Diné Bina'nitin Dóó O'hoo'aah/Education For Us, By Us: A Collective Journey in Diné Education Liberation

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DINÉ BINA’NITIN DÓÓ O’HOO’AAH/
EDUCATION FOR US, BY US:
A COLLECTIVE JOURNEY IN
DINÉ EDUCATION LIBERATION

BY

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B.A. ENVIRONMENTAL ANTHROPOLOGY
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THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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Dedication

To the colonized and to the colonizer. May we be free from these chains that keep us both from being what we are. Ayóó aníinishní.
Acknowledgements

I’d like to first thank all my ancestors for their unbelievable persistence and love in the face of atrocity. I feel you as I write and strive to be even half the ancestor you were for future generations.

*Ahéhee’ ląq* to the Diné people who taught me the meaning of *k’é*—kinship and community. Thank you, each of you, for the tireless work and countless hours of driving that you put into co-creating this school with me. I owe this work and any privileges that may come from it to you all. May I leverage the fruits of this labor towards the health of future generations and may I honor you well with these words.

Many thanks to Dr. Gregory Cajete for your constant inspiration, support, illumination and brilliance throughout this project. May we further your work far into the future in the name of beautiful Indigenous children yet to come, and for all the children of the world.

*Ahéhee’ shiyaazh* Dr. Vincent Werito for your thoughtful questions and challenges that helped me grow as a Diné intellectual.

Many thanks to Dr. Christine Sims, Dr. Glenabah Martinez, Dr. Elisabeth Valenzuela and Dr. Ricky Allen for deepening my understanding of education solutions to injustice.
Abstract

This study is an educational memoir of my experience working for education liberation with hundreds of Diné (Navajo) people written in the style of autoethnography. We are indigenous to what is now known as the southwestern United States and organize in the wake of attempted genocide and destructive assimilation policies. Our collective set out to answer the following question: If we could teach and learn anything we wanted, in any way we wanted, what would we do? Based on our ancestral Nitsáhakees-Nahat’á-líná-Sii Hasin strategic framework, this Diné collective organized a summer school that reflected their hearts’ true pedagogical desires. What resulted was a month-long community-sufficiency curriculum taught by traditional elders and local experts in unconventional “classrooms” distributed throughout our ancestral homeland. This study follows my journey as a co-organizer and student of the summer school and all the epiphanies that ensued. It was found that, when given the freedom to choose, my people tend towards a pedagogical style that is: intergenerational, geographically decentralized, experiential, ceremonial, ecological, traditional, communal, place-based, kinship-based, consensual, synergistic, healing, gendered, skills/craft-based, practical, outdoor, popular, methodical, systematic, self-led, self-sustaining, engaging, mobile, fun and easier to implement due to shared leadership and responsibility. This study encourages Indigenous Peoples to: 1) have faith in ourselves, each other and our ancestral curricula, 2) honor our traditional planning processes as effective organizing tools, 3) think outside the colonial education box, 4) consider the effects our teaching practices have on the natural world, and 5) practice and hone the profound art of sharing power.
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Introduction: Our Grandmother’s Hearth

It’s a cold winter morning. A gang of Diné (Navajo) youth and I are sitting in our elder’s humble kitchen in the high deserts of our ancestors. It’s the year 2015 and we are in what most people call Arizona, but we call it Diné Bikeyah, The People’s Land.

Mr. Blackgoat is translating in real time the words of our elderly matriarch who is speaking to us in our mother tongue. She’s sitting at her kitchen table wearing a skirt and a floral headscarf wrapped around and tied at the chin.

The bulk of us cannot understand what she’s saying. We are the living, breathing products of colonization and I am painfully aware of this. I graduated from the prestigious Stanford University with honors and distinction just three years prior but all the libraries and all professors and all resources at Stanford’s disposal could not prepare me to understand her today. With all my might, I wish I could understand the beautiful words that flicker from her tongue, drifting through velar aspirations, truncated by glottal stops and cushioned by the ancient guttural vibrations of our foremothers. For now, Mr. Blackgoat’s translation will have to do.

We ask her to pass some teachings to us. Mr. Blackgoat expresses our request to her in Diné Bizaad. She remains quiet for a time, looking at a high corner of the kitchen as if she is lost in another place and time. Finally, she begins to speak. The gang sits quietly, listening to every sound she makes. We seem to understand of the preciousness of her thoughts and her words, and the endangered state of this language we cannot comprehend. I strive to understand little phrases here and there but by and large I have no idea what she is saying.
Mr. Blackgoat relays her message to us and her thoughts become clear: “I prefer to teach you by taking you outside, through doing. I can teach you by taking you out to take care of the sheep. The fire is one of our greatest teachers. Learn what you can from the sacred fire.”

A new world of education is broken open. Coming from a long line of Diné people educated in Western institutions, I had come to believe that learning occurred in fluorescent-lit rooms. I was conditioned to think that concepts were transmitted the medium of English on dry erase boards and that learning was primarily an intellectual pursuit.

This grandmother was insinuating to me that she didn’t want to sit there and teach us through words. She preferred to learn through her whole body, through interaction with nature, through her ceremonies involving prayer and fire, through her own daily life. This experience showed me just how much I didn’t know about Diné pedagogy (or any pedagogy besides Western pedagogy, for that matter). I craved to experience the type of education she recommended.

This experience sparked a question deep within me: What did my people’s education look like before the Westerners came? Is this endangered way of teaching and learning important? Or can we afford to let it die along with our aging elders?

I began to question everything I knew about teaching and learning. I started to challenge the normalcy of the content that was taught to me in schools—the Shakespeare, the Calculus, the moral-less, spiritless biology, the introduction/body/conclusion style of digesting and conveying information. I even
questioned the way in which people taught me this content. I saw how these indoor, bookwork, English-based methods catered to my intellect, while sending my body, my emotions and my spirit—yes my spirit—into a state of atrophy. I began to wonder why these public and private schools taught me what they taught me and why they taught it the way they did.

To most people, this grandma was poor, powerless, uneducated and unimportant, living an isolated, invisible life somewhere out in the desert. To this group of Diné youth, however, she is a treasure chest of wisdom, a living key to the vast archives of everything we’ve lost. My Stanford degree granted me access to a whole buffet of prestigious graduate programs throughout the world, but something inside me wanted to spend less time at Harvard and more time at grandma’s house. I was beginning to see that the social capital placed on Western education was racially and politically biased, overshadowing the spiritual and social capital nestled in these rural, outdoor classrooms. It was around this time that my land, my people and my longing to belong to something real seeded within me a quest for an education I had never known. I began to hunger for a form of knowledge that lived completely outside the colonial box in which I was reared. It was around this time that I acquired an insatiable appetite for *Diné Bina’nitin Dóó O’hoo’aah, or The People’s Teaching and Learning*. This yearning would send me headlong into the vast ocean of our traditional pedagogy.

The following is an educational memoir of my experience working for Diné education liberation. Thank you for listening to the story of how I came to work with over 300 Diné community members to dream, plan, implement and enjoy our very own
school. Thank you for peering into a world of living and learning that grows from the seeds of The People’s dreams and from the soil of The People’s hearts. May it help us to revalue our own epistemologies and walk free from these intellectual fetters that the colonial state has placed on us for far too long. May it give all Indigenous peoples greater courage to be just exactly who we are.

**Study Design**

I have chosen to present my findings in the style of story and memoir to honor the storytelling tradition of my people. In the winter time, when the wood-stove crackles and the stars glisten like cold eyes in the sky, my people speak tales to the children. I present my research findings in the form of story that I may speak to the heart of the Indigenous reader.

As I write these words, the audience in my mind is not the publisher of Anthropology & Education Quarterly. It is not the dean of my university. It is not even my thesis committee. As I write these words, the audience in my mind is the Indigenous community who only has handful of native speakers left alive. I think of all the native children sitting in schools that do not support their ethnicity, but both wittingly and unwittingly devalue it and erase it. I think of tribal policy makers struggling to reconcile state standards with the rapid loss of our ancient knowledge bases. I think of native educators who are told by their elders to preserve the ceremonies on one hand and are told by the state to do better on standardized tests on the other hand. I think of the native students in college and native graduates who stand at a fork in the road, wondering how they might work towards a better future for their little brothers and
sisters.

There are serious cultural, linguistic, ecological and social crises on our hands as Indigenous Peoples and we don’t have any more time to be what we are not. We need to feel comfortable being who and what we are and research in ways that suit our demands. As such, I feel a great need to write, speak and research for and through my people’s traditions. I perceive that I need to craft this thesis such that it embodies the credence I hold for this grandmother. I see that my study will earn its feather not based on a grade given to it by the same institutions that disenfranchise my people’s knowledge, but by its ability to inspire, uplift, inform, support, speak to, and be spoken to by the Indigenous voices that have been marginalized from the education conversation for too many centuries.

Having said this, I do warmly invite people of all nations and professional backgrounds to enjoy this piece of work. I hope everyone, native and non-native alike, can enter into dialogue with the ideas presented here in hopes that they help us hone and expand our practice. I hope my story can offer insight to the whole world about the pedagogical resilience of Indigenous Peoples and ways in which this teaching style can improve any and every community. May this story inform the personal and professional journey of every reader, regardless of race, class, religion or cultural orientation.

Another label for this style of research presentation is auto-ethnography. As Ellis, Adams & Bochner (2011) have said, we can illuminate larger cultural realities by describing and analyzing our personal realities. In particular, I would like to employ reflexive auto-ethnography. This method pays special attention to how the researcher is
changed by the field experience, triangulated by the identity, values and political orientation they bring to the field (Anderson, 2006). Thus, the reflexive style invests its analytical energy towards the inner transformations and epiphanies experienced by the researcher during the research process, in light of their aspirations as a person and as a researcher.

This method was appropriate for the present study (where the goal is to understand what Diné people teach and how they teach it in a liberated context) for the following reasons:

- As a student of the curriculum, I am in a perfect position to intellectually and experientially understand Diné pedagogy. This will grant me intimate insight into what is taught and how it is taught, from a unique student-perspective.

- Auto-ethnography’s explicit goal of creating “accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better” matches my true intentions as a community-minded, morally-charged researcher (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 284).

- Auto-ethnography’s autobiographical dimension invites creativity and richness in writing, which supports the artistic tendency of Indigenous research (Wilson, 2008).

- Given the time restrictions for data collection, data analysis and IRB approval, it is wise to study myself only—a manageable data source that can be reported easily.
We learn through story. We teach through story. By telling my story I help others comprehend their own. By listening to other people’s story, I come to understand mine more fully.

**A History of Intellectual Slavery**

Before I begin my story, it must be placed in its proper historical context. The events that gave rise to the current pedagogical situation of Diné people are so significant that it would be imprudent to omit them from the discussion.

In the late 19th century, the basic right of every cultural group to transfer knowledge to the next generation was revoked from Diné communities. In 1864, roughly 9,000 Diné women, children, elders and men were marched at gunpoint by the United States Government from Fort Defiance, Arizona to Bosque Redondo, New Mexico. They were brought to a concentration camp known as Fort Sumner, where they were physically abused, starved, raped and/or killed. Only about 2,000 of these 9,000 prisoners survived. The survivors were released after four years of captivity in accordance with a “treaty of peace” in 1868 (Iverson, 2002).

One major condition of their release was compulsory education for all Diné children in American designed and operated schools. Article VI of the treaty reads:

In order to insure the civilization of the Indians entering into this treaty, the necessity of education is admitted, especially of such of them as may be settled on said agricultural parts of this reservation, and they therefore pledge themselves to compel their children, male and female, between the ages of six and sixteen years, to attend school; and it is hereby made the duty of the agent for said Indians to see that this stipulation is strictly complied with; and the United States agrees that, for every thirty children between said ages who can be induced or compelled to attend
school, a house shall be provided, and a teacher competent to teach the elementary branches of an English education shall be furnished, who will reside among said Indians, and faithfully discharge his or her duties as a teacher (reta 1998).

Self-determination might be defined as the ability to shape the direction, form and magnitude of one’s own life. Slavery might be defined as the inability to act as one wishes due to imposed restrictions by another person or group. In this view, a life without self-determination is a kind of slavery, where one’s ability to live as one wishes is hindered and compromised.

*Choice in education* is a significant dimension of self-determination. Indeed, the nature of a community’s education system will decide the direction the next generation takes and the overall legacy of that culture!

To this day, Diné people are working to recover from this bleak educational slavery. This “treaty of peace” and its effects spawned at least three major wounds for Diné people that persist in contemporary times:

1. A loss of control of how our children are reared, and
2. We have internalized the lie that we are incapable of educating our own children, and
3. We have internalized the lie that Diné culture and epistemology is “uncivilized,” inferior and/or dispensable.

As a testament to the pedagogical resilience of Diné people, however, the 1960s saw a major breakaway from this legacy of subordination. The Rough Rock Demonstration School was founded in 1966 by Allan Yazzie after the Diné community demanded control over the nature of its children’s education. It was the first
Indigenous-controlled Bureau of Indian Affairs school and has long been hailed as the hallmark experiment in Indigenous education self-determination. The school surprised federal administrators with its incredible success and continues to administer it’s balanced traditional- and Western-focused curricula to this day (Johnson 1968).

Former director Robert A. Roessel described the school as, “a unique adventure in community development and local control in Indian education...In essence, this school is showing faith in Indian people and is directed to giving education back to the Indians” (Johnson, 1968, pp. 7-8).

This wasn’t the only instance of Diné education liberation. In 1968, Navajo Community College (now called Diné College) became the first tribal college created by Indigenous People for Indigenous People. The two-year college was founded in accordance with the Fundamental Laws of the Diné as articulated by elders and traditionalists—another example of Diné resilience and agency in education self-determination.

While there have been great advances, there is still much work to be done. Both of these experiments are federally funded and thereby influenced by and beholden to the agenda of the state. Furthermore, even with these schools, the majority of Diné students are still learning Western content through the English language and many schools do not have Diné leadership. It should also be noted that 50 years later, the wave of education self-determination birthed in the 1960s may not meet the current needs and aspirations as defined by Diné people today. Indeed, practicing community curriculum development today could help us gain a more accurate survey of the
community’s present needs and dreams, as well as refine the achievements made by our predecessors. In this way, we can continue to respond to a difficult history in a way that honors the ample strengths and resources of our people.

I situate myself in history as a product of these assimilation policies. Both of my Diné grandparents attended the parochial schools that were created in response to the “treaty of peace.” Both were heavily Christianized and aspired to be as Western as possible. My grandfather was the first Diné man to complete graduate studies in education administration at Stanford University. He would later become president of Navajo Community College from 1977-1979. He wanted the college to be a place of Westernization to help students, “beat the White man at his own game.” He ultimately left his position because the rest of the administrators and faculty wanted a more traditionalist approach. Both of my grandparents, for reasons that make sense when I take into account their childhood experiences, tried to evade their cultural roots by dressing, talking and behaving as “American” as possible. My mother broke away from this tradition and worked to raise me in a manner that affirmed the value of my cultural roots. Even still, enough damage was done to the cultural literacy of our family that I can not speak my language and have only basic understanding of my people’s philosophies.

I will now move into my personal adventure in Diné education liberation based on this personal and cultural historical background.

**My Journey: From Paternalism to Comradery**

It was a seemingly normal day in Dr. Gregory Cajete’s class on “Teaching the
Native American Child.” I was enjoying my graduate studies at the University of New Mexico and noting how different it felt to have Indigenous professors. For the first time in my life, I was enjoying learning and feeling supported in ways I didn’t know you could be supported as a native student.

Dr. Cajete instructed us to create a hypothetical curriculum based on the Zais model. I crafted a hogan construction curriculum where we would “build community by building hoghans.” The hogan is my people’s traditional ceremonial and dwelling house. The structure itself speaks volumes about our ancestral philosophy and make a space for us to “be Diné.” The mere idea of this curriculum was so exciting that I wanted to implement it in real life.

I travelled to my people’s eastern sacred mountain to ceremonially present my idea to Creator and Creation. It was my attempt to embody ceremonial Indigenous research methodologies. Shawn Wilson states in his book Research is Ceremony that, “Any research represents the research paradigm used by the researcher, whether the researcher is conscious of their choice of paradigm or not” (2008, p. 33).

Dr. Gregory Cajete articulates an Indigenous ceremonial research program based on his cultural paradigm as a Santa Clara Pueblo man, an ancient Indigenous community in north-central New Mexico. His research paradigm depicts a spiritual-intellectual process whereby the researcher embarks on a journey towards knowing. Cajete’s research process follows a pattern he calls, “the connected rings of Indigenous visioning” and follows a sequence of asking, seeking, making, having, sharing, celebrating and being (1994, p.71).
The initial stage, *asking*, is described as follows,

Asking is prayer, and is the first ring of the path. Every journey involving one’s whole being begins with asking for illumination. Asking names the quest and sets forth its essential goal...True learning results from deep motivation, the desire to obtain something for which one cares deeply, down to the bones, with one’s whole heart and soul. Such desire sets into motion the process of making ready and preparing the ground (p. 70).

