

“I guess I *do* know a good story”: Re-envisioning Writing Process with Native American Students and Communities

The authors share two projects—Photovoice Stories and Elder Interviews—that helped students develop more sophisticated understandings of the craft of writing and may encourage them to become more involved in place-based issues.

But I don't know any good stories," Lindsey¹ noted softly as she looked down at the piece of kindling she twirled slowly in her hands. It was one of our last nights on a wilderness expedition into the reservation backcountry, and as part of the language arts coursework associated with the trip, several Native² students and four non-Native instructors were sharing stories while huddled around a small campfire. After an hour or so, Lindsey looked up again, her face glowing orange from the fire. "Well . . .," she said, "there is this one story my grandma told me. It's actually about this valley. It feels like I've been here before. . . ."

As Lindsey's story demonstrates, place, culture, and community are intertwined within all aspects of learning (Gay). For language arts teachers, in particular, it can be especially challenging to engage every student in a writing process if the values advanced by the classroom literacy community conflict with those of the home literacy community, as they can for students from diverse³ backgrounds. For example, formal education in the United States has traditionally privileged written expression over other types of literacy, despite the importance of visual and oral literacy in many cultures (Dyc and Milligan; Rios and Stanton). For reluctant student writers like Lindsey, coming to recognize and utilize different forms of literacy in and beyond the classroom can prove empowering and motivating.

For Native students in particular, such differences between classroom expectations and traditional cultural practices potentially affect en-

gagement with writing process in several ways (Dyc). For example, on-demand exercises often require students to dive into writing projects with minimal planning time, despite the emphasis on extended practice present in many traditional Native communities. Additionally, Native students who, from a young age, have been encouraged to listen carefully and share their ideas only once they fully understand the topic may feel uncomfortable when asked to share early drafts of written work with peers or teachers. Additionally, since many Native communities traditionally focus on intimate and relational awareness of audience, an expectation that students will be able to write confidently and competently for strangers (e.g., standardized test evaluators, college admissions boards, etc.) also potentially conflicts with cultural ways of knowing. In these and other cases, teachers may automatically privilege dominant culture beliefs regarding literacy and undermine community views if they fail to engage students in critical analysis of the various practices.

Language arts teachers who draw upon traditional Indigenous forms of literacy, such as visual and oral forms, can redefine the process of writing in more culturally responsive and community-centered ways (Rios and Stanton). Furthermore, place-based literacy—literacy that engages learners in authentic environments such as the community or natural spaces—offers much in terms of learning about both culture and language (Gruenewald; Scheurman et al.). Teachers who strive to connect various forms of literacy can utilize place-based

literacy projects as a means to engage students in “cultural journalism” (Sutton 248) and critical thinking about the differences between community and school literacy.⁴

In two projects described in this article, we discuss the use of Photovoice and Elder Interviews to draw upon visual and spoken forms of community-based literacy, generate ideas for written projects, promote a connection to community and culture, and engage students in critical analysis of writing process. Both projects took place in communities on and bordering an Indian reservation in the Intermountain West. Over the course of several years, Native and non-Native students in traditional, alternative, and virtual high school settings have participated in these forms of place-based literacy learning as part of English language arts coursework and community-based research projects in our community.

Learning in the Community: A Photovoice Story about Food and Sovereignty

Photovoice—or Photo Novella—as defined by Carolyn Wang and Mary Ann Burris is “a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique” (369). Through Photovoice, students learn photographic techniques in order to honor the importance of objects in the photographs and to convey personal and community stories (Minkler and Wallerstein). To advance place-based learning, community action, and self-advocacy, these individual and collective stories can also be shared with policymakers.

Furthermore, Photovoice participants engage in literary analysis as they synthesize information contained in the community-based texts, physically sort photos according to themes, and sculpt written and spoken representations of their understanding. Although students using Photovoice follow steps that define conventional views of writing process (i.e., brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing), they do not necessarily utilize writing as the main (or sole) mode of communication for every step. Instead, they employ the steps in the process using visual, oral, *and* written literacy.

In the Photovoice project, Native high school students snapped pictures that demonstrated their

relationships with food; these photographic stories then served as a springboard for community action (Sutton). To guide thinking and discussion about the images, the students utilized a questioning framework known as the SHOWeD method (Strack, Magill, and McDonagh). This framework incorporates the following questions, which build upon each other to promote deeper levels of critical thinking:

- What do you See here?
- What is really Happening here?
- How does this relate to Our lives?
- Why does this situation, concern, or strength exist?
- What can we Do about it? (Strack, Magill, and McDonagh 51)

During the first week of the reservation-based Photovoice project, the only grocery store in the community closed its doors due to a conflict regarding enforcement of a tribally managed tax directed toward non-Native entities operating on tribal land. Student photo novellas demonstrated the significance of the closing: The Native Pride hat and the “closed” letter, which appeared on the door of the store, were placed together to signify that the sovereignty of the tribe was at stake as part of the conflict (see fig. 1).

