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1-1-1989

## The Navajo Cultural Immersion Project

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### Recommended Citation

DeGraw, Richard G., "The Navajo Cultural Immersion Project" (1989). *Service Learning, General*. 256.  
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MN00 493

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for Service Learning  
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St. Paul, MN 55108-6197

# EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT:

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Contributions to the Study of Education, Number 31



Greenwood Press

New York • Westport, Connecticut • London

## 17 THE NAVAJO CULTURAL IMMERSION PROJECT

*Richard G. DeGraw*

It was nearly dark. We found the turnout near the garbage trucks. The directions included landmarks such as the "second fence," "the sheer cliff," "the dump." Following the rutted dirt road, we passed the dump and turned left toward what looked like buildings. After crossing a treacherous, high, earthen dam (with no water behind it) we found only deserted shacks and the remains of a large corral at the base of a magnificent sheer red rock wall. Recrossing the dam, we continued another two and one-half miles and came to a slanted wash behind a hillock which held a small barn and two residential buildings (one having been unfinished for some years). About a hundred sheep lay asleep packed into a corral. We parked the van and knocked on the door of the small house. Upon entering, we met Monica Damon (seemingly a strange Indian name—we found later that she was a descendant of an Irish cavalryman and a Navajo woman); she dressed very traditionally, and spoke no English. We spoke no Navajo. The house consisted of two rooms and a bathroom. Since there was no running water or electricity, the bathroom only acted as a storage area. We made our hellos and introductions (very awkwardly, because of the language barrier), and then sat around a blazing pot-bellied stove. The heat was intense. Few words were spoken. A little uneasiness was apparent.

Monica began cleaning and carding wool, as seemed her normal nightly routine. After watching her for about ten minutes, Rick asked if he could try using the wooling cards. Monica was unsure; after all he was a man and this was woman's work. Sitting on the floor next to Monica's bed, he watched her pull the wool. Wooling cards are like two brushes with a hundred small, sharp nails thru each one. Rick then tried. On the first pull, he tore the skin off all the knuckles on his left hand and bled profusely. There was a second's hesitation, and then Monica broke

The author acknowledges the assistance of Ms. Marti Crimboli and Ms. Nancy McKinney, graduate students, who provided research support for this article.

into laughter and so did we. There was no more uncasiness. College degrees faded away. Age became unimportant. Language barriers disappeared. We could laugh together. We all knew we could learn from one another. Monica offered food. We offered to learn. Lynn learned to hand spool wool. Rick continued using the wooling cards at great cost to skin and knuckles. Our communication was laughter, pointing, and an unhidden desire to learn. Monica went to sleep in her bed. We slept on the kitchen floor. We were at ease. We knew the sun would awaken us early as it shone through the doorway, which, traditionally, faced east to greet the new day. We knew we had just entered a new kind of classroom which would capture our spirit, our hearts, and our minds for a long time to come.

Thus began the Navajo Cultural Immersion Project for one of the students and one of the faculty from Arizona State University. The twenty graduate students and one faculty member from the school of social work who voluntarily participated in the project were staying with eleven Navajo families spread across the wide-ranging Navajo Nation in northeastern Arizona and northwestern New Mexico. The project was conceived and arranged by Professor Richard DeGraw with the help of Rudy Rodriguez and Rebecca Sherman, both graduate students at the school. Rebecca, a Navajo woman, assisted in making the appropriate contacts with the Navajo Nation. Two other Navajo students, Joe Shirley and Gloria James, assisted in developing and conducting a two-day pre-project seminar to acquaint students with Navajo customs and culture. All the students participating in the project were enrolled in a graduate course entitled "The Ecological Context of Social Work Practice." The course was designed to introduce students to the systemic relationships among people's culture, well-being and their physical surroundings.

In order to insure that the families with whom students were staying did not suffer any financial hardship (families ranged from poor to upper middle class), each family was paid twenty-five dollars for the students' lodging and food.