I call this a “research prayer-posal.”

In such fashion, I travelled north to *Sisnaajini*, or Mount Blanca, the eastern sacred mountain of my people, the mountain of new beginnings, the mountain of sacred thinking, to perform my “asking.” I found myself kneeling on the dirt holding a pinch of corn pollen up to the face of this mountain just as summer was ending and fall was rushing in. I spoke my idea of building a *hoghan* with my people to the mountain and asked the *Diyin Diné’e*, Creator and Creation to guide me in that pursuit.

Immediately after I spoke this prayer, I felt a clear and certain message coming from deep within me that *hoghan* idea was not complete. At the time, I couldn’t put my finger on what was wrong with my prayer-posal, but I knew the shortcomings of this idea would reveal themselves in time.

The answer came one day when I phoned a fellow Diné community servant. I explained to him that I wanted to implement a *hoghan* construction lesson for our people. He liked the idea but had some criticisms. He also encouraged me to read up on some articles that explained our traditional processes a little differently than I understood them. He gave me an insight into how much I could gain from asking The People what to do. This brother of mine helped me see that there were so many vessels
of knowledge I had yet to tap into and learn from.

I also realized that if I were to tell The People: “We are going to build a hoghan and you are going to like it,” I wouldn’t be any different from the U.S. Government boarding school system. I would still be deciding the futures of The People as if I knew better than them. They still wouldn’t have a chance to guide their own learning. Thus, *what began as a mission to build a hoghan evolved into a mission to follow the lead of a powerful people.*

I decided that the only thing worth doing was something the community wanted, created and chose on their own. I came to believe that freedom to choose our own path is a fundamentally sacred and vital element of any just and functional society. Especially in this historical context—where The People have been repeatedly beaten to the ground; where The People have had their choice revoked time and time again; where the state has, without exaggeration, raped our bodies, our minds and our spirits over and over without consent—*the simple act of restoring choice is a revolutionary act.*

**Research Question: The Freedom Effect**

My research prayer-posal was being refined. In my journey to understand Diné pedagogy, I went from a parent of my people to a comrade of my people. I wanted to know what our people would do in *liberated* teaching spaces. By that I mean places where we felt no curricular restrictions or hegemonic pressure whatsoever—a place where we were free to teach and learn anything our hearts desired.

I set out to answer this question: If we could teach and learn anything we wanted, in any way we wanted, what would we do? Little did I know this question
would lead me to partner with hundreds of Diné brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, mothers, fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers. Little did I know I would witness them work together to design and implement a jaw-dropping school for, and by us. Through this co-weaving of curriculum, we also wove kinship, friendship and alliances that will strengthen us for the rest of our lives. What unfolded from this searching was more than I could have ever imagined.

**Guiding Texts**

**Paolo Freire: Restoring Faith in The People**

Freire is a major inspiration to me, as he is for many. Although I have some healthy criticisms of his ideas, there are so many ways in which his writings fuel and inform the present study. I have been deeply impacted by his emphasis on love, faith and humility—Love for The People; Faith in The People; and Humility before The People.

*Shidiné’e.*

I feel a need to share this entire excerpt from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1983) which haunts my bone's marrow and lives in my heart each day as I work as an Indigenous educator:

...dialogue cannot exist without humility. The naming of the world, through which people constantly re-create that world, cannot be an act of arrogance. Dialogue, as the encounter of those addressed to the common task of learning and acting, is broken if the parties (or one of them) lack humility. How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own? How can I dialogue if I regard myself as a case apart from others—mere "its" in whom I cannot recognize other "I"s? How can I dialogue if I consider myself a member of the in-group of "pure" men, the owners of truth and knowledge, for
whom all non-members are "these people" or "the great unwashed"? How can I dialogue if I start from the premise that naming the world is the task of an elite and that the presence of The People in history is a sign of deterioration, thus to be avoided? How can I dialogue if I am closed to—and even offended by—the contribution of others? How can I dialogue if I am afraid of being displaced, the mere possibility causing me torment and weakness? Self-sufficiency is incompatible with dialogue. Men and women who lack humility (or have lost it) cannot come to the people, cannot be their partners in naming the world. Someone who cannot acknowledge himself to be as mortal as everyone else still has a long way to go before he can reach the point of encounter. At the point of encounter there are neither utter ignoramuses nor perfect sages; there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know (p. 78-79).

These words are still music to my eyes. In reading them I discovered how much distrust I have of others to “do things right.” I started to recognize the elitism that was inculcated in me by my “prestigious” university. The self-righteousness and arrogance I carried, even towards my own people, seeded into me by the colonial system, transformed from an unconscious habit, to a blaring flaw that was to be monitored and eliminated as much as possible.

If I was to truly co-create liberated spaces in which The People could do what they wanted, I needed to learn how to be humble and honor the voices of others. I had to adopt this spirit of “coming to The People,” if I was ever to be a true partner to my community. It seems even more crucial in the Diné context, given the long history of subjugation, humiliation and disempowerment of The People’s ancestral knowledge.

For as Freire has said, and as our people have experienced in the most painful of
ways, “without this faith in people, dialogue is a farce which ultimately degenerates into paternalistic manipulation” (1983, p. 79). Thus, this writing is a challenge to native and non-native educators alike to strip ourselves of the doubt we have for native people, a doubt that was deliberately seeded within us through the process of Manifest Destiny. As we will see in the coming story, the entire framework of our school was devised by a (materially) poor single mother, our architecture class was led by a 15-year-old, and life changing lessons were imparted literally in our backyards. The world doubts these people and these places, but the moment I placed my faith in them I was blown away by their creative and intellectual capacity. We as a people hold immense potential to change our world and the world around us. We may lack the financial and academic background of other peoples on this land, but we hold invaluable resources in our hearts, in our languages, in our clans, in our love, in our dreams. All of this treasure is unlocked the moment we have faith in each other and faith in ourselves once again.

**Glenabah Martinez: Identifying and Resisting the Normalization of Western Pedagogy**

Another very eye-opening piece of writing and research is Martinez’s (Diné/Tiwa Nations) discussion of the “politics of what counts as knowledge” (2010). She studied ways in which a Native American Studies class was devalued by an urban high school and by many Native American students themselves, as they internalized colonial ideas about what counts as “real education.”

She drew heavily from her mentor’s ideas (Michael Apple of the University of Wisconsin) on what constitutes “official knowledge” and how people of a dominating culture select the “standard” curriculum from a vast ocean of possibilities. They speak
on the topic of *selective tradition* as, “someone’s selection, someone’s vision of legitimate knowledge and culture, that in the process of enfranchising one group’s cultural capital disenfranchises another’s” (Apple, 2000, p. 46).

Martinez saw how many native high school students had bought into these ideas of what represents “real knowledge” and what represents “lower priority knowledge.” She interrogates why one student referred to math as a “normal” class and Native American Studies as an “elective” class, stating that the normalization of certain subject areas as “unquestioned truth” is actually a result of cultural hegemony.

She furthers this idea in the following interpretation of a young woman who preferred to take “more important” classes before taking Native American Studies:

> Although the students expressed interest in taking Native American Studies at some point in their high school career, they viewed it as a type of curse that could wait...that were deemed “easier” and “less essential” in a student’s preparation for graduation....In other words, core courses enjoyed the privilege of being “essential” in the intellectual development of a student...How did these students learn to draw these distinctions of what counts as knowledge?...How was it possible that some of these students who talked about Indigenous cultural knowledge as being at the core of an education Native person almost simultaneously construct the school’s Native American Studies classes as frivolous? (2010, p. 64).

Upon reading this, I could not help but see myself in this young woman. In two of the four high schools I attended, Native Studies classes were offered. Yet, the thought of taking them never even occurred to me. I was preoccupied with churning through the more “essential” classes that would get me into college, even though I would have
resonated with Native Studies classes much more than English, Trigonometry, Chemistry, etc.

I carried these notions of “real knowledge” and “lesser knowledge” with me all the way through college and afterward. Stanford offered a Native American Studies major and I never gave it a moment of consideration. European-American mentors encouraged me to take a “real major” like biology or engineering.

After I graduated I thought that my ticket to power was Harvard Business School. I prepared to enter this college so I could transform capitalistic structures from the “inside out.” Never once did I imagine that my “ticket” to transforming the world might live in my people’s language and my people’s ideologies, in which I was a mere elementary student. Never once did I acknowledge that by choosing these “more important” tracks of study over my ancestral systems, I was choosing to be indoctrinated by the very same institutions that eat away at my homeland, disregard the earth’s natural cycles, generate global wealth disparities and reproduce cultures of greed, misogyny and racism. Never once did I acknowledge that maybe, just maybe, my people’s knowledge was not unimportant, but incredibly valuable for humanity’s collective return to sustainable societies centered around k’é (kinship), ajoobah’ (humility/generosity), hozhó (inner/outer balance) and iińá (birth/life).

Martinez’s explanation of this rare Native American Studies curriculum, which struggled to survive in a high school that forced them to teach it in the storage room, showed me how the boarding school legacy is far from over; It has just taken on a new face. It is so entrenched we can hardly understand our own complacency with our own
assimilation. It showed me how important it was to uplift my people’s knowledge and gave me greater impetus to hand the reigns of our summer school to the elders, to the community leaders and to the children who were raised in traditional homes. It gave me a deeper love and a deeper respect for who I am and showed me who I want to become. Thus, our summer school did not subscribe to the colonial “selective tradition,” but grew from the roots our own Indigenous hearts, whatever that meant to us.

**Gerald Alfred Taiaiake: Breaking Free from Dependency**

Another article that deeply inspires the present study is Taiaiake’s (Kanien’kehá:ka or Mohawk Nation) discussion of “Colonialism and State Dependency” (2009). He begins by saying: “As is typical in all colonial societies, First Nations today are characterized as entrenched dependencies, in physical, psychological and financial terms, on the very people and institutions that have caused the near erasure of our existence and have come to dominate us” (p. 42).

I could not help but agree with his sentiment. We often depend on subpar Indian Health Service programs for our medicine and healthcare, while our traditional medicinal practices go into atrophy. Many of our tribal members derive their livelihood from Bureau of Indian Affairs positions, which ultimately serve the federal agenda. We are dependent on low-quality, Western food sources—the only thing we can afford—that wreak havoc on our Indigenous bodies. Much like a woman in a domestic violence situation, we have become dependent on an entity that is damaging to us. Although she does indeed have the power and ability to break free from the situation, it is all she knows, making it psychologically daunting to even try to change her situation.
Perhaps the most insidious dependency, though, is our intellectual reliance on colonial education institutions. It is safe to say that the majority of native students today think in English. This language is a reflection of exactly the same paradigm of conquest that assaulted and continues to assault our communities. Our courses of study occur through the intellectual reductionist paradigm which denies the spirit of the earth and turns her into a lifeless cash crop. Our self-worth as individuals is often dependent on how many degrees we have accumulated from the very same institutions that disenfranchised our cultural knowledge and banned our languages from being spoken.

Even as I write these words, I am bound to a form of research presentation prescribed by Western academic standards that stymie my creative and spiritual inclinations.

As Taiaiake writes: “Political and social institutions, such as band councils and government funded service agencies that govern and influence life in First Nations today...conform to the interests of Canadian governments...These institutions are inappropriate foci for either planning or leading the cause of Indigenous survival and regeneration” (p. 44).

Thus, if these colonial institutions are not the place for us to devise our communal revitalization, then where is that place? For me, the answer lied in our traditional institutions. It is for this reason that the initial planning meetings for our school occurred in two contexts: on the land and in the hoghan. We met on the land because it holds the stories of our ancestors that were designed to give us guidance and strength. We met in the hoghan because every log, the orientation of the door to the east, the wood stove and the smoke stack, the earthen floor and the circular positioning
of The People within it, all ground us in the sustainable, spiritual, communal, woman-honoring paradigm of our ancestors, from which we can feel free to be who we are.

Taiaiake’s article also helped me see that we can no longer be financially dependent if we are to have truly liberated spaces. If we derive our school funding from the colonial state or from colonial non-profits, we are often beholden to the agendas of these sources. Even if these entities were in exact alignment with our dreams, this dependency would still deprive us of the honor of being self- and community-sufficient. Furthermore, we would still be dependent on funding sources that are founded on the unstable, unsustainable system of American finance. Thus, and as will be further explained in subsequent sections, we saw a deep value in de-monetizing our school to the extent that it was possible and using our own financial power and crowd-funding techniques to sponsor the school.

**Leanne Simpson: Earth, Content, Process**

In Leanne Simpson’s (Anishinaabekwe Nation) article on “culturally inherent” education, she writes: “Founding Indigenous Environmental Education programs within Indigenous Knowledge systems is one of the most important ways of strengthening our cultures, promoting environmental protection, [realizing] sustainable local economies, and supporting students through healing and decolonizing” (2002, p. 16). She says it is not enough to commit “culturally appropriate” education within colonial contexts, but we must commit to *culturally inherent* education.

She states,

Employing Indigenous ways of teaching and learning, including ceremonies, dreams,
visions and visioning, fasting, storytelling, learning-by-doing, observation, reflecting, and creating, not only allows students to share and learn in a culturally inherent manner, but also reinforces the concept that Indigenous Knowledge is not only content but also process (p. 18).

In other words, we must not only teach Indigenous content, but teach this content through Indigenous ways of knowing. The difference between the two is like learning about sweat lodge ceremony through pictures on a projector, and actually bringing students into real sweat lodge ceremony. Her call to Indigenous educators to not only teach Indigenous concepts, but to teach them in an Indigenous manner was interesting to me.

Applying Martinez’s framework to this, we see how not only the topics we teach our children, but *the way in which we teach*, has been disenfranchised. Thus, if it is not in a fluorescent lit room, using a PowerPoint or dry erase board, in a colonially funded facility, then it “isn’t really school.”

The deeper I reflect on my upbringing, the more I see that some of the most important lessons of my life came from the classroom of Indigenous ceremony, such as sweat lodge, sundance, *hozhójí*, feast days, etc. I saw that in my quest to know Diné pedagogy as The People wanted it, it was important for me to be ready for a pedagogical world unlike any I was accustomed to.

**The Four Steps of Diné Creation**

Just as Dr. Cajete has a process that grows from his Indigenous background, Diné people also have a very well-known, ancient, four-step planning process that guides all
of our creative processes. Edward Garrison of Diné College describes it as follows:

There are four key words, each associated with a multitude of symbolic and interpretive values, which provide a practical framework around which all aspects of college life and function, including curriculum, are developed. These are:

- **Nitsáhákees** – thinking, assessing (associated with the East)
- **Nahat’á** – planning (associated with the South)
- **Iiná** – living, implementation (associated with the West)
- **Sii hasin** – fulfillment, evaluation (associated with the North)

The symbolism and values associated with these four words are exceedingly complex, such that no single graphic or representation is able to capture all of the relevant meanings (2007, p. 65).

I consulted with several Diné about creating our school in accordance with these four steps. In this manner, we were not only culturally appropriate, but culturally inherent, in that we were creating a school based on the four sacred steps of our ancestors. We met four times to enact each of the four steps, beginning on the winter solstice of 2016. We then met on the spring equinox of 2017, then on the summer solstice of 2017 and finally on the fall equinox of 2017.

I had heard about this four-step process over the years, but did not understand its deeper meaning. I never saw it as an especially ground-breaking framework. But, as we will see as the story unfolds, I have come to understand that when put into practice this process is immensely powerful. It seems not to be a human contrivance, but a naturalistic reflection of the creative process itself. When taken to heart, and followed with diligence, incredible things can happen.
**Nitsáhákees: The People’s Dreams**

The first step is *Nitsáhákees*, generally translated as “thinking.” Diné people have a profound respect for the mind and its capacity to shape the world around us. We honor the power and potential of the psyche and we try to cultivate our thoughts as carefully as we cultivate our seeds into life-nourishing foods. Thoughts are sometimes the beginning of creation, just as before any building is built it is first sketched out as an idea.

*Nitsáhákees*—or the sacred, powerful act of thinking—is associated with the eastern sacred mountain, *Sisnaajini*, or Mount Blanca, which sits outside of what is now known as Alamosa, Colorado. *Nitsáhákees* is also associated with *Haayoolkááł*, or the sacred dawn light, the phenomenon of *beginning*. Just as each day begins with the rising sun, so too do creative processes begin with thinking. Similarly, all mountain prayers begin with the invocation of the spirit and essence of this eastern sacred mountain.

With this basic knowledge, I invited many Diné people to gather in my clan grandmother’s *hoghan* in *Tséhootsooi* (Fort Defiance, Arizona) during the winter solstice. I was inviting them to practice *beginning* in a traditional manner, embarking on a journey together.

