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Reasons for, and solutions to, tribal college student reticence in videoconferences with college of art students

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Abstract

Tribal college students are often reluctant to talk in videoconferenced classes. Many Native students have been raised to avoid competing with each other and not ask elders too many questions, which might be perceived as 'acting white' – especially in front of non-Native peers. This case study discusses team-teaching, undertaken by myself and an elder via videoconferencing, connecting students at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in Baltimore and students at Cankdeska Cikana (Little Hoop) Community College, the tribal college of North Dakota's Spirit Lake Dakota Nation. It describes how the elder and I re-directed synchronous discussion to his tribal and my art students' shared experiences, whereupon they voluntarily devised intriguing follow-up asynchronous project-learning activities.

Keywords

cultural differences; pedagogy; Native American studies

Background

American Indians are the least represented minority in American higher education. In order to increase their college recruitment and retention, the U.S. Department of Education recommends that tribal community college students take courses from four-year colleges while still in tribal community colleges (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Distance education is one way Indian students on remote reservations can take such courses. They might find colleges of art and design particularly suitable, since like tribal college students themselves, art and design students tend to be non-traditional learners in the sense that they mainly learn by performing, practicing and participating in cultural activities, rather than by engaging in academic discussion. They tend to be 'doers' and 'makers' – not 'big talkers' (Price *et al*, 2009; Pewewardy, 2002).

Despite this potential suitability, to successfully recruit and retain tribal college transfer students, art and design colleges must do better than other mainstream higher education institutions in understanding and addressing the cultural reasons that lead some tribal college students to perceive mainstream colleges and universities as alien, if not hostile, environments. Based on my experiences teaching videoconferenced Native American studies classes in collaboration with a respected traditional elder who directs his tribal college's Dakota studies program, this article discusses some ways in which institutions can address these perceptions. Charged with teaching his students to balance being both oral traditional Dakota and literate Americans, the elder (and some of his students) confirmed what my review of relevant research had found: Native American students sometimes feel that academic reading, writing or speaking can seem impersonal, exclusive of ordinary people, or dubiously authoritative, compared to the oral stories they hear or tell in their homes or other familiar cultural settings, where it is inappropriate to assert ideas as if they are absolutely factual rather than mainly experiential and felt.

In the traditional tribal culture of the students who took part in this class, a young person especially does not state opinions unequivocally in competition (explicit or implicit) with peers. Doing so can feel

like 'acting white', 'selling out', disrespecting or betraying one's own culture, especially in front of non-Natives during discussions of race and ethnicity at mainstream colleges and universities, where transfer students from tribal colleges may already feel at odds. The frequent presumption in mainstream higher education that every Native student must already possess the knowledge to speak for and about the whole of his or her culture's experience runs counter to tribal cultural norms that teach young students not to be so presumptuous. They come to college to listen and learn, not to speak authoritatively. No wonder they often feel anxious and insecure in classrooms where they are expected to ask questions and express opinions (Sorkness and Kelting-Gibson, 2006).

Immediate context

This article presents a case study of the elder's and my – only partially successful – attempts to ensure tribal college students' full participation in videoconferenced classes that were taught from locations a thousand miles apart. I taught from a classroom of 20 students at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in Baltimore. The elder taught from a classroom of less than 10 students at Cankdeska Cikana (Little Hoop) Community College, the tribal college of North Dakota's Spirit Lake Dakota Nation. For tribal college students, the course objective was to practice performing their dual status as tribal and US citizens by interacting online with non-Native US citizens their own age. For MICA students, the course objective was to challenge their prior stereotypes about Indians living in the past by interacting with their tribal college peers in the digital present.

Both schools also held separate face-to-face class meetings between shared online interactions. In face-to-face classes, Indian students' reserve has long been understood as partly a positive sign of respect for elders to whom they are expected not to ask too many questions, and partly a negative legacy of boarding schools, which historically punished Indians for expressing opinions in class (White, 2011). In our videoconferences, all the tribal college students were even more reluctant than in face-to-face classes to ask questions and express opinions, especially when they might have been perceived to be competing with each other in front of non-Native students. Sensitive to their obvious discomfort, the elder and I and my non-Native students directed questions to the tribal college students only as group, never to individuals among them. Furthermore, the elder restricted our initial videoconferences to 15 minutes, out of concern that his students, as he confided in me, would not want to be 'looked at' for longer than that. Tribal college and MICA students communicated via asynchronous online discussion forums in addition to the synchronous Adobe Connect videoconferences already mentioned. In asynchronous discussions on a shared Moodle site, conversations were also very one-sided, with MICA students asking far more questions than tribal college students.

