

Critical Pedagogy and Praxis with Native American Youth: Cultivating Change through Participatory Action Research

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In the preface to the 2007 volume *Critical Pedagogy: Where Are We Now?*, Shirley Steinberg begins by saying, “wherever we are now, we are being insubordinate” (Steinberg, 2007, p. ix). And in many ways, she is correct. In an education context where the art of teaching and pedagogy is being systematically replaced with scripted curriculum programs, critical pedagogy is happening, but it is happening in spaces where educators refuse to surrender to neoliberal policies and practices that stifle creativity and voices. It is happening in schools that are committed to education and not “schooling,” in summer camps and afterschool programs, and in higher education institutions where students are afforded the space to recognize their own power as social change agents and practice democracy.

We agree with Steinberg that because critical pedagogy is not formulaic or stagnant, it should be

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thought of as “what isn’t” rather than an is (Steinberg, 2007). In other words, critical pedagogy is not the standard practice of schools, though it should be. It isn’t memorization of facts and figures, mindless participation in worksheets, regurgitation of textbook copy, or unquestioned acceptance of the status quo. Instead, it is “learning, relearning, and unlearning” (Wink, 2005, p. 67). Critical pedagogy is transformative education that is not about transmitting knowledge; it is about *constructing* knowledge with students and extending beyond the walls of the school into the community (Kinchloe, 2008).

Grounded in a vision of social justice and equity, critical pedagogy calls us to see the dynamic interplay of education with other social institutions. Schools do not operate in a vacuum—and thus the ways that power operate in society, the relationship between schools and communities, and the roles of the social, cultural, and political in shaping human identity are all central to cultivating empowered democratic citizens of our world (Kinchloe, 2008). Approaching the classroom through critical pedagogy has been theorized as a way to empower students to act upon their oppression to change their lived realities (Freire, 1970; Grande, 2004; McLaren, 2003). Although there are many successful applications of critical pedagogy across grade levels (Cowhey, 2006; Duncan-Andrade, 2008; Gustin, 2010; Schultz, 2008; Stovall & Morales-Doyle, 2010), most of the literature outlines only the theoretical ideology of critical pedagogy and praxis. We seek to discuss critical pedagogy and praxis, but also provide an example of our work and process of engaging in participatory action research (PAR) with Native American Youth as we navigated through our own tensions of positionality and criticality with historically marginalized teens.

The Leadership Development and Transitions Camps

The Leadership Development Camp, created in 2005 as a partnership between a large land-grant university in the Northwest and a Native American Tribe, is a culturally responsive summer camp designed for youth living on or near the local reservation. During this week long residential summer camp for youth ages 13-17 years old, the Leadership Development Camp offers middle and high school students the opportunity to live in a college dormitory while engaging in a wide variety of athletic activities, culturally responsive academic seminars, and leadership and team building activities. Designed to address a long legacy of student disengagement from school, and high instances of teen pregnancy and youth alcohol and drug abuse, The Leadership Development Camp was designed to aid student retention, support student resiliency, and improve academic and socio-emotional development. Paula, one of the co-founders of this camp, serves as the curriculum director and Paul has served as a camp counselor and instructor at the camp for five years. Over the 10 year partnership with the tribe, Paula and her partner Cedric, the co-founder and director of the camp, have worked closely with tribal leaders to listen to the needs and desires for the camp on a yearly basis. After the brainstorming meeting with the tribe, Paula and Cedric would return back to the university to plan the curriculum and activities for the camp each summer. These processes, which

includes multiple meetings on the reservation and sustained communication with tribal leaders, deep listening, and open invitations for tribal leaders and parents to attend events and visit the classrooms during the camp, has resulted in a long term trusting relationship between the tribe and the camp directors.

The camp curriculum and experiences are grounded in the four dimensions of well-being among Native American Youth, identified by many indigenous scholars (CHiXapkaid, Banks-Joseph, Inglebret, McCubbin, Sievers, & Associates, 2008; HeavyRunner & Morris, 1997). These four dimensions include: Social Wellbeing—connections with peers, family, school, community, and culture; Emotional Wellbeing—the ability to cope and deal with the effects of colonization, historical trauma, loss, discrimination, and racism; Cultural Wellbeing—the ability to live in two worlds, knowledge of culture and history, positive identity and connection to cultural community; and Psychological Wellbeing—positive sense of self, adjustment, knowledge of drug and alcohol abuse (CHiXapkaid et al., 2008).