I invited them through phone calls, emails, house visits and through the creation of a “Facebook event,” an organizing tool through the world wide web. I was not sure if anyone would come. I explained to them that I was curious to know, if they could teach and learn anything, what would it be?

In preparation for the gathering I consulted with elders and contemporaries and
asked them how they thought the gathering should be designed. I was trying to put into practice this idea of community decision making and giving the reigns to The People. At first, it was a foreign an uncomfortable operation for me.

One elder woman told me that it would be best to have sweat lodge ceremony be a part of the process to purify our thoughts. Another young man said he would like to do traditional games as part of the gathering and referred me to people who could help. Another male elder said to be sure to have an opening and a closing ceremony to cushion the days’ proceedings. He said, “A lot of programs don’t include prayers like it’s not important. But prayer is everything.”

Another elder said he would like to give us the teaching of the four mountains during the gathering. I was amazed how excited people were when I asked them how the gathering should go. There were so many intricate and exciting ideas that sprouted forth and I became more and more excited about following the lead of my people.

In my attempts to weave all their ideas together into a coherent plan, I started to see that my role as a weaver was important. Even though the ideas needed to come from the hearts of The People, it seemed clear that there still needed to be an individual, or group of individuals, who were committed to organizing these ideas. Our people are often busy and don’t have time to take on a whole new project. Thus, it is helpful to have a catchment team to ensure the basics are covered and nothing falls through the cracks.

I devised a schedule for the four-day gathering (Diné do everything in fours) based on my consultations (Table 1). I made sure to schedule talking circles each day
where we could talk about the kind of school we might want.

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<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sunrise Ceremony/Run</td>
<td>Sunrise Ceremony/Run</td>
<td>Sunrise Ceremony/Run</td>
<td>Sunrise Ceremony/Run</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breakfast</td>
<td>Breakfast</td>
<td>Breakfast</td>
<td>Breakfast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking Circle</td>
<td>Talking Circle</td>
<td>Talking Circle</td>
<td>Talking Circle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheep Butchering Lesson</td>
<td>Sweat Lodge for Men</td>
<td>Basket Activity</td>
<td>Tsiyiyle Activity and Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinner</td>
<td>Dinner</td>
<td>Dinner</td>
<td>Dinner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter Stories</td>
<td>Dinner</td>
<td>Story of the 6 Monsters</td>
<td>Closing Prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>String Games</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. Schedule for Nitsáhákees phase of summer school creation.*

Thus, we started with the first phase of the Diné framework. For four days around the winter solstice of 2016—the coldest, darkest days of the year—we met in a *hoghan* to discuss our dreams. All the while, I was practicing my listening skills. I knew if I was truly serious about my endeavor to honor The People, I would honor whatever it was The People wanted to teach and learn.

It was a strange sensation; I was caring more about giving people choice than controlling and influencing the outcome. I started to see that, so long as we weren’t hurting anyone, the main goal was not to have one certain curriculum or another. The goal was to give people a chance to decide their own future. My whole life I was raised to think that controlling people’s actions could prevent them from doing something “stupid” that would lead them to suffering. Now I saw that controlling another was an infliction of suffering in and of itself. To not have choice is to be a slave and what greater form of degrading suffering is there than slavery? My people had already been through
it enough. My attempts to “help others” to “make the right choice” in paternalistic fashion was self-defeating in that it conjured the very suffering I sought to prevent.

As such, I prepared myself to hear them say, “We want to learn chemistry, mathematics, etc.,” even though I personally preferred a more ancestral curriculum. Even though I was a traditionalist, I was prepared to hear them say, “We want to teach our children the Bible.” I was prepared to make room for many viewpoints and I didn’t see any of them as less important. I felt they could all coexist and be constructed into a curriculum.

It was scary to venture into this space where The People were given complete freedom to speak their piece and to support them in that creation. But I finally came to a place where what they said was not as important as the fact that they could speak.
As I sat and listened, a great multitude of ideas poured forth from Diné people of all ages that inspired and astonished me. It humbled me and showed me how little I knew about all the various disciplines of Diné pedagogy. I was learning all the different things my people wanted to learn and were capable of teaching, as they gave curricular ideas I didn’t know were possible.

As they spoke, I started to see how beautiful and potent the practice of Nitsáhákees truly is. We were thinking, dreaming and speaking a blueprint into existence. Within the careful and reverent context of a ceremonial hoghan, we held each other’s ideas and stories and musings with great respect. I started to see how this step allowed us to brainstorm in unbridled fashion, without any worry about the
feasibility of our ideas or if we could even bring them into being. It was simply a place to speak our dreams, in between puffs on our sacred (non-mind altering) tobaccos, without fear of judgement or fear of failure. We could speak freely.

Figure 3. Young Diné man leads lesson on butchering and processing sheep during initial gathering.

In the process, we came to know each other more personally and forged the k’é (kinship) that our ancestors emphasized so greatly. It was beautiful to see community being woven before my eyes as various leaders from various corners of our homeland met their contemporaries, merged their minds, and joined their aspirations.

To my surprise, my community did not to just talk about teaching and learning—they wanted to practice teaching and learning as well. So, the first meeting became a practice zone for our school where we learned how to butcher sheep, sew prayer bags,
tell the creation story and other things that were important to the group.

Over those days, which were relaxing and enjoyable as much as they were energizing and inspiring, many people trickled in and out. Several elders came in the evenings to tell us winter stories, or give specific teachings, or conduct ceremony. I connected deeply with the women my age (between 20 and 30) to forge very powerful sisterhoods. These bonds would prove to be instrumental in the coming months in igniting, supporting and sustaining more community gatherings. Without their intense, passionate, yet lighthearted, it would not have been the school that it was. We gave each other emotional sustenance, plenty of laughter and a sense of hope that we did have the power to organize The People’s boundless skill and creativity into a beautiful curriculum.

The following table represents as many of the ideas that were able to be recorded by the group:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Dreams of The People</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elder 1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Wild/Edible plants to defeat diabetes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Harvesting Stirring Sticks/Story of 7 Stirring Sticks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• K’é</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• History: Fort Camby, Fort Defiance (Defiant Navajos were there), unmarked graves, first blacksmith, ones hanged here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Language—it takes 5 years to learn, you can do it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Songs—some know over 50 songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Older Sister 2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Critical Thinking through weaving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• K’é for happiness and fulfillment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Control over foods, bodies, medicine—that’s empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learn history of your family’s land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elder 4</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Broader perspective of the world (like in the Bay Area survival schools).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- Making Stirring Sticks/Grinding Stones (*tse be’ēkháha*)
- Water day to teach students all about water and threats to our water

**Mother 2**
- Dressing Appropriately (first step), *Hoghan*, or *Chaha’oh* (fourth step)
- Archery/Warrior Hats (her brother can help)

**Elder 5**
- Knowledge of how to survive
- Build a *Hoghan* at coalmine canyon
- Learn about government
- Horses
- Poetry-Rex Lee Jim
- Instigation of Gross National Happiness in *Diné Bikeyah*

**Teenager 3**
- Push Traditional Knowledge
- Traditional Foods like blue corn mush

**Mother 3**
- Build *hoghan*
- Don’t go to the store, plant a garden
- “Who you are”
- *Txaché* (sweat lodge) at her father’s house
- History
- Culture
- Songs
- Way of Life

**Father 2**
- *K’é* (taught throughout)
- Concept of giving unconditionally
- Refute concept of “power over” others

**Teenager 4**
- Songs/Prayers
- History/Creation Story
- Male/Female Roles
- What it means to protect mountains.
- Ceremonies
- Language
- Stars

**Teenager 1**
- Math
- Culinary Arts
- English
- Science
- Geometry through rugs
• Why is it important to be Diné?
• Why is it important to you?

Older Brother 1
• *Hoghan at Sisnaajini*
• Sustainable Living
• Political Campaigns on the Ground
• Natural Resource Extraction
• Traditional Songs

Teenager 2
• Songs—everything has a song...
• Horse Training

Elder 2
• *Diné Bizaad/Nihitsoo*—undo what the boarding schools have done to us, shame, brainwashing
• Navajo on radio?

Older Brother 2
• We must talk about fearing time
• Have ways to process trauma

Elder 3
• Four “Data Bases” of Diné thought
• Teach children to find their medicine
• Teach them we don’t carry weapons
• Power of Language
• *K’é*
• How to lift up each other
• How to work with feds/Treaties/Indigenous Lawyers
• *Nahajoobá’*—humility
• Passive-Observation/Warrior-Action
• *Txáche* teaching, respecting women, architecture (don’t use screws, don’t use nails, use gravity)

Older Sister 1
• Traditional Diné plants and their Diné names
• Diné forestry
• Traditional Values

Father 1
• Language
• Shield in Navajo Nation Museum Vault

Mother 1
• Build *Chaha’oh*
• Pottery
• Weaving
• Cradle Board
• Farming in this kind of soil
Older Brother 3
• Our traditional sustainability teachings, before they said you have to plow in straight lines
• Building with natural materials—no more Lowe’s, why are we living in crumbling buildings just because we can’t afford drywall?
• Permaculture—care for the earth, care for The People, share the surplus
• Permaculture decolonized (holistically, not linearly), system thinking
• Herbology
• Reinfiltation of water into the ground
• Re-cycling
• Horses- How they rejuvenate the land, how they belonged to everyone
Older Sister 4
• Natural beauty products like salve
• Digital media/documentation
• Journey through the four sacred mountains
Older Sister 5
• Puberty Ceremonies
• Being Self Sufficient/Not relying on Medicine Man for herbs
• Male puberty ceremony
Older Sister 6
• Hairpiece
Elder 6
• Language and however else he can support
Elder 7
• Biology and Prescribed Burns
Mother 4
• Water Catchment Systems
• Gardening
• Massage Therapy
Older Sister 7
• Land Restoration
• Old Stories
Older Brother 4
• Learn something about my people, where am I from? I live in Phoenix now...
Older Brother 5
• Moccasin Making/Silversmithing
• Space
• The way we delineate our time
• Biology/Symmetry
Elder 8
• Traditional Txáche, both men’s and women’s
Table 2. Teaching topics desired by over 30 Diné people during Nitsáhákees sessions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Older Sister 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Oil/Gas Resource Extraction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sustainable Initiatives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Older Sister 9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• “Hohzhó Yoga”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In retrospect, re-reading this table, it is clear why we felt so excited and invigorated during and after our Nitsáhákees session. When you look at a person from the outside, it is hard to notice the beautiful ocean of dreams that stirs inside them. But these talking circles cracked our hearts open to each other and cast these dreams onto the walls of hogan for all to see. Constellations of aspirations refracted from the conversation and we started to see how each of our visions supported and matched another’s. Like the rugs our foremothers and forefathers wove with plant-dyed wool, we began to see how resilient and unbreakable our heart strands were when intertwined together. Themes began to emerge naturally and the idea of actually creating a school seemed less and less daunting and more and more exciting.

After four days of being together out on the land with no running water or electricity and only a hogan and a cook shack to cradle us, we parted ways. We would reconvene in one season, when the spring equinox came to pass, for our second stage of the creation process: Nahat’á.

I will say that part of what made this gathering successful was a loving container for these conversations to be held. In my community, there is so much pain and distrust because of all we have been through. We have been oppressed for so long and sometimes we begin to inadvertently internalize that oppression by oppressing one another. Many of us, including myself, are insecure in our identity because we do not
feel “Diné enough” to belong to the group. Others of us have had hard times communing with community members because of interpersonal conflicts. I foresaw this having experienced it myself and went the extra mile to generate a warm and loving atmosphere where people could feel safe, respected and included. One woman noted how relieving it was for her to see a smile and warm welcome when she came in because she wasn’t sure if she would be accepted. Once this loving tone was set, people seemed much more comfortable to speak their minds and interact with one another.

**Nahat’á: Weaving Dreams**

I once heard an elder say that the word *Nahat’á* means what it sounds like. He explained to me that in order to say *naha* your mouth has to open up wide. It creates a void that opens itself to a whole universe of possibilities that live in the sky, the realm of thoughts. After saying *naha*, you close this opening by saying a quick, sharp *t’á* sound. You trim that great expanse, condense it and propel it forward in the form of a concise, emphasized gift to the space in front of you. This elder said that *Nahat’á* is like this; It is pulling a whole universe of possibilities down from the sky and then shaping that ocean into a manageable, feasible gift to the earth. It is generally translated as, “planning.”

Thus, the second phase of our journey—*Nahat’á*—was commenced during the new moon on March 27, 2017. We wanted to have it occur during spring equinox (March 20), but our schedules did not fit that idea. Perhaps the *Diyin Diné’e*, the Holy People, were reminding us to not only observe the sun, but the moon as well, in accordance with the Diné emphasis on balance between feminine and masculine dualities.
Before the gathering occurred, an elder suggested that it is traditional to make offerings to the eastern mountain in the spring time. During my consultation with a different elder for the first gathering, he advised to not pretend like, “prayer isn’t important.” These two elders combined made it seem like a good idea to begin the second phase in prayer at the mountain.

We garnered funds for a 15-passenger van and drove six hours northeast from Gallup to Sisnaajini. Many of the same people came from the first gathering: mothers, fathers, teenagers, 20-something-year-olds, elders and little children. We arrived very late at night and when people emerged from their tents in the morning they were astounded by the immense beauty of the area.

Thousands of Diné people mention this mountain in their daily prayers but have never actually seen it. Colonel Kit Carson, the same man who oversaw the Long Walk, created an army outpost there called Fort Garland 150 years prior, making it very difficult for Diné people to maintain a presence in the area. It felt like a coming-home.

It was spring time but there was still snow on the mountain and it was very cold. We gathered next to a small fire that morning to warm up. The medicine man who encouraged us to go to the mountain for this gathering was there and motioned for me to speak. He was very interested in supporting female leadership in general and wanted me to speak as a woman before he said anything. I felt very honored at this and wondered what it was I could say that could possibly do justice to the beautiful situation we were in.

I dug down deep, started to speak and said something very close to this:
“For too many years our people have been told we are unfit to teach our own children. The government has taken our children away from us, and has taken us away from our parents. I believe it is time for us to take our children back. The system is not working for us. We have the potential to teach them in a good way.

“I want to say to you all this morning that I believe in you. I believe in the clans that you carry from your mothers and what they mean. I believe in your dreams. I believe in your hearts. I believe in your gifts. You all are amazing to me and I feel very honored to be a part of this creation.”

From there the medicine man asked me to lead The People towards the mountain so we could do some ceremony and prayers. I started to walk forward, feeling somewhat uncomfortable with the leadership position he placed me in. Not because I felt unworthy or unconfident but because I knew that other people needed to have a place and a chance to lead this movement. Luckily, in the near future other brothers and sisters would begin to take key leadership roles.

I took us to a clearing at the feet of this immense, breathtaking mountain. About 25 of us created a circle with an opening to the east. We sat down and pulled our shawls and blankets tighter around us. The medicine man brought out sacred items and taught us special teachings at the base of the mountain. We prayed in the traditional manner and asked for help for our planning process. Many of us younger folks were being included in traditional Diné ceremony for the first time. Several people helped me understand that this was very special to them and helped them feel more connected to themselves.
After this precious and unifying ceremony, we embarked on another arduously long drive (7 hours) to what is now called Coalmine Canyon, Arizona, near Tuba City. An elder from the first gathering invited us to his home there to make connections and plan our school. Our caravan arrived Coalmine Canyon and it was dark and frigid. The stars glistened as we piled into our elder’s toasty hogan, where he had built a fire for us.

It should be noted that the Nahat’á phase seemed to be compromised by so much travel time. It did not leave us much time or energy to discuss how we would implement the ideas that we dreamed up in the first gathering. To mitigate this, I asked people to think about a few questions on the drive to Coal Mine Canyon: When should we do this school? What ages should we teach? How should we teach these concepts?
Where should we teach these concepts? This helped but we had to learn the hard way that travelling for 13 hours was not a good idea.

We awoke at dawn and went outside amongst the yucca shrubs that dotted the land. We gave our morning cornmeal offerings, organized our thoughts and then gathered in a circle to discuss the day ahead. I presented a potential plan for the day and then asked for suggestions about how to amend, improve or even discard the plan. We decided that it would be good to discuss the logistics of the school and how we were to operationalize our dreams.

It was nice to begin the process with the fresh, crisp, open air. I felt so energized by the morning light in a beautiful desert that expanded as far as the eye could see in every direction. Something about being on the land of my ancestors with fellow Diné who were equally passionate about nourishing the future was deeply joyful and fulfilling. Together we co-created a safe, sober, respectful place to connect—something not all of us had everyday access to. To be held by that beautiful earth where we would be fed, sheltered and honored felt very good to me. We were ready to practice the sacred art of Nahat’á.