The project was conceived as an attempt to assist students in realizing the intense relationship which exists between people and their environments; to show through an experiential learning process that the several environments in which we all exist cannot be examined individually; and to assist students in discovering that the interacting social, psychological, cultural, and physical environments comprise the total milieu within which individuals, families, groups, and communities function. In this sense, prospective community workers concern themselves with the mutuality of people-environment relations, and the processes of interphasing and adaptation among people and their environmental systems. Throughout the course, of which the project was a part, the point had been made that certain environments have been found to threaten the healthy adaptation of individual residents, such as the ghetto dweller, the reservation Indian, the mental patient or the aged person. The focus of helping professions then

should be to increase personal strength and community adaptation. As an ecological model, community practice may be conceived as a holistic approach which is concerned with the reciprocity between the person, the family, the community, and their immediate environments, and with increased control of a person's milieu.

In order to use appropriately such a framework in education, a method had to be devised to present a model to students and to allow them to develop skills in applying the model in a variety of ethnic settings. As Robert E. Park stated:

You have been told to go grubbing in the library, thereby accumulating a mass of notes and a liberal coating of grime. You have been told to choose problems wherever you can find musty stacks of routine records based on trivial schedules prepared by tired bureaucrats and filled out by reluctant applicants for aid or fussy do-gooders or indifferent clerks. This is called "getting your hands dirty in real research." Those who thus counsel you are wise and honorable; the reasons they offer are of great value. But one thing more is needful; first-hand observation. Go and sit in the lounges of the luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of the flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and on the slum shakedown; sit in Orchestra Hall and in the Starr and Garter Burlesk. In short, gentlemen, go get the seat of your pants dirty in real research. (Lofland, 1971:23)

Professional education has too often attempted to teach primarily through didactic instruction and selected review of the literature. Since "the role of community development education is the preparation of qualified professionals . . . experts in community problem-solving who work *with* communities, not *for* them, in such a way as to stimulate self-reliance and self-sufficiency, not dependency" (Thomas, 1970:43), the project was designed so that students could be truly educated in a cultural milieu. An approach was taken to allow each student to experience personally a sense of the environment in which a culture exists.

## EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

Following Dewey's idea of "learning-by-doing," the project's director believed that the kind of classroom education provided by most educational systems today falls behind reality and presents conceptions of ethnic minority cultures comparable to ancestral notions of static, immobile societies. To create a new and flexible understanding, it is necessary to perceive the modern individual "as a single member of the human race with infinite variations . . ." (Taylor, 1969:3). The focus of education must then be turned toward personal realization of the cultural and social conditions of our own society. The project was designed to show that individual cultural immersion can be a powerful and lasting instrument of education.

As an attempt to integrate a form of experiential learning into a model

for professional practice, the Navajo Cultural Immersion Project made an effort to assimilate social work students into the Navajo lifestyle through temporary membership in an Indian family. By increasing understanding and knowledge about interrelationships between societal values and environmental factors, the project's director hoped to develop a beginning understanding among students of the need for policy alternatives designed to improve the environment of certain cultural groups in Arizona.

The Navajo Cultural Immersion Project was an attempt to direct the energies of the students and faculty, to free the imagination of the participants for acceptance of a wide range of cultural identities, to participate briefly in the family process whereby elders pass on their wisdom, and to understand why the formation of social policies must be seen in relation to environmental and cultural factors. The project's director believed that a statement by Erving Goffman properly summarized the need for a project such as the Immersion.

It . . . is my belief that any group of persons—prisoners, primitives, pilots, or patients—develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable, and normal once you get close to it, and that a good way to learn about any of these worlds is to submit oneself in the company of the members to the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject. (Lofland, 1971:24)

The project was seen as a novel and innovative approach to learning at the school of social work. There was a good deal of resistance from some faculty and some resentment from minority students. The faculty balked at making special arrangements with students in order to allow them the five days necessary to participate in the project. Some faculty openly referred to the project as a week's vacation and urged students not to take part. For a brief period, some minority students threatened to boycott the class or to attempt to halt the project, that the project was just another type of "minority observation" which viewed the Navajo Nation as a large laboratory in which Anglo society could devise tests and perform experiments. Each objection was answered in the same manner—"We are trading our labor for the opportunity to be there. We are not observers, we are participants. We will not watch the people herd sheep—we will assist the people in herding sheep. We will not listen to their complaints about the need for a new outhouse, we will assist in digging the needed hole and move the outhouse ourselves. We will help shear the sheep, deliver the lambs, repair the fences. We will work, sleep, and eat as temporary members and not as guests. The faculty and the students will live and work with Navajo people. There will be no observation corps. Each person will be left on his or her own to learn in whatever way possible."