Each year, the camp is organized around different themes as a means to approach well-being in an integrated, holistic way. While themes and culminating projects have ranged from literacy and book writing to global and local sustainability and hip hop, the camp provides multiple opportunities and modes for students to discuss and critically think about their identity, culture, community, and history. Creating spaces for students to discuss difficult issues in their lives and community without the fear of “having the wrong answers” or being disciplined for “inappropriate language or topics” has helped students trust that the camp is a “safe” space to think out loud, share, and work through issues. In our classrooms, all opinions, thoughts, and ideas are valued and no topics are off limits. The camp averages approximately 50 middle and high school students a year, with about 60% of students returning from participation in previous years of the camp.

In the summer of 2010, the Tribe, recognizing data which clearly showed that the largest numbers of students in the community left school in the 9th grade year, requested that we provide two summer camps—our usual residential Leadership Camp in early summer and a second day camp focused on the middle to high school transition, near the end of the summer. In order to design the most effective curriculum to address the middle to high school transition and high prevalence of school withdrawal, it was decided that we first needed to understand, from youth perspectives, the issues they were contending with generally in their lives.

In June 2010, the focus of the Leadership Development Camp, therefore, was “Telling our Stories”—where issues of identity, history, and the art of storytelling in historical and contemporary contexts were the major themes in the academic seminars. In addition to several team building exercises and sports activities, students worked with College of Education faculty and doctoral students on understanding local tribal history and the art of storytelling in traditional and contemporary contexts. Students watched and discussed video clips of tribal elders telling traditional stories of the Lewis and Clark expedition from their tribal perspective. Students also attended seminars where they watched various videos of contemporary Indigenous

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students telling stories and expressing themselves through poetry and video projects. We then conducted a digital storytelling workshop for students to craft their own stories and learn the technology to tell their own story via media. Students had the freedom to create and tell their digital story on any topic that they wished. They individually wrote their own stories, selected photographs and music, and recorded their voices to craft their own digital story. While some students chose to tell stories of a particular day in their life that was memorable—such as winning a basketball tournament, or the day that a loved one passed on—the vast majority of the stories were representations of students reflecting on their life.

The process of reflecting, writing, and choosing images to tell their stories was joyous and painful for many students. One of the non-Native students, who lived on the reservation in a foster home, wept in class as she reflected on her birth mother's addiction to methamphetamines and her pain watching her mother's health deteriorate. After a 20-minute private talk with Paula about her story and her desire to talk about her life growing up and her relationship with her mother and siblings, she returned to class and diligently began writing her story. In fact, she wrote so much that she did not have time to record and synch her voiced story with her photographs. The writing process, however, was a breakthrough for this particular student. While this was her third year attending the camp, she always arrived with a lackluster attitude, with little desire to participate in most activities and projects. Following her writing spree, she emerged that afternoon as an energetic participant, leading her group in the evening team building activity. After watching her presentation of her digital story, where she read her script to the group, it was evident that through her writing process she found a way to reconcile her past and find hopefulness in her future. Students later elected her for the "most improved" participant award on the final day of the camp.

The excerpts of the digital stories shared here are with permission from the students who wanted their stories told to a broader audience. Many stories reflected individual identity negotiations, where students explored what it meant to be them, to live in multiple worlds. One fourteen year old girl voiced:

I've had to live with being a Native in an all-White school mostly my whole life. I've never really looked at it in a bad way because I have been going there since around second grade. Living in [town] is such a different world compared to the reservation. I realize it's like I'm living in two different worlds, especially when it comes to my friends. They act different dress different and talk different, and I'm different from them. In my opinion, I think it's a good thing because I know it all happens for a purpose and it makes me have the advantage of living and seeing both worlds. I have the advantage of living the life I want and the way I want it, without having to worry about entering a new world. I basically have the advantage of being myself. And no matter what I will always love being on the reservation more than a non-reservation, mainly because I feel more comfortable there. And I'm closer to family, and every time I come down it feels like home. The environment and feeling is different and it changes. Out on the reservation I feel more open and I listen with my heart better.

In this digital story, the youth leader critically reflected on her cultural well-being and her ability to negotiate living in two worlds. Her photographs and story revealed a nuanced interrogation of the meaning of “home.” Because she lives with her mother outside of the reservation community, and regularly visits her father and siblings who live on the reservation, home for her was a spiritual connection to place, tradition, and culture. In one of the seminars which focused on tribal history, students watched a short video of the tribal cultural historian and elder discuss the concept of listening with your heart. As a part of her reflection of her identity, she too connected place and the reservation community with her ability to more openly and freely listen with her heart.