We initiated our talking circle ceremonially with a blessing involving water and an eagle feather. The teenage boys took my questions very seriously and one had written out his answers the night before. I was surprised at this. When I was a teenager I was not interested in school at all. I was just going through the motions. Somehow, we managed to generate an atmosphere where the teenagers were more interested in the process than we were. This was a good indication to me.
From my perspective, what proceeded during this conversation was monumental. It was
during this talking circle that we discovered not only what we want to teach but how we
wanted to teach it. This was very interesting to me because it gave insight into the
*nature of Diné pedagogy*. I think that education for native youth must be, as Simpson
states, “not only content but also process” (2002, p. 18). We need to tell the next
generation through our actions that we are a beautiful people with a worthy culture. To
embody this, not only our teaching topics but also our *teaching methods* need to be
grown from our own hearts.

The following table includes some of the notions and ideas that we recorded
regarding how our teaching would occur:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Pedagogical Methods and Theory Suggested by Community Members</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elder 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teaching occurs through traditional song</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elder 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <em>O’hoo’aah liná</em>- Learning occurs through everyday life, throughout your entire life</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We can learn from the animals, e.g. ants teach teamwork</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It is good to provide a foundation of basic Diné teachings and then work our way up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teaching must be done through the medium of <em>k’é</em> and clanship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teach in circles so there is no hierarchy</td>
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<tr>
<td>• It is valuable to untrain them from some Western training first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teenager 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It is important to teach with respect to the season, in the context of natural rhythms.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teenager 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Must be fun</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teach learners how to become teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older Brother 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hands on learning is paramount</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Need to treat elders as our teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Teach a tradition that is dynamic and ever changing, not static</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We are conditioned to learn in classrooms, this needs to change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We are conditioned to believe that someone else knows everything and is going to tell us, this needs to change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Make it fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elder 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• My job as a medicine man is to interpret the meaning of different kinds of feathers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In our teaching, we can no longer blame and shame our children for not knowing their culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We need to get out with the lizards and get <em>ch’izhi</em> outside to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We learn through audio/visual media</td>
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<tr>
<td>• We learn in a participative way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Both Western and traditional sectors have a lot of knowledge and both are important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We need to utilize locals and elders in our teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older Brother 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• We can do peer to peer teaching

Elder 4
• Our tongues are already built for Diné Bizaad
• Our language is sacred and sophisticated and teaching must occur through this medium

Older Brother 2
• We can combat assimilation through moccasin making

Older Sister 1
• I learn through audio-visual methods
• I passed all my classes in Western schools but never really understood the concepts
• Learning by doing is helpful for our people to have those things click and stay with us
• Make it fun

Elder 5
• Education is not about learning outside information, it’s about learning how to think
• Majors and minors give you tunnel vision
• Real education is not a regurgitation of the status quo
• Education is about building community

Older Sister 2
• We have all been taught the song, “Go my son, go and climb the ladder,” but we know this song leads to assimilation
• We can reverse engineer colonization—what did the enemy do? They burned our crops
• We need to teach self-sufficiency; You can’t have sovereignty without self-sufficiency
• Life is very short, for people of color it’s shorter, for natives it’s even shorter, education needs to change that

Table 3. Pedagogical theory and methods suggested by planning team.

These were incredibly illuminating statements offered by The People. I was, again, left dumbfounded and jaw-dropped at my people’s creativity and depth. I understood more acutely that Freire’s faith in The People wasn’t a favor to The People, but a favor to me; If I shut my minds and ears to the ideas and creative power of the collective, I impoverish my life, my mind, my process and my potential. If I open myself to the genius of others, I am enriched. There is absolutely no way, no matter how long I
spent at the drawing board, that I could have devised methods as multi-faceted and beautiful as this mosaic of brilliance put forth by The People.

Many of these statements speak about pedagogy in juxtaposition to Western pedagogy. There is a general distaste for how we are forced to learn in Western schools. At the same time, there are very refreshing, proactive ideas about where we would do education if we applied our life lessons to the process. Much like the first hogan dialogue, we felt excited, invigorated and hopeful about our personal and collective ability to transform education for ourselves and our contemporaries towards something that was built for us and not against us.

![Figure 6. Group convenes in a hogan for a second time to distill our big ideas into a plan](Kalika Tallou Davis, 2017, permission granted for photo use).

A major highlight of the discussion for me was when one of our crew members, a single mother without a high school diploma, became the key architect of our school format. She heard people’s opinions about building students up in their knowledge and starting small. She offered to the group that the school be structured into Four Worlds, to reflect our Creation Story of how The People moved through three different worlds to emerge into the present fourth world. The group appreciated and supported her idea.
Thusly, the blueprint of the Four Worlds Summer School was born.

I like the fact that this woman structured it in the context of sacred dialogue. To me it speaks to Freire’s persistent faith in the power and creativity of every person. While she may not be “educated” according to Western standards and although she did not belong to a high social class in American society, it was clear she was an ocean of ideas incarnate, and perfectly capable of leading The People. Her imagination formed the foundational curriculum structure that would cradle our scheme for collective Diné education liberation.

Another interesting highlight was when an older brother looked me in the eyes and said he really wanted to build a hogan as part of our school at the eastern sacred mountain. Five others in our group also expressed interest in learning traditional architecture. His statement to me was so deliberate and full of conviction, it could not be ignored. He explained he had logs ready for a male-style hogan that he intended to build in Cannonball, North Dakota to assist the Standing Rock water protection movement. Because of timing and storms, however, he was not able to bring these logs to the northern nations. He believed it would be a very special thing to build a hogan at the eastern sacred mountain instead. It was an aspiration echoed by many in the group.

Interestingly, half a year prior, I prayed at that mountain for guidance in creating a hogan curriculum. I presented a prayer-posal that we generate a hogan construction curriculum. At the time, my intuition seemed to reject the idea as close but not yet complete. Six months later, though, in a very roundabout way my prayer was
indeed answered. It included a very important step, however: community consensus. Ironically, by letting go of the steering wheel, I got what I prayed for and so much more. The resulting curriculum would involve a four-day lesson in hoghan construction but this idea came straight from the participants without any of my prompting or probing. Not only would it involve hoghan construction, which would help us to embody the environmental ethic of our people, it would also involve other beautiful lesson plans—plans I could have never created on my own.

Perhaps this is why Freire encourages the dialogic approach; Not only to honor the humanity of others, but also in recognition that one person alone will never be as smart or creative as the community is as a whole. Only by honoring the minds and abilities of others can we weave a tapestry as beautiful, complex and thorough as Diné Bina’nitin Dóó O’hoo’aah, The People’s Teaching and Learning.

One regret I have about our Nahat’á process is that there was not enough time during our second gathering to truly cross-communicate and co-plan the schedule of the school. Our decision to travel so much during the second gathering greatly compromised time we could have spent planning. In the second phase of discussion, it seemed we only scratched the surface of our planning before it was already time to go. Indeed, there were many important questions hanging in the air. Because of this mistake, the grassroots, bottom-up quality of the school design was compromised. I had to make many decisions on my own, in the absence of the whole group. Thus, sadly, the initial draft was surely influenced by my biases and ideas.
I mitigated this issue by gaining input from the group after I created initial drafts of our school schedule. This step helped to refine the ideas I had to form on my own so that the school could more accurately reflect the wishes of The People. Even in the face of this mistake, however, I am glad that we tried. An imperfect process and imperfect results are better than not trying at all. With these hard lessons under belt, we will do this process much more efficiently in the future.

The next steps after our second gathering from my perspective were as follows:

1. Synthesize dreamers’ dreams into a cohesive curriculum.
2. Schedule curriculum during times that worked for everyone.
3. Encourage emerging leaders to be teachers/facilitators for specific content areas.

Synthesis: Weaving Dreams, Emergent Themes

Spider Woman is a prominent figure in our Creation Story. It is said that she taught The People how to weave. I saw the beautiful ideas of my people as strands of wool, each uniquely dyed by the brilliant soul of every dreamer. Just as a Diné weaver cannot make a rug from loose strands, so too an organizer cannot make a school of disconnected ideas. Just as a Diné weaver diligently works these strands into inspiring, geometric designs, so too must we weave our many thoughts into a coherent and beautiful pattern. By performing what I call a “Spider Woman Analysis,” I created a preliminary weaving of all our curricular aspirations (Figure 7).

To perform this analysis, you first build a circular frame from the list of dreams The People have. The goal is to find dreams that are similar to others and join them
together so that you can put all the dreams into larger categories. For instance, Teenager 3 wanted to learn about traditional foods, Mother 4 wanted to learn about gardening and Older Sister 7 wanted to learn about land restoration. From these three dreams, I devised the overarching theme of *Ch’iiyan dóó Keyah, or, Food and Land*. For the entire list of things people want to learn, one can create categories to the point of saturation (i.e. each idea fits into at least one category).

![Spider Woman Analysis of the dreamers’ dreams.](image)

You then put these categorical headings inside the circle and draw lines outward to each dream that falls into this category. A kind of web naturally emerges from the

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1 Obviously, the categories reflect the background and tacit knowledge of the person devising the categories and are there is no one way to create these larger categories.
drawing. This process illuminates the relationships between dreams and between the inner nodes themselves.

One night I worked in my office until the sun came up to complete this analysis. During the sacred time of *chahalheel*, or the dark of the night, a small spider came and walked across the poster board. It was nice to know that Spider Woman, the one who taught our people how to weave in the Fourth World, was behind us and with us for the journey.

By keeping ideas associated with The People who had them, this analysis also illuminated teams of people that had similar interests (Table 3). In this way, I discovered teams of people who might have been willing to work together to teach a given class. By placing these people into the categories they were interested in, it became clear which topics were most popular.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CH'IIYAAN/KEYAH</th>
<th>ADÁ'AKOWHII</th>
<th>DINA' BIZAAD</th>
<th>HANE' NAYEE'</th>
<th>ARCHITECTURE</th>
<th>CHAHALHEEL/HOGHAN</th>
<th>HATAAL DOÓ SODIZIN</th>
<th>K'É TXÁCHE'</th>
<th>DIYOGI</th>
<th>TÓ (WATER DAY)</th>
<th>LÍÍ' TREATY</th>
<th>GOV.</th>
<th>HEAL</th>
<th>TRAUMA</th>
<th>CRAFTS</th>
<th>DIGITAL MEDIA</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1</td>
<td>Participant 11</td>
<td>Participant 13</td>
<td>Participant 3</td>
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*Table 4.* Emergent educator teams and theme popularity based on Spider Woman Analysis.

In my earnest yet imperfect attempt to organize our ideas into umbrella content areas, I came up with the following list, in order of popularity:
1. *Ch’iiyaan/Kéyah* (Food/Land)

2. *Adá' Akowhiindzin* (Identity)

3. *Diné Bizaad* (Our Language)

4. *Diné Bihane’* (Creation Story)

5. *Nayee’* (Assaults on Our Land and People)

6. Architecture (*Chaha'oh/Hoghan*)

7. *Hataał dóó Sodizin* (Songs and Prayers)

8. *K’é* (Principles of Kinship)

9. *Txáche’* (Sweat Lodge)

10. *Diyogi* (Weaving)

11. *Tó* (Water Day)

12. *Łíí’* (Horse Knowledge)

13. Treaties/Government

14. Healing Trauma

15. Traditional Crafts

16. Digital Media

This simple list it took months and months of prayer and planning to create. It is important to not cut corners in our efforts to consult with The People and discover their heart’s truth. It must not be carried out as a half-hearted formality if we truly care about honoring the self-determination of our nations. It must be done with painstaking love, care and patience. In almost every Indigenous culture, The People’s voice is considered a sacred thing. As such, it is important to not only hear, but to *listen*, when our kin share
their words in sacred dialogue. We are by no means perfect in this process, but through
this experiment we are becoming more and more experienced in the art of honoring
one another.

**Time, Place and Structure**

![Image of a schedule](image)

*Figure 8. Draft one of community school schedule (no community input).*

The challenge of operationalizing this curriculum was creating a schedule that
truly reflects the dreams of The People, while being mindful of restrictions on time,
funding and human energy. One dreamer asked to structure the curriculum within four
steps to match our people’s Creation Story of moving through four worlds. Another
dreamer mentioned that weekend classes would be wise, since many of our people
work during week days. Other dreamers said they would like the school to be seasonal.
This reassured me that if we could not fit all our curricular ideas into the first summer
school, there would be more opportunities in the future. These ideas mixed together moved me to offer a four-weekend curriculum schedule to the group for final review. The result was a curriculum of self-sufficiency with four major units: 1) Prayer/Philosophy, 2) Clothing, 3) Food and 4) Shelter (Figure 8).

**K’é: Group Consensus and Maintaining Freirean Integrity**

The main challenge I had as a facilitator was supporting the project as much as possible without over-influencing the process. If I were to plan the entire schedule without group input it would not be of, for and by The People. Working within a space as sensitive as this, where people’s lives have been dictated for them for so many centuries, it was especially important that I endeavor to gain community input. At the same time, given our great distance from one another, it was challenging to create a cohesive plan that was communally designed. We tried anyways.

The process of creating this schedule illuminated to me that it may be important to have a person committed to seeing the project through, or the dreams may never come to pass. As Freire has said, “leaders do bear the responsibility of co-ordination—and, at times, direction—but leaders who deny praxis to the oppressed thereby invalidate their own praxis” (1983, p. 120). Even as a coordinator, though, it was important to present this first draft to the community. In particular, it was important to present it to the elders, since our collective placed great importance on the cultural integrity of the project. Because the elders were the ones who knew in detail the paradigm of the ancestors, they helped immensely to improve the first draft.
For example, I scheduled the *Food and Land* unit in the third weekend, the Third World. One elder told me that it was actually the Second World where White Shell Woman taught The People to create food for ourselves. Moreover, the Third World was the place where Spider Woman taught us how to weave our clothing. She told me to switch the Second and Third World so that the curriculum would more accurately reflect our creation story.

*Figure 9.* Draft two of community school schedule (reflecting community input).

Another elder helped me to understand that *Diyogí* meant rug, not the act of weaving. He helped me see that the true name of that theme should be *Dá’hiistl’óh* Bo’hoo’aaah or, “The School of Weaving.” He also let me know that his home-site could not be the lesson location for the first gathering. Others chimed in and asked if certain
lessons could be inserted in certain places. This was of course welcomed and worked into the draft.

The elder teaching the txáche’ course explained he would prefer to teach the sacred songs instead, given the lack of a proper facility to have sweatlodge. This fit nicely with the fact that many dreamers requested to learn about our traditional songs.

Yet another elder warned me that the Creation Story is only told in the winter time and to be careful not to tell the whole story during the summer school. All of this input was woven in to create a final draft (Figure 9).

**Dissemination**

Now that our schedule was mostly complete, it was time to decide how we would alert the community about our endeavor. This presented yet another Freirean opportunity; By entrusting student recruitment to the collective, the resulting manifestation of the school would be even more of, for and by The People.

To create a strong publicity campaign, each member of the collective was reminded of their authority to disseminate the schedule to as many people as possible in their communities. They were each given digital materials to place in their local chapter houses and community spaces. Others were asked to be school spokesmen and women by attending local education conferences.

Through this process, I learned that power can never really be “given” to a person. In fact, it is an inherently disempowering activity to “give power” to another because it assumes power can only be granted to them by another. Thus, the balance to strike in this process of
dissemination was not to “give” authority to the group to publicize our activities, but rather to *remind* them of their power to make the school their own and create a world where they were “the boss” of their own future, of their own school.

**Financing Without Conditions**

An important note in this section of the story is how we financed the school. Many members were interested in self-sufficiency and breaking dependencies. We leveraged the 21st century tool of online crowdfunding to generate the funds we needed for our school. By this method any person who comes across your campaign (mostly through “social media”) can donate online using their credit or debit card. This donation is not taxed. The money is entrusted to the bank accounts of campaign organizers and spent at their discretion.

The *Nahat’á* phase was funded by 41 individual donors who gave in total $2,210.

The appeal to the public as we requested donations was as follows:

*We are a group of 30 Diné (also known as Navajo) elders, parents, youth and children. We want to take our children back from 500 years of oppressive and assimilationist educational influences. We want to create a summer school that is of, for a by our people, where we decide what we teach and what we learn—unfettered by euro-centric standards that have extinguished our language and culture. In our first meeting, we decided we wanted to focus our summer school on rekindling our ancestral ecological knowledge as well as cultural and ceremonial knowledge. We are meeting for the second time in late March to plan the summer school in accordance with the *Nitsáhókees, Nahat’á, liná,* and *Sii Hasin* traditional strategic framework. We need help with the following expenses for our upcoming meeting:*

- $600 food expenses for 30 people for 4 days
- $500 Help for those who need money to travel to the meeting place

*(Diné Bikeyah is very big and people have to drive up to 5 hours to get to the*
meeting place)
• $651 Four-day rental of 15 passenger van (We will be traveling to eastern sacred
  mountain to make offerings, because everything starts with prayer)
• $200 for Gas for mountain trip

TOTAL = 1951

At the time that I write this, this campaign and corresponding informational video can
be found at the following world wide web url:


Choosing to fund ourselves by this method allowed us to garner funds on our
own terms and conditions. For too long, Indigenous education has been held a financial
hostage by the colonial state. While there are countless examples of this bleak historical
fact, the one I’d like to invoke now involves the policies of Carl Schurz who served as
Schurz, the Indian Bureau issued regulations in 1880 that ‘all instruction must be in
English’ in both mission and government schools under threat of losing government
funding” (p. 76). Three years later the Bureau enforced this ruling against a specific
school saying that if they did not stop teaching the Dakota language the children would
be taken away and Government funding would be withdrawn.