In defending and designing the project, the philosophical approach was Marxian, defining people in terms of labor and not in terms of reason. The

participants decided to allow their actions to develop their thoughts rather than the general academic approach where thought comes before or instead of action. Just as the physician may "study medicine" in medical school and then be forced to study many other things in practice such as patients and how to succeed, so would the student be forced to deal with the Navajo people and everyday problems.

### Student Reactions

The Immersion Project began with the administering of a pre-test dealing with Navajo culture. The test was distributed separately to those students who would be involved voluntarily in the project itself, and to those students who would be participating solely in classroom instruction. After the pre-test and prior to the actual immersion experience, a two-day classroom orientation was conducted by Indian social work students from the Navajo reservation, utilizing the pre-test as a basis for their presentations. All students to whom the pre-test had been issued attended this orientation. Immediately following the actual immersion experience, a post-test comprised of identical questions was administered to the same groups of students.

Comparative analysis of the test results revealed that those students who participated in the project and who had had the immersion experience demonstrated a more distinctive and more comprehensive understanding of those questions specifically related to Navajo culture than those students who had not participated. Feedback from the participants also indicated a consistent, new awareness of their own cultural identities—perhaps because they had discovered a point from which to relate the reality of their own perspectives within the diversity of cultural expectations. As one student commented, "As a result of my experiences on the reservation, I gained a new perspective of my own culture. . . . I frequently became aware of the presence of my Anglo value judgements." (Williamson, 1978:1) Other students who dug new latrines, learned to utilize wild herbs, portaged water for personal use over one mile each day, expressed their feelings in another way.

I have never understood how much the historical and cultural heritage can be a part of where a person might be coming from or how it can affect life. . . . I am aware that an entire culture is not in one person nor at one particular time and place, however, living with one person such as I did made some of the cultural traditions easier to see, and to feel, and to hopefully understand. There is no way possible to observe a different culture to get a sense of it; it must be lived and experienced. Living on the reservation put me in the time and place and situation of one American Indian woman. I experienced the work and frustration that she must endure; tending the sheep; watching the birth of lambs and then their destruction by wild animals; working the wool; and using precious little water because it is scarce. (Ganster, 1978:1)

For four days and nights, Carol (another student) and I ate, worked, slept, talked and laughed with Jessie, a Navajo woman in her mid-fifties. . . . Some people had fears about us acting as critical observers, but those fears turned out to be groundless. I lived and worked with Jessie and felt like her friend and part of the family. I received a lot, but I also felt good in terms of what I was able to give her in return. It was a valuable experience that not only allowed me to learn about a different culture, but in the process I inadvertently learned about some of the unique features of my own culture as well. (Koppy, 1978:8)

The injection of new knowledge and ideas from other cultures into our own gives heightened energy to the participants from both cultures. We are given something to assimilate, something to compare, and something to judge, and the Navajo Cultural Immersion Project supplied the students with a broadened framework from which to create a new beginning for social change.

It was paramount that, as students and members of a different culture, we participate in the daily family activities. This alleviated pressure . . . concerning what our role was. . . . What were apparent acts of manual labor became a subliminal indoctrination into the Lidian culture. Thoughts such as "living in harmony with nature," and "finding fulfillment working the land" made real sense. (Latona, 1978:1)

## INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

Other experiments in intercultural education evidence similar effects. A field study program at Justin Morrill College, Michigan State University, has developed a full term of cross-cultural learning experiences in which the students observe and develop various skills by placing themselves in real work circumstances of their own choosing where they must use their ability and initiative to accomplish objectives established by themselves. These skills are enhanced by requiring the students to be conscious of occasions during which the skills are brought into play and by offering the students the opportunities to be exposed to students and non-students who have had similar experiences. In this type of experiential forum, students have found that they can reflect on their own decisions in a more structured way. Such reflection and related skill development have been described by the involved students and faculty as exciting and lasting educational experiences.

Experiential education has also involved students and studies on a world-wide cultural scope. World Campus Afloat (WCA) has been in operation for nearly ten years as the ship-based extension of the Chapman College Division of International Studies. The program offers students an introduction to various cultures throughout the world via an ocean voyage. Classes are conducted regularly while the ship is at sea, and courses are

directly related to the field experiences of students during their in-port stays. WCA describes itself as a "seeing, touching, doing, talking, living and sharing" of cultural perspectives from around the world. A visiting professor with the program once commented, "Of all the adventures, the most significant are the contacts. To live with and share food and conversation with people from different cultures in a first hand way makes geography a joy, politics a fascination, and anthropology a lust . . ." (Shapiro, 1975:22). The stimulation of such a positive attitude toward learning cultural differences suggests a high correlation between the amount of learning taking place and the amount of learning by doing which programs of this type allow.