The most common theme, however, shared in the majority of the stories was centered on issues of education and schooling. One student said:

In my family, no one has ever made it past high school let alone would ever make it to college to expand and pursue their own education and dreams. They had all dropped out before their junior year. My uncle had dropped out in 8th grade, my dad didn't finish his education, my grandpa dropped out because he made himself believe that he couldn't do it. He'd rather party than study. And now he's alone, with no education, and drinking everyday and every chance he gets. My grandma dropped out at the end of her sophomore year because she was pregnant with my mom, and my mom had dropped out of high school at the age of 15/16 because she ended up pregnant with my sister. Throughout my family history it shows that no one had ever made it all the way through with their education. They dropped out, got pregnant, or simply just gave up because it was too hard. My mom had always told us kids that she believes that WE could end this family cycle. That WE could be the first one to graduate high school. That WE can go to college and follow our own dream. And that WE can do anything we set our minds to... Dreams are never easy to follow, but if you have faith in yourself and in your heart, and you know that in your heart that you can do it, your dream won't seem as far away of coming true.

This digital story, like several others, discussed the family legacy of school failure which is largely connected to the historical trauma of colonization, boarding schools, and discrimination. Having spaces in the camp to talk openly about emotional and psychological well-being offered students a language and framework to talk about these legacies experienced in their families. It also offered opportunities for students to stake claim to being a key player in breaking the drop-out cycle and becoming a first generation college student. Over half of the digital stories contained imagery of broken chains or shackles being broken followed by photographs of diplomas. This particular student participated in the camp six consecutive years, and in fall of 2012, entered a four year University.

While each participant was given the option of sharing their digital story with each other in the camp or keeping it private, every student elected to share their story publicly. What became evident during the sharing was the power embedded in the process of having space to tell your own story, using your own words, and your own voice. Having spaces to talk, reflect, write, and “listen with your heart”

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was imperative to the building of trust and relationship with each other and the camp staff.

We ended our camp with a trip to the Indian sacred lands and mountains surrounding Wallowa Lake. While much of this area was recently purchased by three neighboring tribes—the Nez Perce, Umatilla, and Colville—some of the stories of the mountains included contact with the “home” tribe of many of the students. It is important to note that many of the students trace their roots to several tribes in the Northwest, and while they all reside in one reservation community, some are enrolled members of neighboring tribes.

After a scenic gondola ride to the top of Wallowa Mountain, we hiked with area naturalists, taking time to stop and read tribal stories about the history, mountains and lands we were viewing. Students learned of Chief Joseph (and Chief Joseph Mountain), broken treaties, and the Nez Perce War. They also read a Nez Perce creation story about the Seven Devil Mountains, as we viewed the mountain range. Undoubtedly, the camp process, digital storytelling project, and culminating field trip were about reflection and healing. Through informal conversations while hiking, students commented that they loved being at the top of the mountain, breathing fresh air and Native history.

In August 2010, many of the same students returned for a second week-long summer camp that the tribe called the “Transitions Camp.” In this second camp, students were bused from the reservation to the university campus daily. Similar to the Leadership Development Camp, we engaged in a series of sports activities and academic seminars. The tribe supported this second summer camp, with the specific charge of addressing the difficulty students seemed to have transitioning from middle to high school. From the tribe’s data, the majority of the youth in the community that consistently dropped out of high school were in the 9th and 10th grades. The tribe presented their data to students on the first day of the camp, outlining the numbers of students leaving school and the reasons students dropped out—drugs, alcohol, pregnancy, and family problems. Once tribal members left the classroom, many students vehemently disagreed with the classifications and categories of why certain individuals, their friends and family members, left school. They did agree, however, that the low graduation numbers among the Native population in their community was a long time issue that needed to be addressed.

In many of the individual digital stories created in the June Leadership Development Camp, students discussed the legacy of school failure in their own families. Because of the success of the digital storytelling project in June, when the students returned in August, we decided to engage in another digital storytelling project, but this time based on the school dropout/push out issue in their community. For the students who found the tribe’s own classification of data regarding the issue problematic, this project afforded them the opportunity to provide more data, and more nuanced stories.

Together with the students, we engaged in a PAR project focused on the school dropout/push out issue in the community. In this one week camp, students

learned the basics of qualitative research methods and action research, developed research protocol, interviewed each other and community members, analyzed data, and represented their data in the form of thematic digital stories. These digital stories allowed for the experiences of the students and the community to be heard and valued regarding the complex reasons for the high drop-out/push-out rate at the local high school. Pedagogically, the project provided students the opportunity to be researchers, to be a part of the knowledge producing process, and to be active participants in learning about and changing a significant problem in their community.