You might think things would be different over 100 years later but in many ways
they are not. A very beautiful charter school on the Akimel O’odham homeland (called
Vechij Himdag Alternative School, near present day Phoenix, Arizona) was recently shut
down because it was dependent on a state government that saw them as dispensable.
This unique school taught at-risk O’odham youth with culturally-infused curriculum.
We did not want to be a part of a long line of natives who became dependent on, as Taiaiake has said, “the very people and institutions that have caused the near erasure of our existence and have come to dominate us” (2009, p. 42). Neither did we want to be dependent on non-profits who were sympathetic to our cause but required us to meet certain project objectives and requirements that were important to their organization. Online crowdfunding allowed us to articulate our own cause and what we stood for. The public then gives money that does not require any hoop-jumping, reporting or stipulations. It is of course of paramount importance that group diligently account for every penny with integrity, lest they generate internal mistrust or lose public support in the future. For this reason, expenditures were understood and agreed upon by the collective.

A Free School?

There were several members of the collective who believed that teachers in the summer school should work on a volunteer basis. The main reason for this was because too often in our homeland the elders would withhold knowledge for payment. One elder woman said it was important to give our knowledge freely because the transmission of this knowledge was too important to create financial barriers. She mentioned that she knew someone who charged the youth hundreds of dollars to teach them how to make blue corn mush, a traditional food. She said to me, “You can’t ask for payment because these kids are hungry for knowledge and we have to pass on what we have.”
At the same time, sometimes elders and facilitators would have to travel for hours to reach the teaching grounds. As such, we did give them gas and food money if they would accept it so at the least they did not have to pay to teach.

Other elders still would charge money for ceremonies and for teachings. Since this has become commonplace in our culture, I did honor that tradition and allocate funds to The People who asked for it. I personally did not like this or feel comfortable with this. It is challenging to navigate contemporary Diné culture, however, where things have changed so much. Many times we found ourselves compromising our goal of having a volunteer based, free school in order to prevent schisms or hard feelings in our community.

Overall, though, I think free education is something many of us held as an ideal. We discussed what it was like before money came into our communities. Did grandma ever charge me money to teach me how to herd sheep? Did grandpa ever charge the children to teach them how to ride a horse? Were the children ever charged to learn the sacred songs? No; These things happened in a family environment and it was the honor of the elder generation to give their best teachings to the next generation that they would live in balance and health. While we did pay some of the teachers, not one student was charged to learn the teachings the Summer School provided.

*iiná: Birthing Dreams into Being*

The third stage of the Diné strategic framework is *iiná*. This is generally translated as “life” or “living.” This is the stage where all these sacred plans, built from sacred thoughts, are brought into being. In other words, this is the stage of
implementation. My heart raced as we neared the first days of our summer school. We had no idea what to expect but we were excited to find out. It seemed like eons since we began our Nítsáhákees phase. It was summer solstice and the seeds we planted months ago were about to sprout!

**Course 1, First World: Sodizin/Songs**

With all the funding we needed, and flyers distributed throughout our homeland and on online platforms, we were ready to teach our first classes. A local charter school allowed us to use their facilities. Given that the “First World” was about Diné songs, philosophy and botany and less of a hands-on experience, we were able to commit these courses in classroom settings.

![Figure 10. Final draft of “First World” curriculum flyer.](image-url)
To my great surprise our first class had over 40 students and we could barely fit everyone in the classroom. I had never met most of these students. They seemed to come out of nowhere. One relocated Diné family from Riverside, California drove 6.5 hours to attend our classes. People I never expected walked through the door bright eyed and ready to learn.

The first day started with our male elder teaching The People about the songs. I asked him how he wanted to teach these songs and he said he wanted a classroom, a projector, two paper flip charts and a printer to create hand-outs. I was surprised that he gravitated to the Western pedagogical practice, but my primary allegiance was to The People’s choice, so onward we went.

Figure 11. Diné people of all ages enjoy a lesson on traditional songs prepared by our elder.
The main focus of the day was to learn a *hoghan* song. We spent many hours discussing the meaning of the words within the song that he had diligently written out. Each student was given a composition notebook to take notes in along the day. We also practiced singing the song. All the while he integrated humor into his lessons and had everyone laughing from time to time. Along the way, students had many questions and the teacher went on many well-received tangents.

*Figure 12.* Diné students wear their hair in *tsiiyeel* bundles to class (Jake Foreman, 2017, permission granted for photo use).

We discussed the way we tie our hair in a *tsiiyeel* or hair bundle. He explained the deeper meanings of the hair tie and what it represents. He discussed what he called the “four data bases” of Diné knowledge, each containing entire realms of understanding. These data bases were primarily a description of the human experience and helped me to understand the trials I had experienced in life in a new way.
After a lunch of buffalo tacos provided by my brother, we passed the lesson on to a young woman who taught a lesson on Diné Botany. People were very, very excited about this topic and asked her many questions. She employed both classroom and outdoor teaching techniques. The indoor portion involved teaching us the names of certain plants in our language and discussing their uses. She spent a considerable amount of time discussing what she called a “love story” between her and the ponderosa pine, a plant that she admired and cared about very much. She taught us about all the things the ponderosa pine did for the whole forest and ways in which our ancestors would use and care for these trees.

Later she took us outside to visit several trees and plants and talked about their traditional uses, ecological roles, flowering schedules and physiology. At one point, we huddled around a beautiful, flowering globemallow. She explained what she knew about the plant and invited the whole group to give their experiences of it as well. What resulted was a mosaic of collective knowledge coming forth from many participants. We then went to the saltbrush and the same process transpired.

I recollect this day considering my initial research question: *If we could teach and learn anything, in any way we wanted, what would we do?* Both teachers taught through the lens of traditional Diné culture and commented on the hegemony of Western thought. They were both very conscious of the need to reorient ourselves from spirit-less, objectifying mindsets towards an acknowledgment of the voice and personality of the earth around us. Both teachers had each and every student fully engaged and asking questions. This contrasted with most native students I went to
school with. We always looked like we’d rather be anywhere else besides in that public school or Bureau of Indian Education classroom.

Figure 13. Young Diné teacher explains to class the nature and traditional uses of the Yucca plant in an outdoor classroom.

Each teacher had a different style. While our elder wanted to focus on the intellect and held The People’s attention in a performative way, the young woman offered a mix of abstract and experiential learning. The elder had so much knowledge that he spent most of the time teaching us what he knew. The other teacher opened the teaching position to everyone. By giving the whole class a voice in the matter we all benefitted greatly from the collective pool of knowledge we carried. One thing is for sure, there was an electric feeling in the air all day because Diné people of all ages were coming together to learn about topics they cared about.
I attribute the popularity of these classes to the fact that the course content and pedagogical style were determined of, for and by The People. I have come to believe that the only thing worth doing in a community is something that the community wants, chooses and creates. Only then will it reflect the heart of The People. As Freire has stated, “To simply think about the people, as the dominators do...to fail to think with the people, is a sure way to cease being revolutionary leaders” (1983, p. 132, emphases added). It was nice to see all our hard work come to life and to see the students enjoy their time so much.

Course 2, First World: K’é: The Meaning of Clans and Kinship

After the first course, many of us went to a nearby campground to get some rest for the next day of classes. After the sun went down, we sat around fire laughing and connecting with one another. The ability to forge new friendships seemed to be very special for many of the participants. In the morning, my brother prepared breakfast for us. He was teaching me the meaning of kinship in an experiential way for k’é implies not only the existence of relatives, but our motivation to show up and support one another.

When we made it back to the school facility, a female elder began to teach us a more formal course on this principle of k’é. During our planning sessions this word was mentioned many times and several dreamers hoped it would be the foundational lesson of the school.

This elder did not learn English until she was in her 20s. She was raised on the land with our elders, fairly insulated from Western American culture. She seemed to
perform a more traditional pedagogy; She first gathered us into a circle. The teachers
the day before did not do this, but preferred for us to be in rows facing towards them.

She started by saying, “Our prayers go deep into the earth and high up into the
sky. Our prayers are very powerful.” Then with a whiteboard and a green dry erase
marker she began to draw out our homeland and how we all came to be in the four
sacred mountains. There were 16 students at the initial stages of the class, all Diné
people.

She then proposed that we have a talking circle to introduce our clans and
establish k’é Like the other young woman, she invited us all to discuss what we knew
about the topic. As we went around the circle, we got to know each other and how we
were clan-related. As with most talking circles, it became very deep, intimate, personal
and emotional. The Diné family that travelled from California shared their stories of
becoming estranged from their culture and how important it was to make the trip so
that their children would be exposed to the land and the culture. A common theme of
not feeling “Diné enough” was expressed by several people. Tears were shed in a way
that felt safe and healing as many of us told our stories of k’é or how we had come to
lose it.

Once this talking circle was finished we broke for lunch and reconvened beneath
a large cedar tree. Our female elder instructor wanted us to go outside and feel the
earth for the next part of her lesson. She “handed the reigns” to another female elder
who arrived at that time. This new elder wanted to perform a small dzítʼnááh
(mountain tobacco) ceremony. This tobacco mix is gathered from the four sacred
mountains. The mixture is associated with the mind and is often smoked while discussing intellectual topics so that the conversation is grounded in our homeland with a clear mind. We sat beneath this cedar tree smoking the (non-mind altering) mixture of tobaccos and discussed the meaning of k’é. There were children as young as five years old and elders as old as 70 and many ages in between. I learned certain kinship terms such as azéedi’ (female cousin on one’s dad’s side). They taught me about the intricacy of our kinship terms and how this reflected how important relationship and family is for our people. The teaching was carried out through the medium of ceremony.

Our instructor then brought us back inside for another talking circle where she invited reflections. One student said, “I am learning from the way you are teaching me.” This was very significant to me. It showed me that our elder wasn’t just teaching us the content area—she was teaching us by the way she carried herself. The way she taught was teaching us the value of sharing space with other people and positioning learning within the context of ceremony.

Another student expressed how happy she was that she was warmly received when she walked in the door. She expressed how she was hesitant to come to the class out of fear of not being accepted due to her limited Diné knowledge. She was grateful that she was taken into the circle as she was.

This course showed me once again that everyone has a different teaching style and that any one style alone would not be as rich as all of them together. This elder’s traditional upbringing made the learning experience completely different from the day before. Our instructor for the day was very gentle with her speech and took time to
honor elders older than her. The elders are much different from most of my contemporaries who grew up speaking English. Not only what we talk about, but the way in which we talk about it are very different. These bilingual elders are treasures beyond measure and will be instrumental to a 21st century teaching practice of, for and by Indigenous peoples. When creating Indigenous schools, it is important to draw from elders such as these if we want to increase our cultural knowledge and bridge the divide between colonized and uncolonized community members.

Course 3, Second World: Tradition Foods and Stirring Stick Teachings

The Second World of studies sought to satisfy our thirst for ch’iiyaan dóó keyah (food and land) teachings. The first round of courses were taught near dooko’oosliid, the western sacred mountain, to be able to reach students from that side of our homeland. This second round of courses were offered 150 miles to the east near what is now called Fort Defiance, Arizona, or Tséhootsooi.

We met a smaller number of people near the local meeting point and caravanned to the teaching site, the same hoghan that held our Nitsáhákees discussions.

In an outdoor kitchen with no running water or electricity our elder began to teach us the traditional way to make various foods from blue corn meal. She explained that we could reverse the diabetes epidemics by using this sacred food.
She started the lesson with a teaching about White Shell Woman (a major figure in our Creation Story) and how we came to have the stirring sticks we have today. She explained that there are seven stirring sticks to match the seven stars of the Pleiades constellation. This helps connect our foods to the sky realm and keeps us cognizant of the larger universe we are a part of. She helped us understand that these seven stirring sticks are regarded as “women’s weapons” that were used to “defeat hunger” (many of our teachings are quite gendered). The lesson reminded me of the seven stirring sticks I received 14 years prior during my womanhood ceremony.
Interestingly, there were two sets of father-daughter learning pairs that day. It was nice to see fathers learning side by side with their daughters. Never had I learned with my parents when I went to Western schools. What are the implications of learning with our immediate families? I would imagine that family-based pedagogy generates a feeling within the student that they are not isolated from the rest of the world. When I was dropped off at school and never saw my parents all day it created a very definite split between the me and the “real world.” This could also help students act more maturely since they are operating in more mature environments. It may also help them be more prepared for life since they are living it side by side with their parents. Family pedagogy must also generate a sense of comradery between a child and their parent; They are both working towards the same goal as equals.
Figure 16. Father and daughter work together to create blue corn tamales (Kalika Tallou Davis, 2017, permission granted for photo use).

After the class was over several students stayed the night in the nearby hoghan so we could attend the next day of classes together. We decided we wanted to see a movie that night and went to Gallup, New Mexico. I found that a lot of learning happened through informal discussions with one another. These “out of class” times to be with each other gave our group more opportunities to forge k’é. The courses themselves and the time outside of these courses made the school a place to not only learn, but to create community. For many of us who lived in isolation, or who felt disconnected from culture and community, this bonding time was infinitely important.

I was happy to discover several months after this class that one of the young men who learned these culinary techniques was practicing them at home. He had health issues concerning weight and cholesterol and was working to “decolonize his diet.” He
took home the written recipes that the elder provided us and uses them to this day. It is satisfying to see that these lessons were not “one-off” gifts to The People, but were gifts that kept on giving.

Figure 17. Young Diné men (and one Apache) forging friendships and brotherhoods (Kalika Tallou Davis, 2017, permission granted for photo use).

Course 4, Second World: Erosion Control, Water Harvest and Permaculture

The fourth instructor was a gifted young Diné man who was extensively trained in both Diné agricultural techniques as well as Western permaculture techniques. His passion was hybridizing the two schools of thought into an integrated program. He partnered with an established non-profit that encouraged us to host the lesson at a local elder’s home. This elder was former Code Talker\(^2\) who needed help curbing soil erosion

\(^2\) The code talkers are Diné World War II veterans who used the Diné language to transmit coded messages that were never able to be deciphered by the opposing armies.
on his property. Again, through our school, we were establishing k’é, community and good relations simply by interacting with and supporting local Diné that we would have never have met otherwise. The school itself became fertile soil for The People to band together.

The lesson began with about 35 Diné people standing between the earth and sky in a circle introducing their clans and speaking prayers. Once that was established our instructor said, “I don’t like the traditional classroom setting. I want to have everyone give information and resources. I don’t like to have the teacher be the head.” Like other teachers, he invited all of us to share our knowledge throughout the course. It was admirable to see these teachers release their seat of power so readily and fearlessly.

*Figure 18. Intergenerational class tries to implement principles of erosion control (Kalika Tallou Davis, 2017, permission granted for photo use).*
He then invited us to walk along the land to understand how water flows and erodes the hillsides. He explained that much of the problem was a lack of flora to anchor the soil. He showed us how simply putting in a paved road altered the entire flow of water on the hillside and generated deep rivulets. He took us to where a fence was once firmly anchored in the ground but now hung in the air as the ground beneath washed away over time.

We then split into two groups; One made a swale and the other created check dams. Each team’s objective was to slow the water down. The instructor then explained that he would be planting seeds in the swales to further generate soil anchors. For days after the class, I noticed all the ways in which land affected waterflows and how water shaped the land. I will never look at the land the same.

It is significant that the instructor taught the entire class outside, through hands-on learning, beginning with prayer, while honoring the teacher inside us all, in a way that supported a community elder. This kind of education reflects the values and propensities of our culture. This was the pedagogical flower that blooms when our people have the freedom and support to do whatever they want, and it was an honor to witness and participate in it.

**Course 5, Third World: Hozhó Yoga**

The Third World of classes occurred in what is now known as Kayenta, AZ. We sought to reach potential students in the northwestern area of our homeland. The originally published schedule had us learning sheepskin tanning on Friday, yoga on Saturday and weaving/moccasin-making on Sunday. Due to the elder cancelling the
Friday class at the last minute, we merged that sheepskin tanning with the weaving/moccasin making classes on Sunday.

It just so happened that a Diné sister was hosting a large yoga conference nearby that weekend. She was present at our very first gathering, the Nitsáhákees gathering. At that time, she requested that we teach a Diné rendition of the yogic practice as part of our summer school. Roughly 12 of our students attended the yoga conference she had already organized separate from the summer school.