Mid-course correction

After much consultation the elder and I took a risk with the aim of encouraging more tribal college student participation. Taking as a clue African American educator bell hooks' observation in her 1994 book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* that 'non-white students talk in class only when they feel connected via experience', we assigned both tribal college and MICA students to watch MICA's 2015 Constitution Day symposium video on 'Black Lives Matter' and to compare and contrast the tribal college students' experiences on the reservation with those of African American residents in Baltimore.



Figure 1: Still screen-shot, [Black Lives Matter, Structural Racism in 21st Century America](#), Constitution Day symposium, MICA (2015).

Fraught with even greater possibilities for cultural tension than previous discussions, this videoconference started off quieter than usual – even on the MICA side. Finally, a tribal college student broke the silence by asking if any MICA students had been racially profiled by Baltimore city police during the riots in 2015 which temporarily closed the school following the death in the back of a police paddy wagon of Freddie Gray, a young black man. ‘Most of us are white’ – came the first reply, but then one of those white MICA students volunteered that he was gay, as was his brother, who had been hassled by police. He reversed the question and asked whether tribal students had ever been racially profiled, to which the same tribal college student replied yes, sometimes when they went into the white town off the reservation. The elder added that clerks sometimes follow Native American shoppers around in white-owned stores.

On an asynchronous forum, another MICA student then posted a link on Moodle to a Lakota People's Law project article entitled ‘Native Lives Matter’, which quoted data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention for the period 1999–2011 showing that ‘the racial group most likely to be killed by law enforcement is Native Americans, followed by African Americans, Latinos, Whites, and Asian Americans’ (2015). Yet another MICA student wondered how non-Natives could connect better with Native people living on reservations. Should non-natives be a part of spreading the word about Native experiences?

These questions were discussed in the last videoconference between MICA and tribal college students. This particular videoconference was supposed to last the usual 15 minutes but continued for an hour and a half, at the end of which students started a Facebook page for the two groups to keep in touch online (pictured in Figure 2).