Traditional social work methodology based on a limited normative model of society does not begin to effectively serve the needs of many minority groups. Social work education fosters this inadequacy of service. The teaching of theory or methodology in the context of any model such as that of white, middle-class norms, will not produce the knowledge and understanding leading to the variety and flexibility of practices needed to serve the multiplicity of needs of a heterogeneous society. . . . There is a deficit in the knowledge of all students regarding minority group experiences. Minority students themselves often cannot put their own experiences in proper perspective when compared with other minority group experiences, or in the dominant society. Structural barriers based on race and socio-economic status have segregated minority groups in all phases of life. Until recently, there has not been a high priority to learn of their experiences and the resulting group development from these experiences. Without this knowledge, practice and policy cannot be adopted to meet their need. (Norton, 1972:3)

It is not difficult to understand the positive aspects of active learning in ethnic content for students involved with an ecological model for professional practice.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Navajo Cultural Immersion Project was an attempt by the Arizona State University School of Social Work to provide a unique and self-directed learning experience in a minority setting. Students and faculty participated equally in the project. As evidenced by earlier quotations, students received personal and emotional fulfillment from the project. In summarizing the project's contribution to formalized professional education, five possible conclusions are suggested.

First, practical application of theoretical knowledge is a valuable contribution to individual learning. Students (and faculty) develop an ability to place objects and events in a new context within their own culture as well as the culture of others.

Second, active personal commitment, such as that developed through an

immersion experience, may provide motivation for environmental alteration and, hopefully induce recognition of the need for development of new strategies for social policy change. This awareness of the need for new strategies can reinforce a strong commitment and enhance the student's self-assurance, which is essential for students who, in the future, may be analyzing and proposing environmental determinants of human behavior.

Third, the development of an understanding of the interrelationship between the ecology of the community and its social policies is necessary to produce graduates who will respect and not further destroy cultural variations. Experience may provide the student with an insight into understanding why a special policy exists or is absent from the community as the student comes to realize how the society in which he or she is "immersed" uniquely expresses its values and choices.

Fourth, given that "community development emphasizes 'process' (as opposed to 'task' or 'content') goals" and since "process goals refer to the enhancement and strengthening of the civic competence of participants and are 'oriented to system maintenance and capacity'" (Daley and Winter, 1978:65), then immersion for a brief period of time may be the most time-economical model for the development of a general understanding of how a system facilitates or hinders individuals in personal and family maintenance within the community.

Finally, experiential learning of cultural minorities provides the student with the challenge to be conscious of and take responsibility for the reality of his or her own political and cultural awareness. This active, self-determining role is most productive outside of the traditional classroom setting. The educational success of immersion depends on the student's sensitivity to real and meaningful relationships, which provide another source of awareness, enabling the individual to integrate, interpret, and utilize the ecological model for professional practice. In this the central professional value of the model is realized: the right of all persons to know their potential for growth and self awareness.

Students and faculty returned from the Immersion Project with a heightened awareness of the need for cross-cultural understanding. They shared their experiences with other faculty and students. They seemingly worked more closely together during the rest of the semester and at least eight of the twenty participating students specifically stated that the project was a positive influence in their decision to choose social work positions within minority settings or with minority individuals. At least five more of the students stated verbally and in writing that the project had profoundly influenced their personal philosophy and had strengthened their commitment to professional values.

It has been said that "Originality need not and often does not consist in discovering new things, but in enabling us to notice things that were there all the time, but that we overlooked because our attention was focused

elsewhere" (Canovan, 1974:6). The Navajo Cultural Immersion Project was an original learning experience. It allowed students and faculty alike to learn things about culture, about community and about themselves which were there all the time, but which were continually overlooked. It provided the participants with the opportunity to look around and to look inside and to teach themselves at an individualized pace. The project was a time for blisters and sunburn, sign language and laughter, reflection and learning, and above all, a time for living, comfortably and at ease, with real people in a setting which is too often ignored.