It was nice to practice yoga in the beautiful Monument Valley where many red stone monoliths jutted into the sky all around us. I was proud to see a native woman convene so many hundreds of people from all around the country. It was also nice to see so many Diné people engaging in a practice that wasn’t from our culture but could offer incredible health benefits.

An important feature of this class is that we took our students to a pre-established learning center. In other words, we treated the world as our classroom and didn’t reinvent the wheel. One of the things mentioned in the Nitsáhákees meeting was that we needed to support programs that were already happening in our homeland. Someone explained that too often people create new programs and rob people power from what is already going on. It was nice to bring our students to a location that was already set up but needed community input and support.
When I imagine a long-term school for The People, I imagine the whole world being our classroom. There is no shortage of experts in the world doing exactly what they love to do. So many of these experts would love to take in a group of learners and help them gain insight into a certain philosophy or practice. By bringing students into these real-world contexts we dissolve the colonial construct of the “field-laboratory” binary. In other words, we help children remember that learning does not have to occur in artificial environments where every variable is controlled, but can occur in the beautiful, uncertain realm of real life. Cross-pollinating with this young Diné leader seemed to take our summer school to another level.
Course 6, Third World: Weaving, Moccasin Making and Sheepskin Tanning

The sixth course was held at the Kayenta Township Center. Again, we employed pre-existing structures. This facility had all the amenities we needed for the courses, was well known to the local community and was operated by locals who were interested in what we were doing. By leveraging the ample educational infrastructure our kin already possessed, we not only built relationships, we also eliminated the cost of building or renting learning centers.

Figure 20. Instructor teaches intergenerational class the art of moccasin-making while sitting on the floor in a circle.

Roughly 40 students arrived from I don’t know where to partake in the moccasin/weaving/sheepskin tanning course. Parents once again came to learn side by side with their children. All ages, genders, sexual orientations and levels of cultural
proficiency came to learn side by side in a kind of communal education experience.

This day was interesting in that students had many courses to choose from. We were not very well organized in terms of scheduling because we had the last-minute switch of trying to squeeze in the sheepskin tanning lesson. We were trying to juggle three different teachers and honor the miles they had driven to get there and teach. Ultimately, we decided to offer a kind of buffet for all the students to choose from.

In the morning, we focused on the moccasin-making workshop. The instructor was a father from nearby who frequently made traditional moccasins for people in his community. He was recruited by one of our school planners. He started by sitting us all down inside the township center in a circle and talking to us about the symbolism of our moccasins. He explained that the bottom sole represented the earth and the top foot covering represented the sky. He explained the sacred process of sewing the two together.

During his lesson he wove in a small kinesthetic language lesson. By that I mean he taught us through our bodily experience how to say, “take this,” and “hand me that” in Diné Bizaad. We passed an object around the circle from person to person as the receiver said, “hxą’” and the giver said, “ną́.” I found it interesting that he used moccasin making as a means of language instruction as well.

He then taught us experientially how to sew the moccasin together using a mock set of sole and top covering made of felt instead of leather. He gave us each a pattern to outline on the felt and cut out. We learned from beginning to end how the two came
together. It was so neat to see about 25 students each sewing and laughing and learning, through experience, the sacred art of moccasin-making.

Figure 21. Young student proudly displays her finished mock moccasin.

The thing I remember most is how strange the moccasin top pattern looked before it was sewed to the sole. I wore my moccasins frequently, but never notices how the top covering was shaped. It all made sense once I sewed it to the sole. This start to finish process taught me much better to understand the mechanics of moccasin making
than a PowerPoint or a handout would have because I saw it happen before my eyes and understood it through my whole body.

Once the other elder was ready to give us the sheepskin tanning lesson, we gave students the option to either continue with moccasin making or go outside to watch the tanning demonstration. Many people went outside to learn. The elder who taught the sheepskin tanning class was the same elder who taught us traditional foods the week before.

She brought two hides to be tanned. She explained to us that these sheepskins could become excellent mattresses. She explained that this is the way that traditional Diné people still sleep and in the morning, they roll up their mattress and begin the day. This is very healthy for one’s back.

We learned that the first step was to dunk the hides in soapy water to get them wet and stretchy and sanitized. The second step was to lay the hide fur-down on the earth. Then one uses wooden pegs gathered from nearby to nail the hide directly to the ground. One would stretch the hide out as they nailed it, she explained. She insisted that we do all these actions ourselves, and provided only verbal instructions. She said she believed in learning by doing. The students all gathered around and there were too many to do the small job. Those of us who did the “nailing” felt very privileged. The rest looked onward until it was their turn to practice the art. To see all of us gathered in a circle around this hide she skinned herself was inspiring. This circular learning format gave us a precious moment together where, once again, we learned through our whole
body. All the while we were joking, laughing, connecting and enjoying ourselves beneath the bright warm sunlight.

Figure 22. Elder gathers students around the hide to give verbal instructions before engaging in a hands-on learning experience.

After we nailed it to the ground, she spoke in Diné Bizaad and instructed us to take some tse chi’zhi or rough rocks. My clan sister and I were surprised that we understood her words. We knew what tse (rock) meant and we knew what chi’zhi (rough) meant. But we had never heard the two words used together in a sentence. We were learning the proper way to situate nouns and adjectives in a sentence and practiced language comprehension as we learned sheepskin tanning. I think that if an elder is intentional about it, language learning can easily be kinesthetically woven into crafts and skills lessons.
Figure 23. Elder has students stretch hide out on the earth before beginning buffing process.

At that point, we rubbed salt on the fleshy side of the hide and scrubbed the whole hide down with round, rough stones we collected nearby. This would make the fleshy side of the hide soft and pliable, as well as buff away any excess fat.

It was nice to see so many native youth and parents working away at polishing and salting the hides. I felt the feeling our elders talk about so often—the feeling of hozhó, or inner balance, inter-beauty, fulfillment, health and joy. For a few minutes as we were working together, connecting with the sacred dibé (sheep) who provided so much life and warmth to our people, everything seemed like it was going to be okay. We had each other and we had skills that would help us be healthy and independent from the volatile, unsustainable, American economy.
Once we finished this process, she told us to let the hide to dry in the sun. She said we could wash the hide again once it dried to clean and soften it. She then started on a second hide so that people who did not get to practice on the first hide could practice.

Figure 24. Students rub salt on the hide and prepare to polish it using rough stones.

Like the traditional foods class, students employed these skills long after the class was finished. Months later, when the fourth and final phase of our school was carried out, I was gifted a beautiful sheep skin by one of the students who tanned it using this exact method. It was soft, beautiful and ready for use. It sits in my home today.
The sense of community generated by this group learning experience was much different than my experience in public schools. In those contexts, each student was pitted against the other in a race to prove their worth based on grading system contrived by authorities outside themselves. Each sat at their own individual desk, working on their own individual papers, proving their own individual worth. If some failed and some succeed it was okay, because every student was responsible for only themselves.

In this context, however, we were all working on the exact same project and my success was inextricably bound to the success of the other students. That sense of competition was supplanted with laughter, comradery and excitement. We were not there to outdo each other; we were there to help each other learn and understand a very practical skill that we could all use in the future. There was less pressure to “achieve” and “succeed” because we were too busy being in the moment of learning, which engaged our whole bodies and connected us to the ecological world around us.

As we carried out the sheep skin tanning lesson, the weaving instructor was setting up his loom beneath a pop-up canopy. He had a large, beautiful loom and many weaving implements all around him. Beautiful carded and un-carded wool lie around in piles here and hung from the canopy there. He was preparing his demonstration/classroom outside by the entrance to the Township center to draw in passersby. Some people were intrigued to see the loom and joined in our school who were not expected that day.
Many people sat around him to listen to his knowledge. Surprisingly, we did not practice weaving. Instead, we listened to his stories around the art and history of weaving. He taught us through example the importance of creating a comfortable, outdoor space to work on weaving. When I think of all the old black and white pictures I’ve seen of our people weaving, they are always outside beneath the shade of a tree.

*Figure 25.* Facilitator employs oral teaching methods to discuss the art of weaving.

Another thing he discussed was the gender norms associated with weaving and how many people think it is a woman’s art—something he obviously challenged and disagreed with. Many people leaned in and listened to every word he spoke and offered their ideas in return.
Unfortunately, I had to leave in the middle of the class to prepare lunch for the participants. I was not fully present to give an accurate depiction of how the class might have went. What I do know, based on my very brief and distracted time sitting in, was that it was less hands-on and more focused on dialogue and oral teachings. I do also know that a great multitude of ideas were presented by the instructor on a great multitude of topics. In the short time I was there, he discussed Diné gender norms, the clan system, how to stay cool in the hot summer, the deeper meaning of the spindle, the importance of comfort and other topics. I only attended about 10% of the class so I can only imagine what other topics he covered.

The loom and weaving implements around him served more as a backdrop for oral teachings, which I found interesting. It contrasted with the other two classes which were very hands on and focused on helping students generate a final product. This instructor preferred to lecture to The People. When lunch was ready, many students remained with the weaving instructor, indicating that the oral nature of his teachings were engaging and exciting.

It showed to me once again that by having many different instructors we learn in many ways. Each instructor had the freedom to teach as they wished, whereas in Western contexts the range of acceptable pedagogical styles seems much narrower. This instructional freedom seems as important as the freedom of learners to learn what they wish. When everyone is given a blank slate to choose where, how and what they teach, the diverse nature of contemporary Diné pedagogy emerges naturally. We learned from every facet of the day.
Course 7, Fourth World: Diné Architecture/Communal Male Hoghan Construction

We collectively planned to build students in their knowledge towards more advanced topics. For many reasons, the fourth and final course of our summer school was unquestionably the most involved, the most difficult and the most groundbreaking. Even now, as I sit to write out the experience I am nervous, unsure if I could ever do it justice. I will now attempt, and undoubtedly fail, to describe the palpably exhilarating and electric experience that this historic learning experience offered me and many others.

To fully understand the importance of this event, it must be placed in proper historic and geographic context. We decided to build the hoghan at the very base of Sisnaajini, our eastern sacred mountain. This property is currently “owned” by a European-American couple who use the area as a summer training ground for horses. I met them by happenstance about two years prior while walking down the road near their house. They knew I was walking in prayer by looking at the eagle feather staff that I carried. The wife had a vague understanding that the mountain she lived beneath was sacred to Diné People. She explained to me that she had long prayed to connect with Diné people and support our connection to the mountain. She offered her property to us for prayer, camping or anything else we needed. We developed a relationship over the following months.

When I approached her about building a hoghan on her property she felt very honored and offered the land to help Diné people reconnect with their mountain. She eventually found a way to offer a parcel of the land in perpetuity to our collective.
The fact that European-American settlers joined us in our mission to reclaim our land is significant for several reasons. We Diné speak the name of this sacred mountain every day in our morning prayers; We draw pictures of this mountain on the floors of our hoghans through sacred sand painting ceremonies; We sing its name in a great many of our sacred songs; We wear t-shirts and make flyers with this mountain depicted on them for our community events. Yet, very few of us have ever seen it with our own eyes because we were displaced from this area decades ago.

In 1858—roughly 160 years prior to our hoghan construction—the United States government established Fort Garland at the base of Sisnaajini. This fort served as an outpost for Colonel Kit Carson and various military factions as they subdued Diné and Ute tribes in the area during the late 19th century. These tribes posed obstructions to encroaching European miners and settlers (Sabin, 1935). According to the museum that now stands in its place, it was constructed to “protect the earliest settlers in the San Luis Valley.” I have a different take than the majority of history books that frame Kit Carson as a legendary hero. This is the same man who oversaw the Long Walk and corresponding concentration camp where 7,000 of my ancestors were murdered by the United States empire.

There are few Diné People in the towns around our eastern sacred mountain. In contrast, the three other cardinal mountains of our people are surrounded by great populations of Diné. Even though the main road around Sisnaajini is nicknamed the “Historic Navajo Trail,” there is no established Diné community in the area. The fact that we were working side by side with European-American settlers the reclaim this land was
indeed historic. For the first time in 160 years, Diné people were establishing a cultural site that they had control over near the base of the eastern sacred mountain, assisted by the descendants of former colonizers.

Figure 26. Final draft of flyer to notify The People of the hoghan construction workshop.
The reclaiming of self in both concrete and metaphorical terms was very precious to me personally. I think we could all feel how special it was to return to a physical place outside of us and a spiritual place within us. We were returning not only to a mountain, but to our true selves, unfettered by the hegemony of American colonialism. We were creating a place where we could simply be who we are.

Figure 27. Young Diné men carry a dense pinon log to the construction site.
Over the span of four days (one day for each of the four sacred mountains) over 100 Diné people would come to Sisnaajini to soak in the view of our sacred mountain and contribute towards the construction of a traditional ceremonial house.

The eastern sacred mountain, like many things in Diné culture, is constructed as gendered and its constructed gender is male. There are two types of hoghans, a male hoghan and a female hoghan. The female hoghan is octagonal and rounded, whereas the male hoghan is diamond shaped. The instructors gathered materials for a male hoghan months prior intended for a different project. Thus, is worked out that we would build a male hoghan at a male mountain.

This seemed to be significant in that the whole course offered deep healing for many Diné men. They flocked from many corners of our homeland to build a place of prayer. At the risk of sounding gender-normative, I think that this practice allowed the men to feel a great deal of honor; They employed their strength and wit to create a hoghan for something a people outside of themselves. It gave them a chance to build not only hoghans, but brotherhoods. It seemed to give them a chance to express their masculinity in a positive, constructive manner. It made them visibly engaged. They were all smiles during the process and seemed to have increased self-esteem. The women of course assisted in almost all the same activities as the men, but were happy to let the male and masculine-centered students do what they did best; some of the logs were only able to be carried if several men worked together.

Once the hoghan was partially completed, the medicine man came to give some teachings to us in the hoghan. Women sat on the north side of the hoghan and men sat
on the south side of the hoghan. Certain individuals who did not conform to either gender identity sat at the east, on the cusp of each side. The medicine man began to talk. Without being prompted, his speech veered towards words of advice from an elder man to the younger men. He taught them the importance of carefully directing their “arrows” and being ready to be present for a family. By this he meant do not accidentally start a family in one place and another in another place without being able to be responsible to the life you help create. He discussed other issues. The whole experience felt like a kind of rite of passage for the younger men. With the women as their witness, the younger men were learning a healthy masculine expression both in theory and practice.

Another interesting facet of this class is that many “urban natives,” or Diné people who lived away from the culture in the nearby cities, had a chance to reconnect with their identity. As a Diné woman, I did not grow up around many Diné people. It was not until I reached my 20s that I was more thoroughly exposed to my homeland and culture. When I was 14 years old, however, my people hosted a kinaalda, or womanhood ceremony, for me. Even though this one of the only “Diné things” I had done in my life, it was a very precious to me and it stuck with me for the rest of my life. More than anything, it made me feel Diné. It made me feel like I belonged to a people and that I came from a place. This is a very special thing that seems to be as important as oxygen or water for a human being. Those with a vacant place where an identity should be often feel out of place or incomplete. This experience engaged many urban natives in a traditional activity with the rest of “their tribe,” and gave them the same
sense of belonging that I gained from the kinaalddá. Of course, this is mostly strong since I did not interview participants. Given my experience, however, I think it is a well-founded speculation.

Another stunning aspect of this lesson was how quickly the hoghan was built. It was an ambitious goal to build a full hoghan in a matter of four days, but we nearly did it. Our first task was to dig a 4-foot-deep impression in the earth that was about 25 by 20 feet. We completed this task the first morning we were there. Once this impression was created, we placed the three forked poles that would support the rest of the structure in symbolic, ceremonial fashion. We then placed the rest of the logs against this initial frame. We then fashioned the hallway that extended from this conical side towards the east. We had to shape the logs with chainsaws so they would all fit together nicely. Once the frame was finished, we had to plaster the whole structure with a special mixture of dirt, water and cedar bark strips. This process was not initiated until the third day.