Critical Pedagogy and Problem-Posing Approach to Education

Each summer, curriculum and pedagogy in our summer camp(s) is framed around two assumptions: (1) students will rise to high expectations if they know they are cared for and greatness is expected; and (2) when students are provided a space to express, critique, and build relationships, they become engaged in their own learning. While these two assumptions may seem to be very common sense notions of teaching and learning, the reality of this in practice for many of our students is very slim. Our approach to education each summer is grounded in critical pedagogy and the process of problem posing.

The problem-posing approach to education is in opposition to what Freire (1970) calls the “banking” method of education. In the traditional banking model of schooling, students are understood as empty receptacles, where the teacher makes various deposits of knowledge and information that the student should passively receive, store, memorize, and repeat (Freire, 1970). “The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformer of the world” (Freire, 1970, p. 54). The banking method of teaching and learning stifles creativity, debilitates critical consciousness, and reinforces unequal power relations and oppression, as these classrooms are very teacher-centered. In this model, teachers and curriculum have the “right answers” which students are expected to regurgitate onto tests (Peterson, 2009). In contrast, a problem-posing education works to create a space of learning that is not static and motionless, promoting the idea that answers to all questions have not been solved and students must assist in producing knowledge through their own epistemological perspectives.

Problem-posing education is about reading the word and the world (Freire, 1970; Peterson, 2009; Wink, 2005). It is about redefining notions of literacy to include not just the reading of text (word), but “the unstated dominant ideologies hidden between the sentences as well” (Kinchloe, 2008, p.16). When students learn to read the world and the word, they learn to question knowledge and the world around them and recognize that they have the power to be change agents. Reading the word and the world with youth is often enacted through the use of “generative themes,” or issues or topics that catch the interest of students (Peterson, 2009).

As Freire (1970) states, “In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which*

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they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (p. 64). Critically understanding that the world and reality is in process, capable of transforming, is central to recognizing individual and group agency for historically marginalized communities. When students become producers of knowledge and active transformers of society, they no longer become sedentary accepters of dominant ideologies through the banking-method.

Problem-posing education is a framework through which possibilities are opened, critical dialogue can happen, and transformation can be a reality. According to Hytten (2006), Freire’s problem posing approach “calls for learning that involves an existential exploration of the conditions of our lives, one that can both unveil how we often make choices that contribute to our own oppression, and reveal other choices that promote our freedom” (p. 443).

In our work with Native American students in the summer camps, one of our goals was to approach the generative theme of school dropout/push out issue in a problem-posing environment. We wanted students to have spaces to discuss, critique, question and understand the issue in their community from multi-layered and nuanced perspectives that were counter to the dominant narrative espousing school failure simply as an individual problem. We wanted them to critically explore the conditions they face in their community while also recognizing that they have the power and agency to transform their reality.

As a group of teacher researchers, we posited that the best way for students to be critically engaged in this community issue with a sense of purpose and possibility, was to conduct a PAR project. Since the charge for the Transitions Camp was to address the dropout rate during the middle to high school transition, we decided to approach the issue from the perspective of the students, allowing them to drive the research project.

Participatory Action Research

Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) outline three components used to define PAR: (1) shared ownership of research projects; (2) community-based analysis of social problems; and (3) an orientation toward community action. Our¹ PAR project centered on the drop-out/push-out rate in the local reservation community contained all three of these attributes. Students quickly took ownership of the research project as they recognized that they had the power to shape the project. The data collected, analysis of the data, and the representation of the data via digital stories were all from the students, as members of their community seeking to elicit action to a generational social problem.

Day 1—Becoming Critical Researchers.

The Transitions Camp began with a presentation by Tribal leaders which referenced the sustained large numbers of high school drop outs and anecdotal evidence on the reasons why so many left school. Providing many charts and graphs that tracked each Native student in the community from birth through adulthood,

students were able to see themselves, and their potential graduating class, in the statistics.

Following this brief presentation, we quickly began delving into the students thoughts about the drop-out/push-out issue. We hung three large pieces of butcher paper around the room with these questions on the top: “Why do you think students leave your high school?” “What reasons do you think teachers think students leave your high school?” “What reasons do you think community members think students leave your high school?” In this “chalk walk” activity, students were given markers and asked to write their thoughts to the questions on each piece of butcher paper. Once students exhausted all of their written comments on the posters, we began a critical discussion about what they wrote, and the differences between the responses on the three posters.