FIGURE 1. Photos of a Native Pride hat and a “Closed” letter arranged to critique the theme of sovereignty in the community.



Throughout resulting discussions, several of the students voiced beliefs that even when it reopened, the non-Native store should be boycotted. The group considered the benefits and negative consequences of such a boycott.

Community members would need to travel seven miles farther to the next nearest grocery store, which could exacerbate accessibility issues, given the limited public transportation options and costs of fuel. One benefit, according to the students, would be a demonstration of sovereign rights, such as the right of the tribe to manage business on the reservation. In addition to advancing a political agenda by boycotting the store, students realized that looking beyond

the store to local food producers and artisans offered yet another form of sovereignty. Students agreed that photos like the one in Figure 2 depicted the talents and strengths of local people.

As a result of this Photovoice project, students learned about the role of writer choice as connected to organization and audience. They learned that by organizing or privileging photos in different ways, they could adjust the story and its meaning for different audiences. Instead of a linear and statically defined method of sharing information, the storytellers were able to shape the story to best fit the

needs of the community. For example, the participants narrowed their collections of photographs to the five images they found most powerful and identified themes to share as part of a larger research project and through in-class presentations to peers.

Additionally, the Photovoice project cultivated critical thinking about the power of community-based literacy. Students were able to utilize visual forms of literacy to explore community challenges, identify themes, and act in response to the information. For example, students identified a theme of dignity as connected to sovereignty; as a result, they developed strategies to learn about what community members wanted and needed—according to the community members themselves—prior to determining ways to increase access to healthy food for the community as a whole.

Finally, students worked together to utilize aspects of writing process over an extended period of time, which cultivated a stronger sense of community among the students and beyond the classroom. The classroom discussions allowed students to make connections between forms of literacy and cultural and civic values—especially as evidenced through the discussion regarding boycotting of the local store. The collaborative efforts also allowed students to develop competence and confidence, especially when considering ways to appropriately share their findings with community leaders and elders. In this case, findings were shared through presentations at regional conferences on food sustainability and social justice issues, as part of lessons coordinated by a Native Science Field Center, and in reports to school districts, community food assessment organizations, and local and federal government agencies. The project results have also contributed to the development of community gardens and informed efforts to reintroduce traditional foods to the reservation.

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FIGURE 2. Students chose this photo of clocks made by a local tribal artisan to highlight ways to promote sovereignty.



Learning with the Community: Critical Story-Hearing through Elder Interviews

Traditionally, many Native peoples shared, and continue to share, collective and experiential knowledge through spoken language (Archibald; Beverly). Unlike written literacy, which potentially distances the audience from the writer, traditional storytelling promotes an interaction between the

teller and the hearer. For both Native and non-Native students, interviewing elders and interpreting the resulting text can increase student engagement and understanding while promoting culturally responsive literacy (Archibald; Sheurman et al.). We have used Elder Interviews in traditional, alternative, and “virtual” classroom settings. In some cases, the prompts have been fairly specific (“Interview someone in your community who is at least 60 years old about a story you’ve heard from a family member”), while in others they were more general (“Interview a community leader about a topic that interests you”).

Previous work (e.g., Scheurman et al.) emphasizes the importance of providing an orientation to prepare teachers and students about appropriate etiquette for place-based literacy in tribal contexts, so prior to the interviews, students discussed the principles of respect, reciprocity, and interrelatedness (Archibald) as related to listening, interactions with elders, and responsible story sharing. For example, students learned that circular storytelling structures best articulate the way people think and serve a cultural purpose within the Native community. As a result of this discussion, students were not only more responsive as listeners, but they were also better equipped to discuss stylistic and structural choices as applied to writing and storytelling in both classroom and home communities.

Students recorded the interviews using voice recorders, as long as the cooperating elder agreed. Transferring the oral information from the Elder Interviews to written text was the next step in the process. To make this aspect of the process manageable, most students focused on one aspect of the story they found particularly intriguing or perplexing. These segments offered forums for discussions about different perspectives and structure. For example, one student noted, “She [the elder being interviewed] was talking about making dolls for her sisters, but then all of a sudden she started talking about going away to school.” As a class, we were able to discuss the importance of fluidity when sharing personal experience and cultural information. Once we recognized the cultural significance of dynamism in storytelling, we were able to consider ways to authentically represent that dynamism in written storytelling in terms of punctuation and sentencings.

