
In Our Own Words: Service Learning in Native Communities

McClellan Hall

One of the things that has interested me over the years in terms of Native education is that what you call Service Learning, is how Native people transmitted knowledge and culture in their own communities. (Roger Buffalohead, remarks during the First Annual National Conference on Service Learning, 1991)

THIS QUOTE IS ONE OF MANY THAT HAVE COME TO OUR ATTENTION IN RECENT years and captures the spirit of the National Indian Youth Leadership Project (NIYLP) in its efforts to initiate and promote active, thoughtful, authentic service in Native communities. Over the past twelve years, we have discovered numerous examples of how service learning has been practiced in Native cultures and have identified several terms that describe the process in Native languages.

As a Cherokee, I am most familiar with the concept of *gadugi*, a traditional practice based on interdependency and reciprocity among clans and families. A call for *gadugi* results in people coming together, much in the same way as the early pioneers in the American West came together to raise a barn or help a family in need. The *gadugi* tradition has been the blueprint for the service component of the NIYLP.

Back in 1980, when the ideas for the NIYLP model were germinating in Cherokee country, one of the best examples of contemporary *gadugi* was the project coordinated by Wilma Mankiller in the small Cherokee community of Bell, Oklahoma. In those days, Wilma was Director of Community Development, while I was Director of Stilwell Academy, the Cherokee Nation alternative high school. Wilma, myself, and other Cherokee Nation staff may not have been aware of the

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roots or the approaches of the "Service Movement," as it is now called, but we had our own models. While this project contained all of the elements recently described by Eliot Wigginton (1986) in the project-planning process used by his Foxfire classes, it was organically Cherokee.

A thorough assessment in the Cherokee language was the starting point for the Bell project. Consistent with the traditional approach, the assessment looked closely at, and placed great value in, the strengths and skills already present in the community as the foundation upon which this project was to be built. Through a consensus-building process, it became clear that people in Bell really wanted running water in their homes and were willing to work to make it a reality. In spite of many warnings that the project would not succeed, the residents of Bell did their share and more. The community came back together around the *gadugi* concept. Rather than asking the government to do the project *for the people*, this project was done *by the people*.

The experience of the NIYLP with Native communities across the United States and Canada has identified several other terms in Native languages that describe the service ethic. In the Keres language, spoken by the people of Acoma, Laguna, and Zia pueblos, the term *si-yuu-dze* translates to "everybody's work" and refers to communal service, where people get together to clean the irrigation ditches in the spring, plant corn, clean the plazas for ceremonies, etc. In the Zuni language, the term *yanse'Lihanna* has a similar meaning.

These concepts can be traced to the original teachings, passed on through oral tradition for thousands of years, in Native as well as in other cultures throughout the world. In the Cherokee tradition, it is taught that the Creator made the different races of people and sent them to different parts of the world with specific instructions and responsibilities. The Native people of the North American continent were entrusted to be caretakers of this place. The songs and prayers used in Cherokee ceremonies, for example, acknowledge the other races of people by name and emphasize our relationship to each other. With the five hundredth anniversary of our reunion on this continent, it is clear that most of those who came from Europe didn't recognize the Native people here as relatives. Many of the early missionaries did not realize that our ancestors were providing a valuable spiritual service. Prayers for the benefit of the entire creation would seem to be a common ground that people of all cultures could support.

The importance of service in the reclamation of the continent cannot be overstated. It represents a place to start, a way to empower people, especially young people, to regain control of our communities, on our own terms—in our own words.

We are all learning more about the power and nature of dependent relationships from the extensive body of knowledge on co-dependency in our society. It is clear that dependent relationships exist, not only in classrooms where students are not encouraged to think for themselves, but rather to wait for the teacher to provide the "answer," but they also exist on a community level. As the result of generations of

paternalistic government policy, many contemporary Native people have somehow lost their focus on the true significance of what is reserved in our treaties. As proud, independent people, it is difficult to imagine that our ancestors intended treaty language to be a prescription for a lifestyle of dependency.