Students quickly recognized many contradictions as well as numerous reasons for dropping out of school that were not categorized by tribal leaders in their presentation. As a part of the critical analysis of their written ideas, we introduced them to the idea of “push out” versus “drop-out.” As students discussed and debated the difference in language to frame the issue of school leavers, they began the process of problematizing the dominant narrative and replacing it with counter-narratives (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Discussions regarding differences in point of view on the part of students and adults, as well as the multiple reasons they knew people left school, encouraged students to provide explanations of the drop-out/push-out issue that went beyond the usual dominant narrative of student deficiency. Drugs, alcohol, lazy, pregnancy, and unmotivated were insufficient categories that did not address the larger systemic contextual issues that students identified as also being key factors in school failure. Statements such as “Teachers are boring,” and “The tardy and absence policy,” were critically analyzed in a dialogic space to expose the reality that it is not simply the “bad” student, but often components of the school structure that could be responsible for the high drop-out/push-out rate.

After a concerted focus on storytelling in the Leadership Development Camp in June, students agreed that narratives or stories of people who dropped out or were pushed out of school and of people who graduated from school were necessary to more deeply understand the issue in their community. Students argued that in order to understand the factors that caused people to leave school, they also needed to understand the factors that helped students graduate. Actively resisting a deficit approach to the issue, the week-long PAR project began, and students quickly transitioned to becoming investigators, or researchers into the “real” reasons students leave their high school, and the factors that helped those who graduated.

To prepare students for data collection, two instructors led a special seminar on qualitative research. Students learned about ethical considerations for research and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) regarding human subjects in research. Since the camp directors had already obtained IRB approval for engaging in qualitative data collection for camp participants as well as for the action research project in

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advance, students were walked through consent forms regarding confidentiality and participant consent for audio taped interviews.

Students were also introduced to the historical and contemporary issues of insiders and outsiders researching in Indigenous communities. While it was not clear that students really understood the colonial legacy of the “lone ethnographer” researching *on* Native communities as juxtaposed to our project of Native researchers researching *with* their own community, we nevertheless wanted students to recognize the historical implications of research in Native communities (Rosaldo, 1993; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

Using the previous “chalk walk” activity as a starting point in the discussion of research questions, data collection and interviews, we began with grand tour questions such as: What do you want to know? What do you think the community wants to know? What would be helpful information to collect for you and the community? These questions led us to our overarching research questions: Why do people in the [tribal] community leave school? What experiences or factors lead to the decision to leave school or graduate high school in the [tribal] community?

We continued by asking students what they would want someone to ask them if they were being interviewed about this topic. As we brainstormed possible interview questions, we walked students through the process of re-phrasing the questions to be open-ended, non-repetitive, and closely connected to the two big research questions. The process of formulating an interview protocol with students was dynamic and interactive. Nearly every student contributed, in the whole group setting, to the wording, re-wording, and finalization of the interview protocol. Students were beginning to trust that this was, in fact, *their* research project, where they would be in control of the new knowledge created about their community.

Students were then given digital recorders, and in pairs, piloted the interview questions by interviewing each other using the interview protocol. We then gathered as a large group again to debrief and talk about how it felt to interview someone and be interviewed. Students ended the day with a homework assignment to interview someone in the community, preferable between 18-24, who either dropped or graduated high school.

Day 2—Listening to the Stories

After a long productive day of camp on Day 1, we were a bit nervous as we greeted the bus on Day 2. Hoping that students completed their homework assignment and decided to catch the early morning bus for the hour and a half long ride to campus for day two, we were elated to find that nearly all of the students returned, and additional students were added to our camp roster.

We began the day with a short discussion of their experiences completing their interview assignment. Approximately half of the 30 students were able to complete their interview. Students acknowledged that because we had a limited number of digital recorders (they had to share recorders), they were not able to complete their interview, but would be able to do so the evening of Day 2. A few students gave no

reason for not completing their work, and seemed surprised that they were being held accountable for not completing their assigned task. As a means to get the new students on board, students who did not complete their assignment were asked to interview the new students, as was done the previous day. We then paired students up (one who completed an interview and one who did not), and asked them to listen to the audio recording of the community member interview three times. The first listening was to understand and listen to the participant's story from the interview as a continuous stream. The second listening was for students to write down the main ideas, or the essence of the participant's message in their story. The third listening required students to selectively transcribe, and write word for word, quotes that represented some of the main ideas extracted from the interview. Students were diligent to get the quotes exactly as they were spoken, and helped each other decipher inaudible words in the transcribing process. As students engaged in this laborious process, pairs began sharing with each other how the taped stories were similar to other stories that they knew from their own families.