The third phase of the interview project centered on reading the written versions with an eye toward form and purpose. Discussing the challenges of representation also provided a forum to explore topics in critical literacy, such as the ethical implications for “preserving” community narratives, including tribal stories, through publication. In particular, students focused on the relationship between teller and audience when they considered questions such as, “Why did you interview this particular person?” and “Would the person you interviewed have told the story differently to someone who is from another community?” and “What are the implications if you write down the story exactly as it was meant for you, and then share it with community outsiders?”

In general, the Elder Interviews project, like other forms of “Indigenous storywork” (Archibald), allowed students and teachers to connect the classroom community to the tribal community in several ways. Students learned about the time and patience needed to share a story well, the importance of developing a relationship between teller and hearer (or writer and reader), the potential misuse of written expression, and the purpose of various approaches to organization—all aspects central to Indigenous literacy. In addition, contextualizing the use of grammar and structure as a dynamic process—a process dependent upon writer *choice*—emphasized experiential relevance. As a result, discussions about purpose and audience took on more concrete meaning. Students recognized that literacy involves decision-making and power: Even in terms of state assessments or college settings they are expected to make certain choices, or to consciously, clearly, and coherently argue against those expectations.

Throughout the Elder Interviews project, the principle of respect was central for many students. Students learned about the role of audience, since during the first phase of the project, they formed the audience, but during the last phase, students chose whether or not to share specifics of the written stories with other community members. In several cases, students learned from the elders they interviewed that the stories they heard could not be respectfully shared with some people (e.g., younger

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children or non-Native audiences) or in certain contexts (e.g., outside of a specific time frame). Some students clearly viewed the elders as having a dialogical role in the project. For example, students noted, "I had to think more carefully about what I wrote, because I didn't want to disrespect

my grandma," and "I realized with this project that I don't always listen to my uncle the way I was taught." In many cases, students realized they needed to discuss the written versions with the elders they interviewed to become more effective and culturally responsive "listeners."

Additionally, the Elder Interviews project supported the principle of interrelatedness in several ways. For example, several students emphasized the potential for the project to help them learn

about the experiences of their grandparents, uncles and aunts, family friends, and other community elders in new ways. As a result, students began to make connections between what they learned through the project and other classroom topics.

In terms of reciprocity, many students became interested in ways to respectfully publish and share the stories and experiences with others in the community. As a result, students learned about earlier efforts to publish traditional stories and the challenges associated with funding such projects. Additionally, they learned about the dangers of overgeneralization as they endeavored to distinguish between personal and collective experiences. The elders also expressed an awareness of reciprocity: Most highlighted the opportunity to interact with a young person as the most meaningful aspect of the project.

There Are Many Ways to Tell a Story: Connecting Classroom and Cultural Communities

The first step in advancing learning for all students demands recognition of the potential conflicts and continuities between classroom expectations and community ways of knowing. To cultivate genu-

ine classroom community that engages *all* learners (and all educators, including elders, parents, etc.), teachers should connect schools with communities. To do this, teachers must step outside of conventional ideological and pedagogical boxes by turning to the community for guidance. In Lindsey's case, for example, it became important to connect formal language arts education with a place of cultural significance and to honor oral storytelling as a legitimate way to share experiences. In both the Photovoice and Elder Interviews projects, our first steps demanded that we learn about the cultural expectations of the Native community in terms of literacy education.

We learned that establishing such a connection between classroom and home communities demands respect and patience. Early in both projects, it was important for us to develop relationships with cultural mentors who were unafraid to tell us when we made cultural missteps. We also learned that schools in general, and English teachers specifically, have not enjoyed a reputation for cultivating responsive teaching in Indigenous communities, thanks in large part to the assimilation efforts of the boarding-school era. During this time period—a period that directly affected the grandparents and great-grandparents of our students—children were punished for engaging in traditional Native literacy practices, such as speaking their Indigenous languages. Even today, the teaching of Standard English is viewed with suspicion given its dark and relatively short past in the Native communities our students call home.

We also learned that tribal education is built upon centuries of story and experience. Our mentors also explained that, in terms of traditional Indigenous place-based education, learning is experiential, and skills and knowledge are meant to prepare learners to better serve the entire tribal community. Young people are expected to learn from elders but also to seek out innovative ways to address contemporary challenges within the community. Understanding is shared simultaneously through problem solving and storytelling.