The young men worked all day in the hot sun and we nearly had to force them to leave their work to eat lunch and dinner. They seemed to have tunnel vision and worked collectively in an orchestrated way.
Figure 28. Young people test the strength of the hoghan tripod and delineate the foundation of the hoghan at sunset on the first day.
Figure 29. On day two rotating crews dig the foundation swiftly (Roberto Nutlouis, 2017, permission granted for photo use).
Figure 30. Crew begins to build out the western side of the hoghan (Roberto Nutlouis, 2017, permission granted for photo use).
Figure 31. Diné crew works to put founding hogan logs in place (Roberto Nutlouis, 2017, permission granted for photo use).
Figure 32. Completed west side of hoghan (Roberto Nutlouis, 2017, permission granted for photo use).
Figure 33. Crew begins to build eastern hallway (Roberto Nutlouis, 2017, permission granted for photo use).
Figure 34. Young students mix plaster for hoghan exterior (Roberto Nutlouis, 2017, permission granted for photo use).
Figure 35. Semi-built eastern hallway and semi-plastered hogan (Roberto Nutlouis, 2017, permission granted for photo use).
Figure 36. Team works to plaster hoghan on fourth day (Roberto Nutlouis, 2017, permission granted for photo use).
Figure 37. Nearly completed male hoghan (Sarah Martin, 2017, permission granted for photo use).
Figure 38. Team returns to place finishing touches (Roberto Nutlouis, 2017, permission granted for photo use).
This was the first time any of us had ever built a male style *hoghan* but we had incredible leadership from the Black Mesa Water Coalition, a Diné initiated and operated non-profit. I found it interesting that much of the instruction was entrusted to the Black Mesa Water Coalition Fellows, a group of teenage boys. These young men help to direct the slew of volunteers towards a common goal and organized the labor very efficiently.
Hoghan Reflections

This learning experience was immense. To have over 100 Diné people trickle in and out over four days, with the bulk of them staying all four days, created a deep bonding experience between us all. Native schools from New Mexico and Arizona brought student-groups to camp and learn. The fact that we camped out for the four days also integrated our learning experience with all the natural elements. The wind came strongly. The sun shone intensely. The work was full of dust and sweat and intense focus. I felt as if I had to feed all The People three meals a day (something I felt differently about later, as I will explain in the fourth phase of the school). This entailed a good amount of outdoor camp cooking, dish washing, trash hauling, etc.

Interpersonal conflicts came up for the first time in our school. Maintaining group harmony is an important element of 21st century Indigenous education. I do not pretend to have an answer to this except to find a balance between making everyone feel welcomed, loved and respected on one hand and having clear boundaries on the other hand. This is challenging in Native communities where the intergenerational trauma is so immense that it becomes difficult to relate to each other in healthy ways. While these behavioral issues are not our fault, but are the result of 500 years of sustained torture on behalf of colonizing forces, it still effects our pedagogical practice. It showed us how important it is to have places and procedures to process conflict, neither of which we had arranged. Thus, we did our best to mediate for each other and hold patience. Optimal results were not always achieved and schisms formed between learners. The great majority of learners, however, did not experience any conflicts.
A major reflection of the hoghan lesson and of the school in general was its focus on self-sufficiency and sustainability. Turns out that when The People get to choose what they teach and how to teach it, they tend towards a curriculum of sustainable, self-created solutions. The hoghan is an ingenious form of architecture. Due to the passive insulation technologies of our ancestors, it remains cool in the summer and warm in the winter. Unlike most Western buildings, it is made of completely non-toxic materials. These materials are not only safe, they also have a wonderful, adobe aroma that gives me a sense of comfort and calm.

Once it is built, we don’t owe any mortgage. Materials are harvested by hand and aside from the fossil fuels needed to transport the logs, we were not dependent on outside sources to create it. I think the course was so popular, drawing Diné people from every corner of Diné Bikeyah, because this is the kind of thing that our hearts yearn for. We yearn to be independent of a system that doesn’t care for us or for the ecological web we are a part of. We yearn to be self-determined not just on paper but in real life. We yearn to regain the power to take care of each other and the whole world. These skills give us that power.

Once the last course was over, I went home filled with awe and wonder. While it was anything but perfect, I couldn’t believe that our dreams and our planning would yield such an incredible curriculum. My faith in my people was deeper than ever. To see the immense amount of creativity, intelligence, passion, wisdom and joy spring forth from their bodies, minds, voices and hearts brought me to tears many times. I felt very proud to be a part of such a people. I started to see that I was finally becoming educated
according to my elder’s standards, The People I respected infinitely more than a system that consistently generated poverty, violence and ecological disaster in its wake. Even now, I have a hard time comprehending the amazing beauty that manifested during the *liná*, or birthing phase.

**Sii Hasin: The Harvest**

One might think that with the *liná* phase over, the school itself was over. But according to our very thorough ancestors, there was still a fourth step: *Sii Hasin*. This has been translated as hope, reassurance, fulfillment and reflection. It is connected to the fourth mountain and is associated with old age. I was excited to learn what this meant not only in theory but in practice.

For the *Sii Hasin* phase, during fall equinox, the group decided to return to the *hoghan* for a *hoghan* blessing ceremony. What I liked about this phase was that the group organized the whole thing without any of my help. In fact, due to a scheduling conflict, I could not attend the first few days of the gathering. The school project began with me creating the space for people to gather, feeding everyone, running logistics and making sure nothing slipped through the cracks. By the fourth phase I was entirely unneeded and I was surprised. I felt like I would have made Paolo Freire proud to know I did not become one of those “revolutionary leaders” who positioned themselves at the forefront of the movement. It reminds me of what my good friend Xiuhtezcatl Martinez has said in his speeches: “I don’t want followers; I want to create leaders.”

By the time I showed up, the fire was burning, everyone was fed, the camp was established and the ceremony was organized. I believe that the only reason this school
became self-sustaining is because it directly grew from the hearts of the students and teachers. The top-down policy approach is a sure way to create a passionless workforce. It does not belong to The People and therefore The People are not invested. One usually resorts to coercion, offering payment, arbitrary social capital or other forms of false partnership to get them to show up every day. If it is something The People believe in, on the other hand, you cannot stop them from coming back and giving it their all. It is theirs.

It was so nice to sit in our beautiful, fully finished hoghan and pray all night long. We sang our sacred chants until the sun came up. In the middle of the night, I gazed at the fire in the center. I watched the smoke spiral its way out of the opening in the roof. As I peered out of the symbolic opening, I saw a cropping of brilliant stars shining down on us. I looked around the circle and I saw Diné people of all ages, mostly youth, singing and learning the endangered songs of their ancestors. I saw my sisters sitting to the right of me, the ones who worked so hard to create a cradle for all of this to emerge. I looked across the fire and saw my brother who had cooked countless meals for The People so they could focus on their work. I saw the elderly father of the medicine man weeping as he expressed how happy he was that we had built this hoghan and that we saw our culture as something valuable. I felt my own understanding of the songs building and increasing as I tried to recognize patterns and phrases. Pride, joy and fulfillment filled my entire being.

That night I learned the true meaning of Sii Hasin. It is a harvest of the fruits of our dreams and plans. We worked so hard to build this curriculum and build this
hogan. We didn’t cut any corners, and treated the journey as a destination in and of itself. And now, we had the joy of sitting inside our finished creation. We could look back on all we had created and enjoy the fruition of our collective labor. People brought their produce from their fields and we feasted. We butchered a sheep and had plenty to eat. We had something under our belts that made us feel accomplished and able.

Indeed, we were full of hope, reassurance and fulfillment.

I knew that my initial prayer to this mountain and all the other prayers we laid down were foundational to our success. I knew that because of these prayers we were not working alone. We surrounded all the time by legions of ancestors and by the great Creative Force that permeates and gives life to all things. I thank the Diyin Diné’e for giving us such a precious journey in Diné education liberation.
Results: The Nature of Liberated Diné Pedagogy

While the results of this collective experiment may not be generalizable to the whole of the Diné Nation, I think what ensued does point towards some important aspects of our traditional pedagogy.

Intergenerational

The most obvious facet of liberated Diné education is its intergenerational nature. We do not stratify classes into age groups. Our focus on k’é means that we must learn how to be older sisters, older brothers, maternal grandfathers, paternal grandfathers, nieces, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. How can I learn to be an older sister if all The People around me are the same age as me? We tend towards creating a family experience that reflects our love for treating everyone as if they were related to us.

Decentralized

Our school occurred in many places. This is how our ancestors lived: the field was our lab, the earth was our classroom, the fire was our teacher and every single day was another unique experience in the Creation’s great lesson plan of life. This is in sharp contrast to the monotonous routine that schoolchildren endure today, where their dynamic potential to learn is stymied by a lack of different learning environments. Who knows? This may be the explanation for what our society writes off as “teenage angst.” Are the youth incapable of meeting the demands of the public school agenda? Or is the public school agenda incapable of meeting the demands of adolescent development, with its inherent and insatiable desire for dynamism, community and meaningful application of knowledge?
Experiential

Eight of ten instructors chose to integrate experiential learning into their lesson. Diné people are very much about seeding, nourishing and sustaining iini, life. This is a very physical pursuit as it involves created physical structures that cradle life. It is not surprising to me that our dreams, planners and instructors tended towards a learning-by-doing pedagogical style.

Community-Sufficiency

The whole curriculum tended towards providing the next generations with skills they could use to be interdependent and community-sufficient. We were beginning to learn how to take care of each other on a local and regional scale. As we can see from the first two hoghan discussions, this cohort sees how socially and ecologically precarious the American way of life really is. Not only is it harmful to others to live the American way of life, it is also founded on a globalized monoculture economy that is highly susceptible to collapse and geopolitical disruption. We have stories about many worlds being born and being destroyed. We know that the fourth world in on the descent and the fifth is on its way. Based on the hoghan discussions I found that I was not alone in my desire to rebuild a healthy, sustainable culture that we could depend on and share with others.

Ceremonial

Much of our classes were mediated by ceremony. For Diné people the hoghan serves not only as a dwelling space, but as a place of meditation and prayer. Thus, we do not separate ceremonial life and everyday life because life is a ceremony. The sacred
enterprise of existing and growing was acknowledged and supported by cultural structures. It does not surprise me, then, that from thought, to seed, to sprout, to harvest education is ceremony for this cohort.

Ecological

Nineteen out of thirty-one dreamers expressed a desire to learn ecological knowledge. This is defined as a skill or practice that involves working with soil, flora, fauna or the larger regional landscape. For centuries, we have designated ourselves as protectors of the earth. Yet, Nihimá Nahadzáán, Our Mother Earth, is unravelling all around us due to resource extraction, water pollution, dwindling stewardship practices and more. The pain of being a self-identified defender of the earth whilst that same earth gets beaten and bruised all around you is profoundly psychologically troubling. One starts to feel as if they are failing at their primary job. By gaining skills and abilities to take care of her and create solutions helps us to heal that loss of collective self-esteem. Thus, I am not surprised that Diné pedagogy tends towards the ecological and the sustainable.

Traditional

By and large this cohort tended towards traditional content areas. Traditional is defined here as those topics and skills that were practiced by our ancestors. In Martinez’s book, native children chose Western classes because they were “more essential,” while at the same time their heart yearned to spend time in Native American Studies courses. In the public-school context and in larger society, the social capital and social mobility of Native students is held hostage unless they bend towards assimilation.
In this context, however, where this hostage situation was nowhere to be found, The People tended towards ancestral curricula and epistemology.

**Communal/Kinship-Based**

Our learning was built from community and was an expression of community. Everything from how we fed ourselves, to how we made decisions, to where we held classes, to how we taught, to how we travelled, to how we publicized the school was a communal effort. This contrasts with my Western schooling experiences. School is isolated from the community and students very rarely have a chance to interact with humanity in its natural state. A kind of artificial reality is conjured where there are only administrators, pupils and teachers—no mothers, fathers, neighbors, grandparents, community leaders, babies or role models. All the while society hums outside of the classroom. This expression of Diné pedagogy, however, helped to root students in real environments with real community.

**Place-based**

It became clear over time that we couldn’t learn our topics in “any old place.” There were specific places where specific kinds of learning had to occur. Because our strategic framework was matched with the four sacred mountains, our learning was most appropriate in these places. Furthermore, to learn ancestral ecological skills and crafts, we had to be in the deserts of our ancestors where these ecological materials existed. I can study chemistry in Germany or Australia or Peru, but the traditional songs can only be learned in their full glory in the places that these songs talk about. We are an endemic culture and like an endemic species we cannot exist as we currently exist
anywhere besides within the four sacred mountains. Thus, our curriculum was
intimately connected to the place our cultural knowledge was born of.

**Consensual**

Every dreamer, every planner, every teacher and every student who was a part
of this school came by their own volition. Some drove many hours to be able to attend
the overflowing classes. No forms of coercion were employed to get people to
participate.

**Synergistic**

The pedagogy that emerged merged our personal knowledge bases so that we
were smarter together. Several instructors employed a teaching style that invited the
entire group to chime in and teach what they knew about the topic. Furthermore, by
partnering with many pre-established non-profits, community centers, land-holders and
community leaders we found ourselves much more powerful than if we tried to create
our own isolated program. Thirdly, our collective capacity was increased by sharing and
passing off leadership. Nobody had to do too much work and nobody had too much
power. We were not threatened by each other’s ability to lead, but fluidly transforming
from instructor to student to organizer to friend, in a single day.

**Healing**

In accordance with the medicine traditions of our ancestors, the school became
a place for people to heal. Many tears were shed and healing laughter was provided
throughout the learning process. People were healing primarily from psychological
issues such as depression, isolation and identity loss. The ceremonial nature of our
classes also allowed us to practice our tradition of spiritual healing. To me this means having a bodily experience of being filled with the Creative Force that permeates the world. Sometimes there are blockages where we cannot feel beauty or hope or joy but through ceremony, Diné people restore that unseen substance within the body such that we are have more mental and emotional strength and peace. Since many physical illnesses are somatic in nature, influenced by stress or other emotional realities, we healed the physical by healing the mental-spiritual-emotional self.

Gendered

The content areas and instructional methods were often gendered, as is most of Diné culture. For instance, the women dressed very specifically in the way of the traditional grandmothers (skirts, woven belts, long hair ties). The stirring sticks were framed as “women’s weapons.” The hogan was a “male hogan.” The songs we learned talk about “white corn meal boy” and “yellow corn meal girl.” Given that many of our youth identify with a gender opposite of their sex, this gendered classroom caused some awkward situations. Some teachings placed males on one side and females on the other, forcing students to choose. While this traditional framework may not serve the contemporary population fully, I think that the original intention of this gendered format was designed with good intentions that served the population of the times. For instance, I think these frameworks were originally designed to help students find a healthy way to express their womanhood or manhood. They were designed to give masculine-identifying and feminine-identifying people guidance on how to be both and also to give them an honorable and fulfilling position in the larger community.
Nevertheless, it was clear that the traditional framework was not pliable enough to help all participants feel safe and welcomed. This warrants further discussion such that every individual can be honored.

**Skills/Craft-Based**

Our people tended to want to teach and learn practical skills and crafts. Our people and all the world’s people used to derive their livelihood from local materials that were crafted locally as well. We did not have Wal-Mart or Walgreens or other symptoms of a globalized economy where citizens no longer need to know how to create things for themselves. Our traditional life was self-made. Perhaps for this reason the crafts (from *hoghans*, to tanned sheep hides, to moccasins, to rugs, to traditional culinary dishes) seemed to be important to this cohort.

**Practical**

Our curriculum designers tended to teach skills that could be immediately applicable in the world of the students.

**Outdoor**

Every single lesson had at least some component occur outdoors. Six out nine lessons occurred completely outdoors. The pedagogy preferred by this group was all about experiencing the earth with one’s whole being. Like most earth-surface beings, our people tended to prefer an outdoor existence.

**Popular**

Our pedagogical practice had inherent within it a form of grassroots publicity primarily through the medium of social media. We did not pay for advertisements. We
simply put our flyers out on the internet. Perhaps because the curriculum was built by The People, it excited The People. Our humble hogan building flyer was reposted on Facebook 467 times and reached the eyes of over 40,000 people. We did not pay for increased reach but shared this flyer on a Facebook page with very little traffic. The fact that it travelled so far with such a small push indicated to me that we were successful in resonating with the hearts of The People.

**Successful**

While our pedagogical approach certainly was not perfect, it did seem to educate students effectively and reach its educational objectives. The fact that students would employ these techniques, months after the lesson had occurred, indicated to me that these lessons were so important to the students that they stuck with them into the realm of individual practice.

**Methodical**

True to the systematic thinking of Diné ancestors, this pedagogical practice was thorough and thoughtful. The steps of collective decision making and planning as outlined by the Nitsáhakees-Nahat’á-íiná-Sii Hasin framework were strategically designed by the ancestors over millennia of observation, theorizing and practice. We cut no corners in our school design and implementation. Furthermore, our instructors came prepared with a thoughtful lesson plan ready for our enjoyment. It was clear that they put a lot of forethought into what they would teach and how they would teach it. The curriculum was created with intention and vision, a journey that brought us, step by step, to an ultimate state of understanding.
Seeding/Growing Leaders

The school planning process created space for natural leaders to emerge. In a school where the curriculum is decided by people outside of ourselves, a person’s natural skills and abilities do not always fit into the predetermined picture. But when given freedom to choose, The People’s gifts could freely assume their place as instruments of collective guidance.

Self-led

It was very interesting to see how the fourth phase of the process did not have a leader. Rather, without any oversight, people naturally fell into roles that needed filling. Certain groups headed the dish washing and cooking. Others oversaw the coordination of ceremonial preparation. Still others ensured elders had sufficient gas money.