The NIYLP uses an approach that focuses on "habilitation" of both young people and communities. This term is simply defined as a process of becoming capable, not through self-centered individualism, but through interdependency. To accomplish this, we promote three levels of service: traditional/community-generated service, program-generated service, and student-generated service.

TRADITIONAL/COMMUNITY-GENERATED SERVICE

These would be the *gadugi*-type projects that were described earlier. In addition, we include activities where the community or individuals come together to recognize, through ceremony and celebration, the rites of passage that young people traditionally go through in the process of reaching adulthood successfully. Recently, the NIYLP has been involved in reviving these recognition events where they are no longer practiced. In the Navajo tradition, for example, the puberty ceremony for females is still commonplace. Unfortunately, the ceremony for boys has nearly been forgotten. In the spring of 1992, we brought several 12- to 14-year-old boys together near Sweetwater, Arizona, for the initial phase of the ritual. A medicine man who remembers the procedure took the boys through a sweat lodge and began the instruction in the roles and responsibilities of manhood. We want to provide what our young people need to help them take their places as productive members of their communities.

PROGRAM-GENERATED SERVICE

Through examining a spectrum of issues all the way from the local to the global levels (i.e., environmental concerns), and building consensus on priorities, we have initiated the following activities:

- Establishing a state- and tribally-sanctioned search and rescue program made up of high school aged youth from Zuni Pueblo.
- Developing an integrated unit at Twin Buttes High School (Zuni) which focuses on issues involved with the recent Zuni land claims settlement. Students are studying erosion and its impact on their reservation, and are creating a "before and after" slide show based on ideas for improvement projects that students will plan, conduct, and evaluate.

- Working on restoration of a 250-year-old church at Picuris Pueblo. The community is rebuilding the church with all volunteer labor. We provided a crew of sixty youth and adults and made one thousand adobe bricks by hand. We still hold the record for most adobes made in one day.
- Painting the tribal office buildings, including the governor's office at Jemez Pueblo.
- Working with the National Park Service, cleaning and preserving Anasazi ruins, and providing trail maintenance and erosion control.
- Adopting several miles of highway on the Acoma Pueblo for which Acoma students are cleaning and caring.
- Developing the "Buddy Works" program at Acoma Pueblo, where seventh- and eighth-graders adopt kindergarten buddies and provide reading and tutoring service. The older students prepare lesson plans and make materials.

STUDENT-GENERATED SERVICE

Several examples of student-generated projects are:

- Students participated in a field-based Navajo history unit in Canyon DeChelly on the Navajo reservation where they learned about the destruction of Navajo homes and food supplies at the hands of Kit Carson and the United States Army in the 1860s. One student was so moved by the presentation that he suggested that we could begin to do our part by planting new peach trees all over the canyon. Although this project was originally somewhat symbolic, we did plant the peach trees and have continued to do so since 1989.
- Zuni high school students decided they wanted to spend quality time with senior citizens. They are now painting murals on the walls of the new seniors' center, and they are involved in intergenerational cultural exchanges, where both groups take turns doing the teaching and learning.
- Junior high students in Taos, New Mexico, were recently recognized by their tribe for helping with a Pow Wow and raising money for local runners.

SERVICE AS AN ENTRY POINT

In the early 1980s, as director of the Stilwell Academy, I often visited Crosslin Smith, a religious leader of the Keetoowah Cherokees, a traditional group that still practices the traditional religion. In one conversation, as I was sharing my frustrations and concerns, Crosslin talked about how, long ago, Cherokee spiritual leaders fasted and went to a sacred place, performing the necessary rituals to see into the future. "We already know these things will happen," he warned, "we have seen it coming," referring to the difficult times young people are facing. Although he never prescribed what could or should be done, I took this as a challenge to see what difference I could make.

Judging by the newspaper headlines, drop-out rates, and reports about gang activity in Native communities, we're now living in the times that the Cherokee elders saw when they looked into the future many generations ago. The negative opportunities for our youth often seem to outnumber the positive, and young people are trading away their culture for something far less valuable.

