he would send them into the library in an hour or so to begin the training! That was a surprise to me. The training would not begin on time, and that meant that I would not have the full amount of time to address the content. However, I rationalized that I could make up the time in the coming days.

As I set up the room and waited for the teachers to arrive, I began to think about my expectations. Time was very important to me, as was staying on schedule. I was accustomed to environments where schools were prepared for my arrival and would accommodate my needs. I began to talk to myself, as trainers often do, and tell myself to relax and to try to go with the flow. I reminded myself that Native Americans frequently have a different concept of space and time and more often than not see life as an unhurried event (Sparks, 2000). I needed to adjust my European American, middle-class thinking to accommodate the situation and the people I was training.

The training did eventually get underway and things went relatively well that day. We started late, but I quickly caught up. The reason for this was that I was able to go quickly through application activities because there was very little discussion. Time typically allocated for discussions was shorten significantly because very few of the teachers in the workshop participated in the whole group discussions about the strategies. The teachers were pleasant and involved when doing collaborative learning activities but rarely volunteered any information to the whole group. I listened with interest as they spoke to each other in their native language and tried to read their body language as to their understanding of the approach. I reminded myself, that it often takes time for the participants in a workshop to get comfortable with the presenter and the information. It is typical that participants don’t volunteer much information on the first day, so I was not overly worried at that point!

When lunchtime came, the teachers began to pull out their sack lunches. I asked if the cafeteria had any food prepared for the day. The Principal quickly said, “Oh, no! Didn’t I tell you to bring your lunch?” As he realized that I had nothing to eat, he asked a teacher to take me to a convenience store (about 10 miles away) so that I could purchase something for lunch! This took quite a bit of time, and made me late again in starting the afternoon session. I felt as though I was getting further and further off schedule. I realized that I had not asked the right questions of the principal when preparing to come to the school, nor had I researched the Navajo culture specifically for guidance in presenting the information.

As I taught the afternoon session, I again noticed the lack of participation in whole group discussions. I am a very active teacher that involves participants in many activities
that apply the concepts being discussed. In addition, I use storytelling and humor throughout the sessions. However, I was not getting the typical responses to the classroom activities that I had planned, nor the stories that I told. The teachers seemed to enjoy the stories, but were silent for the majority of the day.

That evening, I slowly drove the 30 miles back to the hotel and contemplated the day’s events. I was so tired! I felt as though I had been almost “standing on my head” to get participation and conversation from the participants. I was looking forward to a nice quiet dinner and a glass of wine at the hotel. After that, I was going to revamp the next day’s plan to include information that was not covered as planned on the first day, but also revised to include a no-fail hands-on activity to spark the interest and participation of the teachers! However, when I got back to the hotel and ordered that glass of wine, I was told that because the hotel was on the reservation, no alcohol was served!!!! Oh, no! This day was not going well at all! Again, I was not an informed traveler!!

That evening I worked on revamping the next day’s schedule and tried to figure out how to better meet the needs of the teachers in the training. I decided to do an active learning activity that involved the participants in making silly putty in collaborative groups. I went to the nearby grocery store and purchased all the materials necessary for the activity (and food for my lunch). I just knew that this activity would break the ice and would help the participants relax and participate in the workshop.

The next day things began almost the same way as the day before. (However, I did bring my lunch!) Again, the teachers began to trickle in one by one after the designated time for the training to begin. After most of the participants arrived I began the workshop and not long after beginning, I brought out the silly putty activity. I linked the activity with active learning, learning through inquiry, collaborative learning groups, higher order thinking skills, etc. It was obvious that the teachers had a great time. There was laughter and exclamations throughout the room. I was so happy. Okay, now they are relaxing with me and things will go more smoothly.

However, as we completed making the silly putty I realized that I did not have any plastic bags for the silly putty. The silly putty can be placed in the bags to enable them to take it home with them or take it into their classrooms. I asked the teachers if anyone had some plastic bags in their rooms that we could use to save the silly putty. Not one person volunteered. It was totally quiet. I looked around at the group thinking how could that be? This is a boarding school. I know there are plastic bags available! But, no one spoke up. So, I said, “Well, then, I guess we will just leave the silly putty on the table and watch what happens over time! This will be an additional observation activity we can do this afternoon!” I told the participants to take a break and I would straighten up the materials and get ready for the next part of the workshop.