We later gathered as a big group to begin discussing the stories, the messages, and the key points that participants made in their interviews. It became clear that students interviewed a wide variety of people in the community—young adults, elders, family members, those who left school, those that graduated high school, and even a few that graduated college. Several students interviewed members of their Tribal Council. Careful not to disclose identities or names, students discussed, with great enthusiasm, some of the contradictions they found in the stories that defied the more traditional categorizations of the drop out/push out issue. For example, while pregnancy was almost always framed as a negative barrier to education or a primary reason that young women left school, their data suggested that if these women were well supported by their families, their pregnancy served as a motivator to complete school, and in many cases pursue higher education. This process of sharing the stories of their participant interview motivated students who had not completed their own interview to schedule and complete their interview that night.

Day 3—What Does This All Mean?

After a second night of data collection, the students took time the third morning to continue the listening and transcription process with the new interviews that were conducted. We then split the camp into two groups to begin the data analysis process. Students were asked to write on the white board all of the issues, phrases, or words that captured the main ideas in their particular interview. Students consulted with their notes from their listening process and they were asked to think about additional issues their participants discussed that they may not have initially written down. Once the board was filled, and students exhausted all of the words or ideas from their interviews, we explained that this was similar to a process called coding that researchers use to make sense of written transcripts. Since time and resources did not allow us to fully transcribe all of the interviews, our group “coding” process allowed for more conversations about what was written on the board

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and the significance of those words when analyzed as a collective. Students began noticing patterns, and the process of moving from codes to categories began. In each classroom, we collapsed nearly 70 “codes” into approximately 10 categories, and finally into two or three themes. This process, therefore, yielded 5 themes, and students grouped themselves according to thematic interest. The five themes—money, fear, teachers and families, family, and “rez life”—became the focus of the digital stories that students created to represent their findings.

At the end of the day, we discussed the process of representing the stories of the participants and their data as digital stories. Since the majority of students previously learned how to create a digital story in the Leadership Camp, they were eager to begin planning their thematic videos. Because a key piece of digital storytelling is imagery, groups brainstormed possible images needed to represent their data. They made lists of photographs they might take on their cameras in the community that evening, as well as images to search for and collect from the internet when they returned the next day.

Days 4 and 5—Telling the Stories of Our Community.

On Days 4 and 5, groups worked meticulously on creating their digital stories. We outlined the major tasks necessary to complete the digital stories which included: a written story/script which incorporated participant quotations to tell the story of their theme; digitized photographs; and an audio-recorded reading of the group script. We watched students, many who are usually unmotivated and resistant to engaging in academic work, transform into group leaders and active participants in the project. Students who previously proclaimed their disdain for writing, wrote pages of text, thoughtfully inserting participant quotes to support their claims. While we did not explicitly require each student to read portions of the script in the digital stories, every group ensured that all group member’s voices were recorded in the story. At the end of the camp on Day 5, students presented to each other the completed digital stories and engaged in critical conversations about the meaning of the stories they created.

Critical Pedagogy and Praxis

Freire argued that a true praxis is impossible in the undialectical vacuum driven by a separation of the individual from the object of their study. For within the context of such a dichotomy, both theory and practice lose their power to transform reality. Cut off from practice, theory becomes abstraction or “simple verbalism.” Separated from theory, practice becomes ungrounded activity or “blind activism.” (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003, p. 15)

We agree that it is imperative that theory and practice engage in a constant dialectical relationship, praxis. Theory and reflexivity must inform practice, as practice and action must inform theory building and reflection (Peterson, 2009; Wink, 2005). In academia, we have witnessed many accounts of theorists who engage in disconnected abstract “verbalism” for advancement in a system that values

theory building, but belittles “service.” We have also seen many well intentioned individuals and organizations work tirelessly to improve the conditions of historically marginalized communities fail because they were not grounded in theories of practice. In order to engage in transformative education, praxis is crucial as Kinchloe (2008) notes,

Any viable vision of critical education has to be based on larger social and cognitive visions. In this context, educators deal not only with questions of schooling, curriculum, and educational policy but also with social justice and human possibility. Understanding these dynamics, critical educators devise new modes of making connections between school and its contexts as well as catalyzing community resources to help facilitate quality education with an impassioned spirit. (p. 7)

For us, praxis is what makes critical pedagogy and participatory action research powerful educative strategies to use with disenfranchised and historically marginalized youth. Praxis involves moving abstract theoretical ideas into practical application in the classroom and community; the absence of action provides “lip service” to the idea of transforming the world.