Whereas much formal writing instruction focuses on following dominant culture norms, the Elder Interviews and Photovoice projects focused on the *why* behind both school and community literacy practices. As Gloria Dyc suggests, effective literacy education

in Indigenous communities draws upon a problem-posing framework. Such problem-posing advances a critical literacy pedagogy and, as Jo-ann Archibald explains, makes it possible for stories to “educate the heart” (83). Specifically, Indigenous scholars emphasize the need for students to learn about and “examine the political struggles inherent in the educational sites where Western and Indigenous education meet” (Archibald 90). Place-based critical literacy projects emphasize the importance of sovereignty, choice, and power within the language arts. As students compare and contrast these approaches to literacy with conventional approaches privileged by the dominant academic culture, they can begin to push the boundaries purposefully as a means of advancing social justice within their own communities.

Specifically, in our community, we learned that responsive place-based literacy education must support the values of concept interrelatedness, collaborative reciprocity, and respect for learner and community sovereignty. Both projects helped students view literacy development as a holistic, collaborative, and powerful process. Furthermore, while formal literacy education has, historically and contemporarily, focused on “weak literacies” that neglect the sociocultural context of language (Gutiérrez 149), place-based critical literacy projects promote in-depth understanding of Standard English conventions, skills, and context. Projects such as the Elder Interviews and Photovoice example can bridge forms of literacy, content areas, and genres while supporting collaboration, engagement, and action within the larger community. For example, the Photovoice project asked students to draw upon science, economics, art, history, geography, and language arts content while utilizing visual, oral, and written literacy forms. The Elder Interviews encouraged students to collaborate with elders to learn about sovereignty as connected to storytelling. As Kris D. Gutierrez argues, a comprehensive, expansive view of literacy enriches learning (152).

Culturally responsive literacy education, especially when the learning occurs in authentic community contexts, offers real possibilities to expand learning and teaching. New technological tools and critical literacy genres (e.g., StoryCorps, Doc Your Block, and *testimonio*⁵) hold the potential to take place-based literacy projects, such as Photovoice and Elder Interviews, even further in terms

of culturally responsive learning. As Ernest Morrell notes, such critical literacy activities make it possible for students to “deconstruct dominant texts” while developing skills needed to “create their own critical texts that can be used in the struggle for social justice” (313). Viewing writing process in a way that encompasses multiple forms of literacy allows students to bring home and school literacy together in powerful ways.

Once Lindsey realized that the form of literacy most valued within her culture—oral storytelling—could serve as a springboard for her success as a student writer, she gained confidence quickly. She told story after story that evening by the campfire. The next day, during a conference about the written version of one story she included in her expedition journal, she noted, “I guess I do know some good stories after all.” Sometimes, we need to re-define—to re-envision—the writing process with and for our students. Sometimes, as teachers, we forget that there are many ways to tell a good story. 

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Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. Although it is preferable to refer to Native people by specific tribal names, over-specifying affiliations can jeopardize confidentiality given the small size of Native communities. Therefore, the terms *Native*, *Indigenous*, *Indian*, or *Native American*—terms identified by members of our communities to be appropriate in this context—are used throughout this article.
3. Terms such as *diverse*, *minority*, and *dominant culture* are problematic for several reasons. First, these terms suggest a hierarchy that privileges Euro-American experiences and ways of knowing. Second, shifting demographics call the validity of these terms into question. Third, such terms normalize mainstream values and ideas while distancing “diverse” peoples from that mainstream. As authors, we utilize these terms interchangeably with more responsive terms as a means to draw attention to, and encourage dialogue about, word choice in writing.
4. For more information regarding the historical role of cultural journalism in the classroom, refer to Thad Sitton’s works (see Works Cited list).
5. For information on StoryCorps, visit <http://www.storycorps.org>. For more on Doc Your Block, see the chapter written by David Stovall and Daniel Morales-Doyle. Additional information regarding the use of *testimonio* can be found in John Beverly’s work and in Cinthya M. Saavedra’s article.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Interviewing family members or friends can be a valuable way for teens to learn about themselves and their families. In "Helping a Teen Plan and Conduct an Interview" teens are shown how a little time spent in preparation will result in a more positive, productive experience for everyone involved. <http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/tips-howtos/helping-teen-plan-conduct-30113.html>

Watch this video of a family interview: <http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/tips-howtos/video/helping-teen-plan-conduct-30113.html>