As Native people, I've always felt that we have a responsibility to give something back. As parents, teachers, coaches, and mentors, we have an exciting opportunity to provide the most valuable service of all, that of simply providing a positive example. Changes need to be made in Native communities; there are some extremely destructive cycles that need to be interrupted by positive, caring individuals. Service can provide an entry point to bring those young people who have been alienated back into the circle. There are exciting new programs waiting to be developed, based on a template that has been available to us all along. We can start anywhere. Let's begin by taking a look at our communities, not to identify problems, but to find the strengths on which we can build. Let's look for those things that need to be done and for those who can do them. Let's not overlook those whose greatest need is to do something that will be recognized and appreciated by others. We can start this process from a traditional values base that has been with us for as long as anyone can remember. Service can represent an act of faith—both in our communities and in our young people.

As Bernie Bearskin said in Studs Terkel's book *Division Street America*:

I think perhaps that my early training in the home impressed me with the philosophy of our forebears. It was taught to us that if one could be of service to the people, this is one of the greatest honors there is.

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“Borrowing” Activities from Another Culture: A Native American’s Perspective

Gordon W. A. Oles

THE ENTIRE SPECTRUM OF THE WILDERNESS/ADVENTURE EDUCATION EXPERIENCE is a most dynamic phenomenon. Many of the programs and experiences which adventure education practitioners facilitate are exciting, innovative, affective, and effective. Moreover, the profession has not developed to the point where the calcifying effects of organizational rigor mortis threaten to overtake it. There is still room for new ideas. In fact, if a wagging finger were to be pointed, it would have to be directed toward the tendency to jump on a bandwagon whenever an idea, concept, or practice captures one’s fancy. It seems that one of the more pervasive bandwagons has been the trend of latching on to the rituals and practices of various Native American tribes and other aboriginal groups.

My concern stems from my experience in working with a number of agencies that conducted wilderness rehabilitation programs for troubled youth. One aspect of the various agencies’ programs included sweat lodge ceremonies, giving of names, vision quests, fasts, etc., yet no cultural context was appropriate for the things which they were doing. Additionally, I believe that these agencies and individuals had no right to take these religious activities and put them to use in that setting.

I have had deeply spiritual experiences that I do not share with others, yet they are of profound meaning to me, for the context in which they occurred was appropriate to my cultural heritage. There are other events which I share with others of my culture, for we have these experiences in common; however, those who are outsiders must always be excluded.

By attempting to adopt Indian ceremonies into their adventure leadership programs, these well-intentioned, but misguided leaders have desecrated things that should have remained sacred and holy. From my perspective as a Native American (who also happens to be an outdoor leader), these contrived, pseudo-Indian activities

were tantamount to a non-believer taking the Emblems of Communion and passing them out along the trail as a snack.

What if I were to come into St. Patrick's Cathedral, clad only in moccasins and a breechclout, and attempt to take the place of the priest? Or suppose that I went into a synagogue on Yom Kippur and sang *Kol Nidre* instead of the cantor? Can you see the incongruity? Even if I say the correct words and do the correct things, I certainly do not have the right to do so, and I would most likely offend the religious sensibilities of those within their respective congregations. It works both ways.

Many non-Indian people within Western society seem to think of Indians as a separate species from them, with a cosmology based upon fear and superstition. Worse, they may view us as curiosities, or as stage props instead of people. In the short story *Sun and Shadow*, Ray Bradbury pointedly demonstrates the cultural insensitivity that far too frequently occurs when Westerners deal with indigenous peoples.

