

[PERSPECTIVE]

Global Indigenous Studies: The Navajo Technical University Experience

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As Linda Tuhiwai Smith points out, “When Indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed. Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently, and people participate on different terms” (2012, 196).

Global studies, and to a lesser degree, global Indigenous studies, are growing fields in colleges and universities across the United States. How can we ensure that global and global Indigenous studies combat “othering” practices and align with postcolonial practices (Tuhiwai Smith 2012; Battiste 2016)? In other words, do current efforts to internationalize post-secondary institutions avoid reinventing the colonial methodology that perpetuates asymmetries in the curriculum?

This is where our work can help to set standards and practices. We codirect a joint Navajo Technical University–Indiana University project entitled GALACTIC (Global Arts Language Arts Culture Tradition Indigenous Communities). Over the past few years, GALACTIC has been looking at new ways to conduct global Indigenous studies. As part of this work, we are establishing a global Indigenous studies curriculum at Navajo Tech in Crownpoint, New Mexico.

We understand and construct our effort as global Indigenous education that arises from Indigenous communities, rather than as a Eurocentric study of the “other.” A colonial approach to global studies results in an imagined “utopian” Western society that erases the endless

variation of people, their languages, and their actual ways of life. This colonial approach appropriates, romanticizes, and misinterprets Indigenous ways of life and ways of knowing. A global Indigenous studies approach—emerging from traditional homes such as the Navajo (Diné) *hogan* or the Tuvan *yurt* or the Bedouin *beit al-sha’r*—is grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, n.d.). According to Marlene Castellano (2000), Indigenous knowledges are personal, orally transmitted, experiential, holistic, and narrative.

The Global Indigenous Approach

At Navajo Tech, global Indigenous studies is rooted in an Indigenous institution of higher learning. When we first began creating GALACTIC, we asked ourselves whether it was possible to globalize curricula at Navajo Tech—or any Indigenous institution—when the local struggles and challenges are so immediate and dire. Attending to the global seemed like a goal for the distant future, yet as we dug further, we saw how deeply intertwined the local and the global are for Indigenous communities.

We saw how empowering it would be to draw connections through comparative studies of, for example, leadership, water issues, or even the ways of knowing of sheep-centered societies. Why not, for example, build a comparative course on economic, environmental, sacred, artistic, musical, and food practices among communities from Bedouin,

Peruvian, Armenian, and Diné shepherd societies? Conversations between Diné and Peruvian weavers a few summers ago at a GALACTIC workshop at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival inspired this idea. In fact, the Smithsonian-based GALACTIC workshops have provided numerous opportunities to further the comparative approach as Diné scholars and cultural practitioners have met other Indigenous practitioners from around the world, including Chinese Muslim storytellers, Armenian potters, Amazonian medicine people, and Basque shepherds. Participants in these workshops have forged and fortified a global Indigenous network.

Navajo Tech currently incorporates a comparative approach in some courses as part of its Diné Studies undergraduate degree program, including courses in global Indigenous leadership and theoretical Indigenous leadership. We imagine developing additional comparative courses and eventually comparative undergraduate and graduate programs in global Indigenous studies centered at Navajo Tech.

GALACTIC invites participants to travel beyond the global and into the universal—not in the way the word “universal” is often misunderstood as erasing difference, but to see ourselves as part of a living cosmos. We posit an approach to global Indigenous studies based in arts, culture, language, and tradition, because that is the way societies really work if they are really working.

Looking to the model provided by WINHEC (World Indigenous Nations Higher Education Consortium, <http://winhec.org>), we conceive of a pedagogy that combines “Western” methodologies and Indigenous ways of knowing taught by traditional practitioners who also serve as counselors and advisors rather than objects of study. GALACTIC, following the WINHEC model, believes that global Indigenous studies requires oversight by a council of elders from the community

who can ensure that learning remains grounded in traditional ways.

We also study the Indigenous communities that have, against all odds, decolonized aspects of their own countries over time (including India, Hong Kong, and others). What can we learn from them? How do we translate this strong need for change into a global reality? We draw upon their work as we look at global Indigenous studies for current and future Indigenous generations.

Global Indigenous studies must challenge existing notions of what it means to be global. The Navajo Nation is a sovereign nation within a nation. Diné people elect government officials and governing bodies, control a school system, and fiercely ensure the survival of a national language. We imagine a day when students can travel to Crownpoint to study Diné language just as they travel to Paris to study French. We imagine a time when tribal boundary issues such as the Diné/Hopi border struggle—caused and perpetuated by earlier and continuing colonial interests and policies—are part of the geopolitical curricula of global studies.

Reclaiming History and Heritage

Indigenous peoples have been subjected to a long and continuing history of cultural genocide, land thievery, broken treaties, appropriation of natural resources nestled within and under sacred spaces, and the loss of their children—their future itself—who were taken away from family and sent to boarding schools that stripped them of their language and their roots.

History is not made up of past relics to be romanticized; it is a way of living daily life. The idea of linear time is a Western colonial construction. The past, present, and future are not separate realms with neat borders in time or space. The Diné people, and all Indigenous peoples, carry traditions, traumas, perseverance, language, and ceremonies, and these transform



Students at Indiana University Bloomington (foreground) participate in a GALACTIC videoconference with students at Navajo Technical University (on the screen). (Photo by Amy Horowitz)

the present and ensure the future. Even as we talk about a postcolonial consciousness, Indigenous peoples and the perpetrators of colonialism carry forward the legacies of devastation, colonial brutality, violence, genocide, and cultural annihilation wrought upon Indigenous peoples in the Navajo Nation and globally.

Indigenous peoples have to reclaim their heritages to distance themselves from the Western history of genocide, trauma, and violence. More importantly, they are the only ones who can readress, recognize, and recover from the ongoing and continuous injustices each community is experiencing. Such confrontations with Western injustices empower Indigenous people to persevere and to build better lives for themselves and their children. In this way, global Indigenous studies provides a curriculum for understanding, healing, and empowerment.

Global Indigenous studies must be rooted not only in the study of devastation but in providing frameworks for reconciliation where those who have benefited from this travesty assume responsibility for these injustices.

There has been no time in the history of Indigenous peoples that this sort of reconciliation has occurred. Only after the European heirs of colonialism, who continue to benefit from its devastating practices, recognize this continuous colonialism will the future of global Indigenous studies—and the future itself—belong to Indigenous peoples.

The effort to unify global Indigenous communities through global Indigenous studies is a search to find themselves and to define and reclaim their ancestral homelands. ☐

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