Self-sustaining

The first three phases I provided the funding for the food and cooked when my brother could not. The fourth phase I expressed to the group that we had run out of funding and could use some help with food. To my surprise many individuals brought food items. We feasted again and again and still had too much food left over. Because the curriculum and its direction made sense to the students, they eventually became invested to the point of taking on the whole enterprise. By the end of the cycle, I was completely unneeded.

Engaging

One thing I noticed at every class was how excited and engaged the students and teachers were. People travelled from very far, asked many questions and felt more
invested than most classes I attended in Western schools. In public schools, it is often very challenging to maintain student attention or bring them all into the fold. Again, I wonder if this is a deficiency on behalf of the students (as they are told) or if it is a deficiency of pedagogical style. I believe it was the consensual basis of the school that provided fertile soil for self-driven learning.

**Easy lifting**

I have been a dedicated community organizer for about a decade now. I always operated under the assumption that it was the leader’s job to direct and create the movement, which is why Friere’s articulations were so profound for me. I then returned to the community-consensus model of my ancestors. Through this practice I realized that by allowing The People’s ideas to lead we had a much more involved population. The old saying that many hands make light work only applies to a group whose hands are inspired to put in the work. Because this project grew from the hearts of The People our hands were all excited and ready to contribute. I’ve never experienced such an easy organizing experience. I realized that a community based pedagogy is an inherently easier pedagogy to implement due to its increased community buy-in and community motivation.

**Mobile**

This liberated Diné education practice was a moving practice. This may because of our emphasis on weaving k’é. To forge new relationships and build upon old ones, we needed to visit our relatives across the land. If we were to stay in a single schooling facility, we would lose out on the ability to make relations with people and their
homesites. We have always been a travelling people who moved with to the rhythm of seasons. Many of our songs are about walking, horseback riding, and journeying. Thus, our pedagogical practice reflects this mobile cultural idiosyncrasy.

**Implications**

The implications of this study reach far beyond the realm of educators. The efficacy of community decision-making can be applied to any context involving a collective. Furthermore, it begs us to question why some projects don’t involve The People in collective decision-making processes and if such projects might be immensely improved if they did. Businesses, workplaces, tribal councils, student organizations, neighborhoods, athletic teams and a multitude of other human groups could benefit from this simple concept of *having faith in The People*. If other leaders are anything like me they have a deep-seated fear and distrust of the empowerment of others. The results of this study, however, imply that if we can take the leap of faith and place our trust in The People, we may be pleasantly surprised and humbled. Results can be liberating not only to the community but to the organizer as well.

This study also indicates that the current state of “Indian education” may not be genuine. All day long our tribal councils encourage their children to attend and succeed in Western public schools and universities. We have a popular song that is sung in various native school functions that says, “Go my son. Go and climb the ladder. Go my son. Get an education. Go my son. Go and earn your feather.” But when given full reign over what was taught and how it is taught, The People tend towards an education that Western schools could never provide.
Perhaps the reason many tribal peoples push a Western education is not because we genuinely appreciate it or want it, but because our very livelihoods and social standing are held hostage unless we conform to the norm. Without this pressure, however, The People choose a wildly different form of education that has very little to do with Western standards and institutions. It makes me wonder how I can create a world where Indigenous People can have the social, financial, spatial and community support to simply live how they want to live, instead of compromising authenticity for the sake of survival.

Another important implication to Indigenous Peoples is that our ancestral frameworks are very effective guides for contemporary learning. The Nitsáhakees-Nahat’á-liná-Sii Hasin framework is one of thousands if not tens of thousands of Indigenous planning strategies that exist throughout the world. Why not employ these methods to generate an education that is rooted in the tried and true wisdom of our ancestors? People are ignorant to think that Indigenous Peoples lacked sophisticated education systems. Our knowledge and the way it was transferred was so advanced that we were able to live and thrive in one land for thousands of years without destroying it. For most tribes, we still have these systems at our disposal or at least partial versions of them. It is time to stop dumping our energy into Western education, which is spreading across the globe and flattening humanity’s pedagogical diversity. It is time for us to breathe new life into our people’s structures, symbols, stories, songs and frameworks to guide the next generation of leaders and learners. For what message are we giving our children if we spend all our time in Western institutions playing the Western game? We
are telling them, through our actions, that our people’s institutions are not worthy of our time and are therefore inferior or unimportant. In the worst case, our children come to believe these institutions are worthless altogether. This study implicated that our ancestral frameworks are incredibly powerful, effective and healing. In what ways can you leverage your nation’s frameworks to generate collective self-esteem and catalyze effective change?

Conclusion

My personal journey began with a prayer to the eastern sacred mountain to create a hoghan building curriculum. This prayer sent me to my first epiphany: that it wasn’t my place to define what “the right” curriculum was for my people. Instead, it was my task work towards educational sovereignty or risk enacting the same paternalism of American assimilationist policy. This transformed the project from a mission to create a hoghan curriculum, to a mission to discover and support whatever The People wanted to teach and learn.

Despite deliberate and aggressive disenfranchisement of Diné epistemologies on behalf of the United States government, this intergenerational cohort of Diné leaders expressed great value for our ancestral ways of learning and knowing. Based on a Spider Woman Analysis of what was said during the initial planning meetings, when given the freedom to choose, The People chose to focus on following curricular content areas in order or popularity:

1. *Ch’iiyaan/Kéyah* (Food/Land)
2. *Adá’ Akowhiindzin* (Identity)
3. *Diné Bizaad* (Our Language)

4. *Diné Bihane'* (Creation Story)

5. *Nayee’* (Assaults on Our Land and People)

6. Architecture (*Chaha'oh/Hoghan*)

7. *Hataał dóó Sodizin* (Songs and Prayers)

8. *K’é* (Principles of Kinship)

9. *Txáche’* (Sweat Lodge)

10. *Diyogi* (Weaving)

11. *Tó* (Water Day)

12. *łii’* (Horse Knowledge)

13. Treaties/Government

14. Healing Trauma

15. Traditional Crafts

16. Digital Media

   The manifestation of The People’s self-driven pedagogy was socially, intellectually, spiritually and pragmatically potent. The instructional practice that emerged in this liberated space was (among other things):

   - Intergenerational
   - Geographically Decentralized
   - Experiential
   - Community-Sufficiency Focused
   - Ceremonial
• Ecological
• Traditional
• Communal
• Place-Based
• Kinship-based
• Consensual
• Synergistic
• Healing
• Gendered
• Skills/Craft Based
• Practical
• Outdoor
• Popular
• Methodical
• Systematic
• Seeding/Growing Community Leaders
• Self-Led
• Self-Sustaining
• Engaging
• Easier to Implement Due to Shared Leadership and Responsibility
• Mobile
This contrasted sharply with my experiences in American public schools and universities, which tended to cater to my intellect in narrowly defined, indoor, non-consensual spaces.

Another conclusion to be drawn from my experience is that our traditional collective processes, such as the Nitsáhakees-Nahat’á-liná-Sii Hasin strategic framework, are fully capable of supporting effective community curriculum development. This process entailed four different group meetings during the equinoxes and solstices of a single year. The first stage allowed us to dream without limits and brainstorm in ceremonial context. The second stage allowed us to form a feasible plan for operationalizing these dreams. The third stage was a time for the full-blown implementation of our summer school that was beautiful beyond words. This fourth stage culminated with a hoghan construction workshop that gathered over 100 Diné people to their eastern sacred mountain for a priceless learning experience. The fourth stage provided a time for us to enjoy the fruits of our labor by simply enjoying our time together and holding traditional ceremonies within the hoghan we had built.

This experiment in placing complete faith in The People was scary and unfamiliar because I am a recovering “control freak.” Yet, it taught me profound lessons. The difference between deciding a curriculum for people and co-creating a curriculum with people may be compared to the difference between drawing with a charcoal pencil and painting with an infinite array of colors. The co-created curriculum is dynamic, engaging, mind-blowing at times and far greater than anything I could have achieved on my own.
This self-study implies that we can heal a long legacy of Indigenous epistemological disenfranchisement by consciously creating liberated educational spaces. This act is particularly poignant in the context of settler-colonialism. Here, The People’s precious knowledge was de-valued and marginalized for centuries before these colonizing forces ever understood what they were destroying. It is incumbent upon us as Indigenous Peoples to not internalize this hatred for who and what we are and reclaim the beauty and praxis of our ancestral curricula.

Finally, this study urges people of any background, working in any context, to practice the profound art of *sharing power*. Only when we have the courage to honor the choices and the voices of the collective, in an earnest attempt to understand and learn from one another, can we truly benefit from the exquisite gifts that only a collective can provide.
References


Appendices

Appendix A: Research Site

This educational experiment took place in Diné Bikeyah, or the Navajo Homeland, spanning parts of what is now known as Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona and Utah. The group decided to have a multi-site school made available for students throughout the homeland. All in all, lessons were planned and taught in seven locations near five different communities (Leupp, Arizona; Fort Defiance, Arizona; Coalmine Canyon, Arizona; Lupton, Arizona; Kayenta, Arizona; and Blanca, Colorado).

Appendix B: Research Setting

About 60 Diné people came together to design the curriculum itself over two dreaming and planning meetings. This number is a function of community interest and outreach ability. The organizers/participants of the summer school were an intergenerational group, some as old as 78 and some as young as two. Some were medicine men, some were teenage boys and girls, some were organizers and community leaders, some were grandmothers, some were traditionalists, some were recovering from drug addiction, some were single mothers and some were urban Diné looking for a connection to their cultural roots. The main subject of study was myself. Due to the time allotted for study/analysis and the insights offered by auto-ethnography, this was an appropriate sample size.

Appendix C: Researcher Positionality

My positionality was that of a 28-year-old woman working to reclaim my roots. My mother is "full-blooded" Diné (save for her one German-Jewish great-grandfather
who operated a trading post in Diné Bikeyah long ago). My father is of mixed heritage from Oklahoma including southern Indigenous nations, relocated Indigenous nations and various European nations.

Within the study, I was a co-organizer, a student, a leader, a follower and a woman with a deep love and appreciation for the culture of my ancestors. I did profoundly affect the research setting in that I made the initial call for The People to gather. I also affected it as a major fundraiser. My “job” as I saw it was to ensure that The People were fed and sheltered so that they could focus on their dreams, plans and implementation. I also affected the setting by deliberately co-creating spaces where The People could freely express themselves. I did not, however, offer my ideas during the initial planning stages as I sought to follow the lead of The People. I did help to shape the ideas that were put forth into a coherent schedule and program of study. Once the instructors and students had everything they needed in terms of funding and communication channels, I reverted to the role of a student of the summer school.

Appendix D: Data Collection Methods

In line with the tradition of retrospective, reflexive ethnography, I rely more on data recollection than data collection. That is, these research findings are drawn from the memories of my experience. The auto-ethnographic style as outlined by Ellis, Adams & Bochner revolves around, “epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture” (2011, p. 276). Thus, the final report emerges from a presentation and analysis of my epiphanies and memories emerging from this experience.
After a full year of co-creating a summer school with my kin, the following months were reserved for data recollection, analysis and write-up. In this phase, I generated data in the form of an exhaustive list of personal epiphanies as they related to the what and the how of our learning process. In the analysis of this list, autoethnographers simultaneously, “consider their own level of connectedness to space, place, time, and culture” (Whitinui, 2014, p. 12).

Appendix E: Limitations of Study

A major limitation of this study is that it is not generalizable to the whole of Diné people. The dreaming and planning process was open to the public but the group that came was undoubtedly skewed towards the traditionalist point of view. There is a large faction of Christian Diné people, for instance, that did not have a large presence in the group. It should be noted that our nation, with a population of over 300,000 people, cannot be represented by any one cohort. Similarly, “Diné Pedagogy,” as it were, cannot be represented by any single pedagogical form. The present study simply seeks to shed light on the possibilities of education outside of the colonial box. This study also hopes to provoke our imaginations to ask, ‘if this is possible, what else might be possible in other corners of the Diné community, or in other Indigenous communities around the world...’

Appendix F: Review of Literature

This review analyzes 6 texts and their treatment of three themes: 1) Indigenous community curriculum development, 2) discussions of Indigenous ways of teaching and learning, and 3) education liberation (self-determination) in the Indigenous context.
Teresa McCarthy’s *A Place to be Navajo: Rough Rock and the struggle for self-determination in Indigenous schooling* (2002) discusses a community education experiment in Rough Rock, Arizona. She presents the history of the school from 1966-1996 as a story of pedagogical openness and empowerment of Diné community members to educate themselves. The curriculum that emerged in this semi-liberated space centered around a bilingual and bicultural education. Specifically, she reports that the school taught TESL, science, Diné arts and crafts, mental and spiritual health and agriculture, with an emphasis on “funds of knowledge” and “informal knowledge” of community members (p. 87).

This study discusses at length a Diné liberated education space of the past that involved fluent speakers as students. It does not discuss contemporary contexts or contexts where learners have English as their first language, as is the case for the proposed study.

Kathryn Manuelito’s (2005) study focuses on how the Ramah Diné community defines and operationalizes self-determination. Much of the article details how, once given the freedom to choose, teachers gravitated towards traditional content and instructional methods. A list was compiled of what an “educated” Ramah person should know, according to Ramah teachers. Of the 31 items on this list, only four had to do with “contemporary” (i.e. Western) knowledge sets.

However, this article studies Diné instructors as they operate in a public-school context. It’s discussion of self-determination is helpful and supports the findings of my study. However, it does not represent a truly liberated space as defined here where
teachers can teach whatever they want, \textit{wherever} they want.

Julie Davis's (2013) book focuses on curriculum development in the 1960s in the Twin Cities in Native American “Survival Schools.” Her study revealed that these Indigenous communities worked to generate a political-consciousness within their students and even employed political protest as an instructional method. Their creation of adult education for incarcerated Indigenous peoples in Minnesota prisons shows their flexibility and ability to teach and learn outside of the classroom box. Their high school class learned within a “‘circle room,’ where the cultural, political, and community dimensions of the curriculum intertwined” (p. 151). This shows us that, when given the liberty to design their own education, native communities create highly innovative curricula that address their needs as oppressed political groups.

The study does focus on the urban context, whereas our study will occur within a rural context. A major emphasis of this cohort is learning about Ch’iィyaan dóó Nihkeyah, or our land and food. Thus, Davis’s study does not point directly to what may occur within the \textit{land-based} liberated context present in the proposed research setting.

Wendy Geniusz’s (2009) book treats the preferred teaching methods of Anishinaabeg (also known as Ojibwe) traditionalists. She posits that gikendaasowin (teachings) are preferably transmitted through izhitwaawin (traditional institutions). She maintains that in this process gikendaasowin are learned through dreams, animal observation, stories, songs, oral teachings, spirits, apprenticeships, birch bark scrolls, personal notebooks, recording devices and picture writings (pp. 67-85). This opens those of us who are indoctrinated in Western ways of teaching and learning to exciting
new dimensions of knowledge transmission. It affirms and celebrates the diversity of teaching methods and encourages researchers to expect the unexpected when studying the “how” of liberated pedagogy.

Brian Lewthwaite et al. (2013) conducted participatory action research to explore the nature of culturally responsive teaching and learning within Yukon Indigenous communities. Interviews with 51 Indigenous peoples of the learning community (students, parents, teachers and former teachers) revealed eight characteristics of this community’s learning priorities and styles. Of most relevance to the present study is the eighth theme: “learning was not abstract; instead it was connected to students’ lives and prior learning” (p. 120). This theme is triangulated with what our cohort has said thus far: that they prefer learning that is practical and useful for their lives today and they prefer to teach and learn through doing.

Brayboy & Castagno (2009) echo Lewthwaite et al. through their comprehensive study of culturally responsive schools across the U.S. The end policy recommendation is that, “Diverse curricular materials must be both immediately relevant to and mirror the students’ lives” (p. 49).

What we know after a review of the literature is that liberated Indigenous curriculum tends towards traditionalist, practical and politically motivated themes. We also know that the process of liberated Indigenous education tends toward highly creative, community- based, spiritually-mediated and culturally-guided instructional methodologies.

What we still do not know after this review is what kind of education occurs in
liberated spaces for Diné people in *this generation* of teachers and learners. Each study holds some characteristics of my community, but not one represents the totality of *my* community’s circumstance. We are Diné teachers and learners within a rural, contemporary, primarily English-speaking space, where achievement is defined by teachers and learners themselves, outside of the confines of Western public schools.

It is not surprising that the literature fails to treat our situation since Diné freedom in the here and now is an especially unique subject area. Indeed, it is a research setting that disappears and reappears with each new generation. Because critical pedagogy posits that truly liberated spaces must be defined by the learning community themselves, and because an educational experiment like Rough Rock has not occurred for a full generation in the Diné context, a refreshed study of the proposed topic is in order. Thus, the nature of the research question itself is supported and informed by these texts, but not fully answered. We needed to explore these things for ourselves to embody the beauty and potency of education liberation.