We must understand each other I will not have my alley used because of its pretty shadows, or my sky used because of its sun, or my house used because there is an interesting crack We are poor people. Our doors peel paint, our walls are chipped and cracked, our gutters fume in the street, the alleys are all cobbles Did you think I knew you were coming and put my boy in his dirtiest clothes? We are *not* a studio! We are people and must be given attention as people. Have I made it clear? (Bradbury, 1953)

Our religious beliefs may seem strange. I will agree they are different from the Western world's cosmology; however, that difference does not make them less valid as a means of expressing reverence for the divine. From a Western viewpoint, land is a commodity to be bought and sold, or to be plundered and conquered. To the Native American, the earth is our mother. Western thought arrogates to humankind the sole right of reason and being. One Native American perspective takes the viewpoint that all animals are sentient beings. Moreover, the very rocks themselves are alive. Western thought conveniently divides the sacred from the profane; yet in the cosmology of a Native American, one may see the Hand of the Creator in all things; therefore, all is sacred.

How often over the centuries has our religious expression been ridiculed by the West? Yet, at the same time, if *their* religious institutions fail them, many non-Indians think that by adopting some Indian rituals or ceremonies (or a "reasonable facsimile"), they will find their way back to truth and light. *It just isn't going to happen!*

I seriously doubt that Western society is without spiritual meaning, and I cannot subscribe to the notion that the West is morally bankrupt (as yet). All enduring societies must have been built upon a spiritual and moral foundation, or else they would not have endured. In all of these societies that have risen and fallen, there was a spiritual drive that sustained them in their growth. Western society is no

exception, though it seems in many cases that this spiritual dimension has been either denied or demythologized.

Western society has had its full complement of culture heroes, but what has it done with them (or to them)? If the heroes have displayed any human failings, they have been unceremoniously removed from their pedestal. Any element of the supernatural was dealt with in just as cavalier a manner. *Consequently, there remains a spiritual void when the culture heroes are dismantled, and we vainly search for their replacement.* It has been popularly stated in Western thought that "God is dead (also the culture heroes)." It must be remembered, however, that it is we who have killed them in our de-eschatological hubris. In Native American mythology, however, the hero remains inviolate; *it is we who must live up to the myth.* Therein lies a critical cultural difference between a Native American perspective and the Western cosmological viewpoint.

AUTHENTIC CULTURAL CONTEXTS

In order for a religious institution to work, it must be founded within the appropriate cultural context. Its adherents then practice their beliefs within that cultural milieu, and do so appropriately with their society's full sanction. For example, the religious ceremonies that are integral to any given tribe will be central frameworks of that tribe's cultural identity. Trying to juxtapose certain ceremonies into Western society would be disturbingly jarring. By the same token, those tribes also recognize the absurdity of trying to do the reverse. Hence, virtually all outsiders and outside distractions are excluded from most activities within the tribal religion, and rightly so. The hero motifs, cosmological perspectives, etc., remain forever intact—a standard that the tribal members strive to attain in their lives.

"Putting new wine into old bottles" is a timeless adage now, even as when it was first uttered. Adventure educators should critically examine the activities that are adopted. Activities must be *authentic* in order to be effective. In this definition of terms, authentic activities must be congruent to one's cultural framework. Therein lies the dilemma. Though people may recognize the value of certain activities (and Native American ceremonies have been perennial favorites), they cannot effectively make use of them if these activities and ceremonies come from a culturally dissimilar framework. To do so would make them appear unnatural and contrived. No amount of "cultural appreciation" or "cultural sensitivity" can make them fit within the Western cosmology, because the necessary perspective is lacking. Nor can these elements which have been appropriated (stolen) be of lasting efficacy, for the simple fact that they have been practiced without the proper sanctions. There is neither the cultural precedent, the cultural framework, *nor the authority* to conduct any sort of tribal activity—even if couched with Anglo terminology—even if conducted with the purest motives—even if those conducting these activities are doing them in a manner

that is "sensitive" to the feelings of the Native Americans' tribal ceremonies that have been appropriated. In all honesty, I would have to say, "Find your own ceremonies; don't take ours."