As the participants began to go outside, to the restroom, or to get a drink, one of the participants came up to me and quietly said, “Dr. Morrison, I have some baggies. I will go get those for you.” I thanked her profusely, and as she left to get the plastic bags another teacher came up and offered some plastic bags that she had in her room. This happened a couple of more times before the break was over.

It finally came to me. I finally realized what had been happening throughout the training. In the Native American culture it is rude to call attention to yourself, to make yourself
look better than others in the group. The teachers would not speak up and answer one of my questions or join in a discussion because it would call attention to their understanding and it might make them look more knowledgeable than others in the group. In many Native American societies, the humility of the individual is a position to be respected and preserved. Advancing oneself above others violates this key value (Swisher, 1991). Individual teachers would not volunteer to bring in plastic bags in front of the whole group, but would quietly approach me, one-on-one and offer to bring the bags for the silly putty; it was truly an “AH HA” moment for me! I had just experienced first-hand what I had been teaching to my university students when talking about multicultural education. I made a connection in real life to all that I had read and taught about Native American learners.

From that time on, I changed the way I taught Native American teachers. I did short mini-lectures in whole group, and then spent at least half the morning and half the afternoon in their classrooms. This provided opportunities for the teachers to talk with me one-on-one, time for me to demonstrate how to arrange a classroom, and time to discuss how to implement the best practices possible for these children. I gained insight into the way they taught by being in their classroom and actually helping them set up their environments. I made much closer connections with these teachers as we worked together to develop a daily routine that included active learning. Native American people learn by observing someone perform a task; they then reflect upon their observation and practice it privately. Only after they feel confident about their ability to perform the task will they attempt to perform the task publicly (Stokes, 1997).

It was important for me to understand that my European American, middle class values and standards were not the only way things can or should be done. There are many ways to approach learning and teaching. If I want to be a truly effective teacher of teachers, then I must model ways to adapt my teaching style to better meet the needs of individual students and to differentiate instruction for each group of students that I work with whether in a workshop or in my university classroom.

One last sequel to this story: On the last day of the training, I had driven to the boarding school and was going to leave from there to fly home. Again, I would be driving approximately 100 miles to the airport. As I was talking to several of the teachers about the drive, they told me not to go all the way back the way I came to get off the reservation. They said, just drive over the mountain, and take the short cut to the highway. They assured me that it was a good road and that my tiny compact rental car would have no trouble making the drive. So, I trusted their judgment and decided to cut across the mountain to the highway.

The road appeared to be a fairly wide two-lane gravel road that wound around the mountain. Well, it appeared that way when I started out. The further I drove up the mountain the narrower and narrower the road became, until it was truly a one lane road winding its way up the mountain…and it was about dusk at this point. There I was, little white woman, driving on a road through the reservation without any idea where I really will wind up, and if I will ever make it down the mountain again! At that time, I didn’t have a cell phone, and it probably wouldn’t have worked there anyway. I kept thinking, why didn’t I tell my husband the name of the school, not just the hotel I was staying at? Why did I think
I could drive across a mountain in this little tiny car? What if the car broke down? What if I met a car???? What would I do? Eventually, as I reached the top of the mountain, I saw the highway off in the distance. I knew that I was going to be all right. The tiny car and I made it to the highway and to the airport, safe and sound. Again, my middle class European American understanding of what a good road is was entirely different from the understandings of the people that lived on the reservations.

As teacher educators we must open our minds and hearts to the opportunities that present themselves in our lives to teach us lessons in tolerance and in diversity. We must be quiet and listen to what those from other cultures are trying to convey to us through their body language, and through their actions, and through their silence. I hope that this lesson will be one that I will never forget and one that I will use to teach others some of the lessons I have learned the hard way!!
References