Student Praxis

In September 2010, many of the students who participated in the Transitions Camp came back to campus to attend the university homecoming football game and also plan the “action” portion of the project. Prior to the game, we met with students to structure a community forum, where they would have their first opportunity to publicly share their PAR research and digital stories on the reservation with the community. In this follow-up session, students designed discussion questions, and practiced leading small group conversations that they would later conduct with an audience of approximately 80 community members, including tribal leaders, retired and current teachers, parents, and school district employees. Key questions that students decided to discuss with the community were: (1) How do you feel about what you just watched? What are your reactions? (2) How can you better support the middle and high school students in the schools and community? and (3) How do you think that you can change what is going on in the community and schools?

The community breakfast forum, held at the Tribal Wellness Center early in the morning before school, was well attended, despite the heavy November snowfall. The students demonstrated their leadership and ownership of their project. Two students served as the master of ceremonies, introducing the project and each digital story. After the viewing, they invited their peers to lead small group discussions of approximately ten adults at each table with their prepared discussion questions. Students were interested not only in the visceral reactions community members had to their work, but also the plans the adults had to transform the legacy of school failure in their community. They wanted to know what adults were willing to do, and the changes they would commit to making, in order to better support them in their quest to “break the cycle” of leaving school without a diploma. After small group discussions ended, a large discussion commenced and attendees expressed

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their pain regarding the digital stories as they reflected on their school and family experiences, and the deep meaning of “rez life.” For the first time in many years, stakeholders from nearly all facets of the community engaged in a frank, open, and honest dialogue about education. The impact of the forum produced two future events: a follow up forum to continue the dialogue and focus on action, and a second viewing of the digital stories at a school-wide assembly for the middle and high school students and teachers.

The outcomes of this project illustrate the transformative possibilities of critical pedagogy and PAR. Having students research and expose a large community issue pushed adults in the community to critically reflect and make changes. Parents pledged to make changes in their own lives regarding alcohol use and increase their support for students in school; tribal leaders vowed to continue to support youth programming; and school personnel agreed that they needed more targeted professional development to better meet the needs of all students.

Perhaps the most powerful outcome, however, was in the lack of school leavers in the school year following the project. In the 2010-2011 school year, Paula, along with three faculty instructors from the camp, committed to working with the 9th and 10th grade English teachers and classes on curriculum and pedagogy. These two teachers, who were teaching out of field, welcomed our presence in their classrooms every Monday to team teach and help them plan their lessons for the week. While we were not able to replicate the intellectual culture and open dialogical space in the public school classrooms as we had in our camps, we were able to assist in opening up spaces for greater relationship building and more culturally relevant and engaging lessons. At the end of the year, the tribe reported that only one student in the ninth or tenth grade (a student who did not attend our camp) left high school. This was a drastic reduction from the average of 15-20 school leavers per year in this small high school of approximately 120 students.

This is particularly significant because during the camp, one female student was contemplating dropping out because of childcare issues with her son, and another handful of students were unsure if they would return to school because they failed courses in the 9th grade. When we analyzed our student evaluations at the conclusion of the Transitions Camp, it was clear that students internalized the importance of the topics that we discussed throughout the week. When asked in an open ended format, “what did you learn from participating in the camp?” an overwhelming majority responded that they learned about how to help decrease the dropout rate in their community, they learned about others and their experiences, and they learned that they can achieve more if they expect more of themselves. It was clear to us that the “doing” ---the generating of research questions, conducting interviews, listening to others deeply, and representing their work in a multimedia format---significantly impacted how students thought of themselves as active change agents.

As Freire (1970) explains,

Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obligated to

respond to that challenge... Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings; and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed. (p. 81)

We believe that the process of actively researching, representing, and presenting their PAR project to the community also had a profound impact on students and their commitments to education, school, and each other. Listening to the lived experiences of their elders and family members, telling their own stories, and being able to situate themselves within the larger context of their community history and education pushed students to imagine a future that may be different from the past. Seeing the impact of their work in the community, students began to believe in their own power to transform and change reality.

Teacher-Researcher Praxis

According to Darder, Baltodano, and Torres (2003), “Critical pedagogy is fundamentally committed to the development and evolvment of a culture of schooling that supports the empowerment of culturally marginalized and economically disenfranchised students” (p. 11). As a summer program, our charge from the Tribe has been, and continues to be, centered on student support for middle and high school retention. Our approach is for the camp to be a counter-hegemonic space—an intellectual and social space where the voices of the youth are privileged—through democratizing their entire experience. In the process of engaging students in dialogue and providing them space for conscientization, students also become keenly aware of unjust and unfair power relations that have historically shaped, and continue to shape their lives and communities. On the one hand we are pleased that students develop a critical consciousness, are more connected to each other and their ancestry, and are more resilient. There is still a part of this work, however, that is painfully uncomfortable, as we encourage students to “do school” and play by the rules that have continued to marginalize their very existence. As non-Native teacher-researchers, the confluence of this tension with our own positionalities has sometimes been paralyzing.