FINDING WESTERN CULTURAL CONTEXTS

Within the framework of non-Indian culture, there is a rich legacy that has been bequeathed if people will only look. Western society is not devoid of examples that could be emulated, if only one could look beyond one's cultural myopia. For example, if an individual only went so far as to read the delightful stories that Laura Ingalls Wilder (1976) wrote about her growing up, a very effective program could be developed using the subsistence skills that were once common to America's settlers. Wilder was not alone; there were others who left behind a record of early American life and institutions. Virtually every library has some sort of account of a pioneering family that could be effectively used with further research. A most simplistic example perhaps, but it could be easily incorporated into a program. Wigginton (1974) has done much to preserve America's heritage with the Foxfire efforts. Surely there is much that could be critically examined and incorporated from that source—and numerous others.

The nice thing about this approach is that it is *authentic* in the previously defined sense. Moreover, I doubt that many people's sensibilities would be offended, as might occur with some of the pseudo-quasi-religious-mystic undertones of some "Indian style" activities. Certainly, they would not take on the trappings of the "cigar-store" Indian and the inherent tawdriness that comes from such an unnatural union.

... pseudo-Indianism is a passing fad. It cannot last. A sacred pipe torn from the body of a living heritage soon dies and becomes meaningless. (Hawk, 1990)

This is not to say that sweat baths, solo experiences, quests, walkabouts, and so on are inappropriate for use in programs. Just don't couch them in language or metaphorical contexts that cause them to appear to be something that they could never be. Once something has been shown to be a forgery (despite all the careful attention to authentic details), its baseness becomes glaringly apparent.

THE VALUE OF RITES AND CEREMONIES

It seems that there is a need for formal rites or ceremonies to validate human experiences within a society. In Western societies, there are christenings, bar mitzvahs, weddings, graduations, funerals, retirements, etc., all done with much ceremony. They are formalized ways in which each person's place in a Western

society is validated. In Native American societies, there are rites and ceremonies as well. Upon closer examination it might well be said that activities of the types under discussion are essential for the complete development of a human being. One example must suffice.

Among many Native American tribes, the training of the young boys to become men was long and thorough. For instance, one of the great Crow chiefs, Plenty-Coups, had this to say:

In all seasons of the year most men were in the rivers before sunrise. Boys had plenty of teachers here. Sometimes they were hard on us, too. They would often send us into the water to swim among cakes of floating ice, and the ice taught us to take care of our bodies. Cold toughens a man . . . In we plunged amid the floating ice. The more difficulties we faced, the better for us, since they forced us to use our heads as well as our muscles. Nothing was overlooked that might lead us to self-reliance or give us courage in the face of sudden danger. (Linderman, 1967)

As I come to the end of this discourse, I feel it necessary to explain a few things. As a Native American, I felt that I could share some perspectives, but please keep in mind that I have only spoken for myself; I do not speak for my tribe. I certainly do not speak for all Native Americans. Nonetheless, I felt that it was important that I should share some of my feelings with you, so that there may be greater understanding between us.

I have no quarrel with those who see the value of developing men and women among our youth by making use of certain activities such as a solo experience, a fast or vision quest, bathing in a sweat lodge, or whatever other activity has been included within an adventure program.

Native Americans are not the only societies in which these activities occur or have occurred; consequently, we don't have a monopoly on them. What I will always object to is couching these activities in the realm of "Indian lore." I am not a museum specimen; my beliefs are not for sale. I am a human being. Treat me as such.

I realize that many people may strive to do these things because of a desire to emulate certain ideals, but please remember, the Noble Savage has existed only in literature, and perpetuating that myth only perpetuates stereotypic ideas. Romance is very seldom reality.

If you feel that the clients whom you serve may benefit from a sweat bath, fine, *but* don't say it's a Dakota sweat lodge ceremony. If you feel you want to change your name, fine. Just don't tell me that it's an Indian name. (If it really were your true name, I would hope that you wouldn't tell me.) If you want to fast, go ahead; that's your business. And, if you are in search of a vision from your Creator, please seek earnestly. All I ask is that you keep those things sacred to you. There are numerous models within the Western cultural context that can be deemed to be

worthy of emulation—why be ashamed of them, because they originated in Western civilization?