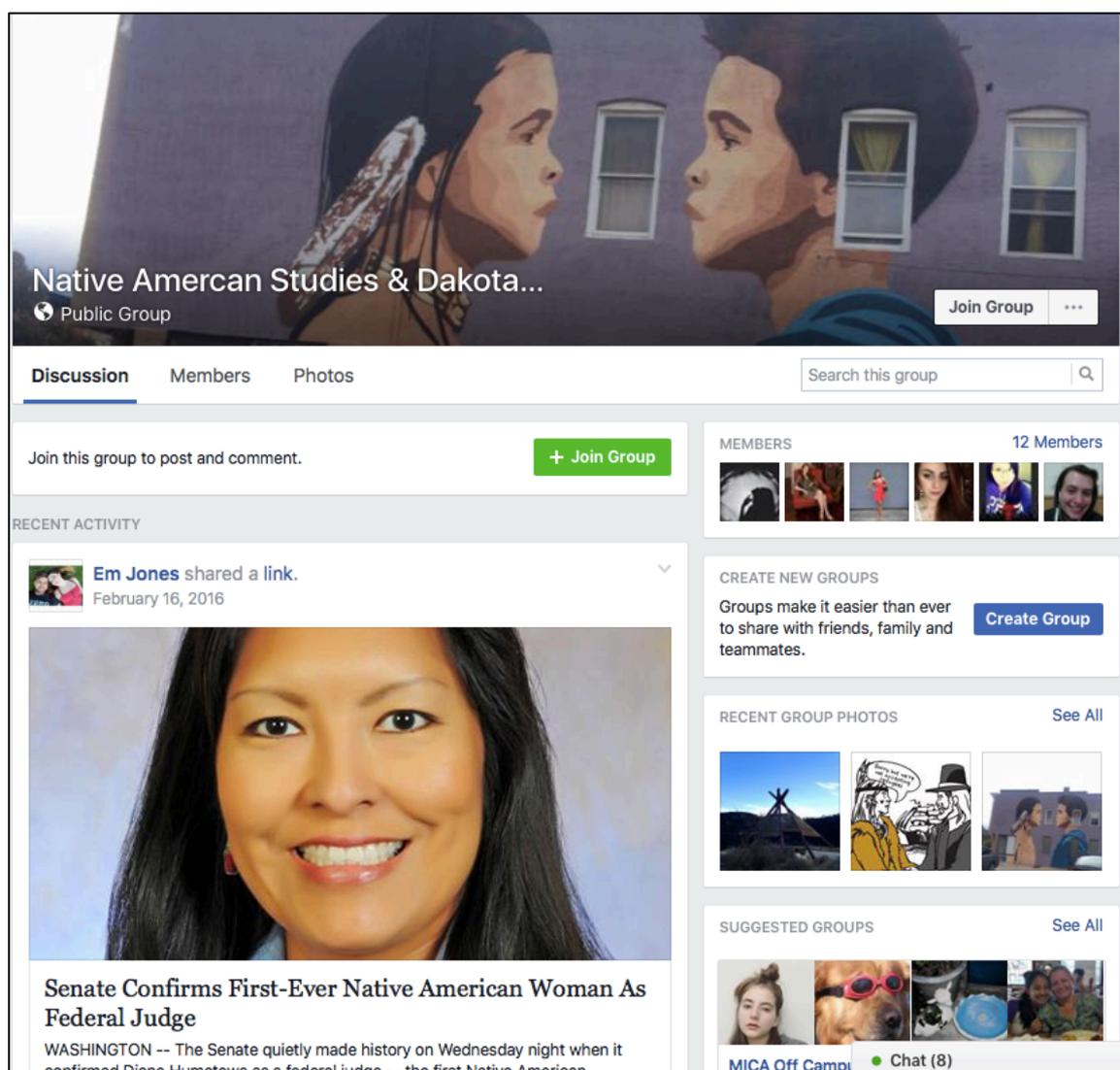


Figure 2: *Native American Studies and Dakota Studies Public Group*, Facebook (7 October 2016).

Future plans

MICA and tribal college students also suggested a face-to-face 'cultural exchange' between the two schools in future years of the course, based on students' common understanding of culture as something less to be studied academically than to be performed, practiced and participated in through music, dance, storytelling and visual art. These art forms have never been considered separate from one another in American Indian cultures as they have been in Euro-American cultures – one of the reasons that contemporary multimedia MICA art students loved studying with tribal college peers.

MICA and tribal college students also jointly suggested that in future years the course pair tribal college and MICA students in service learning projects. But what kind of projects? For years the elder had been asking me to conduct various kinds of research regarding the tribe's treaties in the Bureau of Indian Affairs records at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. (Lambert and Peacock, 2014). He and his students in North Dakota could potentially generate questions for MICA students to research at the Archives. The elder and his students would need to answer MICA students' questions about how and why this research matters, spelling out its context and purpose from the perspective of the tribe. Small groups of members from both classes could jointly produce shared documents online and present their research findings to the whole class. These projects could then be archived as a knowledge base for future students to learn from and build on. Some of this research might be of

interest to tribal constituencies, who, if sufficiently impressed, might in turn submit questions of their own for the joint class to research. In a very modest way, the class might, in collaboration, begin to learn to perform for the tribe some of the functions that post-secondary research institutions perform for their communities.

In years past, tribal college students had already brought what they learned in class to bear on their community. The year before our team-taught blended class, they recommended that their tribal council pass a resolution to engage in nation-to-nation negotiations with the US to return all the land that the US had taken from them in violation of the tribe's 1867 Treaty. Tribal college students, in other words, had not just passively learned about sovereignty in class, as future tribal leaders they were beginning to participate in practicing it. From their example, MICA students not only learned more about tribal sovereignty than they did from any of the course readings, they were inspired to wonder what they could contribute in like manner to the tribe and to their own communities in Baltimore and elsewhere.

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Biography

[Professor John Peacock](#) is an enrolled member of the Spirit Lake Dakota Nation in Fort Totten, North Dakota, and Professor of Humanistic Studies at the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore. He was translation editor and wrote the introduction/afterword to *The Dakota Prisoner of War Letters* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2013), a collection of 50 letters written in the Dakota languages by warriors incarcerated at the end of the Dakota-U.S. War of 1862 (translated by Dakota elders Clifford Canku and Michael Simon). Peacock's writing in the endangered Dakota language has been read and exhibited at the Minnesota History Center and published in *American Indian Quarterly* and *Studies in American Indian Literature*. His English-language essays, fiction and poetry have appeared in over forty journals, periodicals and anthologies.