**DISPELLING THE MYTH OF INDIAN TIME**Action Research Project Report – Winter quarter 2011
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As college instructors we continually seek out methodologies that not only improve student engagement and success but also create an environment that firmly imprints the college experience for our students. Additionally, as tribal college instructors we understand that the college experience often begins at the developmental education level. Given that most tribal college students enter into their experience at the Dev. Ed. Level, we can be sure of a few certainties. Dev. Ed. Students often come with a lot of negative educational baggage, which is often times a direct result of a boarding school or public school experience and potentially historic trauma. In other words, their experiences with education have not always been pleasurable or positive. Often students are non-traditional students beginning their college experiences much later in life than their dominant society counterparts. Perhaps most importantly, they come to us ill-equipped and lacking college readiness and/or academic preparedness and it is our job as tribal college instructors to elevate their academic skill level in a decidedly expedited manner without making them feel uncomfortable and unintentionally creating another tribal college occurrence, the stop out.

As a Dev. Ed. instructor in my second year here at Northwest Indian College, I have experienced many of the aforementioned attributes and circumstances. Perhaps none more evident than the Dev. Ed. Level college students need to acquire the necessary academic skills that will serve to ensure they obtain the absolute most out of their educational experience. As former students ourselves, we college instructors are keenly aware of academic skills such as the ability to complete assigned tasks, preparedness, deliberateness, punctuality and regular attendance. It is without question that punctuality and regular attendance are the most crucial skills to be developed, yet for various reasons they are the skills that seem to be most out of reach for our students. Hence my quarter long effort to, in effect, “Dispel the Myth of Indian Time” for my Winter Quarter, 2011, Dev. Ed, English students by demonstrating cultural knowledge in the classroom.

One of the most foundational attributes of any Native culture is that a people or tribal community’s identity and way of life is shaped, perhaps even dictated, by the environment in which those people live. Much like our students initially experiencing the college environment for the first time, our ancestors must have had to experience their environment for the first time as well. It was at one time new to them much like the college environment is new to our students. The rigors of that often unforgiving environment dictated, for our ancestors, that they adapt, learn to navigate and eventually survive with relative ease. How do we know this to be certain? Our language, history and origin stories tell us so.

Confirming that a tribal people is shaped by their environment causes me to reflect upon how the environment of my ancestors must have been to have created the strong, intelligent relations I recall from my youth. I understand that it was not haste but time, patience and necessity that allowed my ancestors to exist since time began. I understand and believe that it was the knowledge that they had of themselves and the environment in which they lived that allowed them to create life sustaining tools such as the reef-net, which served to ensure their survival in an unforgiving environment. For our students here at NWIC, the environment and the resources may have changed, however, the cultural attributes necessary for success, have not and the cultural model of the reef-net serves as a template for our student’s survival in and the navigation of, the academic environment.

Our ancestors most assuredly recognized the usefulness of the reef-net as a life sustaining tool that served multiple purposes. Most importantly it fed the people through long cold winters when other food resources were scarce. Perhaps even more importantly however, it brought the people together for the common purpose of sharing in the experience of being the people they were. Undoubtedly while they prepared for the long winter ahead by gathering fish they longingly looked forward to the time spent around the winter’s fire as a family, sharing history, genealogy and origin stories as they stripped and wove stinging nettles into twine for the next years fish harvest. The reciprocal nature of who we have always been, as coast Salish people is clearly demonstrated by this cultural template and although the resource has changed, for the most part, from fish to dollars, the outcome is still the same. We are able to feed our families through long, cold and often unforgiving winters when resources are scarce. Given the economic condition of not only our tribal communities but also our national community, there is really only one way to ensure our peoples social and economic sustainability and that is through our available contemporary resources, which is primarily education. It is through education that we are able to attain employment sufficient enough to ensure the survival of our families and communities.

For my Dev. Ed. English students the cultural template or (metaphor) was very much cut and dry. I spent one hour per day for three days in succession of one another demonstrating this experience for my students and continued throughout the quarter to, whenever necessary, re-iterate the juxtaposition of cultural attributes with the attributes necessary to ensure academic success. Throughout the quarter students clearly demonstrated via their punctuality, regular attendance and commitment to not only the course materials but also class discussions that they undoubtedly recognized the validity of the example set before them and its practical application with respect to their educational experience.

Although this particular action research project did not necessarily ensure a higher than normal success rate with respect to course completion, it did appear to have dramatically impacted the students who perhaps would have succeeded in the course regardless of whether or not they had been exposed to the cultural example. In short, I believe it merely improved my potential of reaching those who were underprepared and/or academically not ready for the college experience, while at the same time drastically improved the overall experience for those who would have otherwise already been invested in successfully completing the course and developing academic skills necessary to ensure success.

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