Paula, a Critical Race Black Feminist, has struggled with her intertwining roles as scholar, teacher, and administrator. Keenly aware of the colonial legacy of racism and deculturalization in schooling, it is highly problematic to design and implement a program whose primary charge is to support “school success.” Encouraging students to navigate through a system of schooling that in many ways is toxic for their holistic well-being causes great tension, as the life chances of students who do not complete school poses and even greater threat to well-being. Navigating through the complex tapestries and legacies of racism, gender discrimination, historical trauma and schooling with adolescents is tricky. While critical thinking opens doors for students to see systems of oppression (which includes schools), education is one of the main vehicles students can drive to control their futures for greater liberation. Similarly, as an outsider to the tribal community, the teaching of tribal history and culture is limited to what can be learned through reading,

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listening, and engaging with tribal members. While curriculum and activities are grounded in Indigenous epistemology, it is the Indigenous knowledge systems that can be understood through reading and listening, not living.

Paul, a Critical Pedagogue, constantly problematizes his positionality as camp instructor and scholar, entering the classroom as a White, middle-class, male. The destructive past of Native American boarding schools and current inadequacies of public schooling that are rooted in white supremacy, provides a tension that must be acknowledged. Recognizing school practices of dehumanizing curriculum, and the detrimental impact this has had on marginalized communities, his motivation comes from a belief that education can be liberating. Placing focus on interrupting colonial ideologies of research *on* to research *with*, teaching strategies must mandate valuing student voice through connecting the curriculum to students' lives. Well aware of not knowing tribal history and ways of being, a consistent method of listening and learning with are at the forefront his pedagogy.

Because this work has always been about the students, and we feel honored to have been entrusted by the tribe to work with their youth, we have been careful to not disclose the details of the digital stories that emerged as a part of the PAR project. To us, those stories belong to the tribe, the kids, and the community. What we do take ownership of, however, is our process, our grounding in critical pedagogy as a theory and a practice. The student voices that we did share in this article were from students who wanted their individual digital stories shared with broader audiences, and they granted permission for us to share anonymous excerpts in academic settings.

As we reflect on our experience engaging in critical pedagogy and PAR with Native American youth, we come away with a renewed sense of hope. Generett and Hicks (2011) contend that hope and action are in a symbiotic relationship; action requires a hope-filled frame of reference, and when filled with hope one must act. Our hope, however, is full of contradictions. We are hopeful about the future our students can make for themselves and their communities. We are hopeful that their actions have allowed them and others to see beyond what is, and imagine the possibility of change. And yet at the same time that we feel incredible amounts of pleasure and hope for the liberating possibilities entrenched in this project, PAR and critical pedagogy, we also find ourselves struggling with some of the consequences of engaging in this work with historically marginalized students. The critical consciousness that emerges as a result of inquiry based research and pedagogy creates students who ask critical questions and are dissatisfied with traditional banking models of education. They are students that will thrive in college environments, but placed back into traditional K-12 school environments, their critical questioning coupled with their racialized bodies often places students in positions where they are viewed as "trouble makers" or problems. And yet as educators working within an educational context that continues to silence the voices, experiences, and creativity of youth in schools, we still have the audacity to be hopeful.

This notion of audacious hope, or "the recognition that some efforts are worth

struggling for, even when doing so feels like raging against an unyielding machine,” (Generett & Hicks, 2011, p. 686) is how we feel about critical pedagogy in education. We believe that our students also have audacious hope. Their work, critical discussions, and commitments to each other and their community showed us that they are willing to fight for social justice and change. They also showed us that if educators provide safe spaces for students to engage in dialogue about the issues that matter most, the issues that directly impact their lives, they can do incredible and impactful work in a very short amount of time. While critical pedagogy is no magic solution or recipe for the myriad of issues plaguing schools and communities, we remain hopeful that actions for liberation and critical consciousness will ultimately transform schooling and education in the future.

Note

¹ When discussing the digital storytelling and PAR project, it should be noted that “our” and “we” refers to the work the team of instructors engaged in during the camp. Since we worked on nearly all aspects of the camp as a collective, the authors of this article wish to acknowledge the contributions of our colleagues Dr. Pamela Bettis, Dr. Michael Hayes, Dr. Sean Agriss, Dr. David Warner, Dr. Francene Watson, Mary Crowell, Renee Holt, Wynonna Johnson, and co-director Cedric Price to this work.

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