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A Librarian Teaches Reading: Opportunities, Challenges, and Classroom Practices

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A Librarian Teaches Reading: Opportunities, Challenges, and Classroom Practices

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Intercultural modalities of reading present significant challenges, as well as opportunities, for both the librarian and the Reading instructor. Reading, as an activity, is a social construct based on the peculiarities of each language. Even when the question of the student's first language is not an issue, there are still further cultural constructs that need to be taken into account if the library and the Reading classroom are to be effective.

Where I work, I am the College Librarian, responsible for library services at three sites in two states. I also teach a Developmental Reading class as an adjunct at the same institution. I work at **Diné College**, the tribal college for the Navajo Nation, and this particular cultural setting presents its own list of challenges and opportunities. The Navajo people ("Diné" in their language) have traditionally had an oral rather than a literate culture, and this remains true for many of the most important aspects of their culture to this day. Some stories are only told in the context of certain ceremonies and never shared with outsiders.

As is the case at all community colleges and some universities, a significant proportion of our Diné students are required to take Develop-

mental Reading classes before they are allowed into credit-bearing college level courses such as English 101 (or its equivalent). Placement into developmental classes is the result of a standardized test, in our case the Accuplacer. It is well known that standardized tests have a cultural bias in favor of the dominant culture and the Diné students at our college clearly bear this out. There are alternatives to standardized tests, but they are all labor-intensive and most are cost-prohibitive for a small institution such as ours.

While a full-time librarian teaching a college-level reading course may be unusual, it is certainly not a contradiction in purpose. In this electronic age, it is still the purpose of the library to gather texts and make them accessible. I use the word "text" here in its most general sense to include images and objects, both real and digital — in short, anything that can harbor meaning and is thus open to interpretation. Interpreting the written word in order to uncover meaning could serve as a definition of reading. So, reading (and related activities) is a *sine qua non* for the usefulness of a library. Rather than being a contradiction, the teaching of reading by a librarian is a highly complementary activity.

Through teaching Developmental Reading I have had the opportunity to share my love of reading with students, to prepare them for further study, and to foster habits of seeking out librarians for assistance. It surprised me a bit when this happened because I expected the students to be bored by it, but they really respond well when I read to them out loud, usually a particularly important or difficult passage. They could hear in my voice the joy I experience in reading and that made a greater impression on them than any lectures I might give them.

Knowing what it takes to succeed in higher education gives me a goal toward which I need to move my Developmental Reading students. However, I must begin where the students are at. Like a trip in unfamiliar territory, each class takes a slightly different road to reach the goal and may get sidetracked for a bit along the way. As I see it, my task as the instructor is to keep them moving.

The Students

It has been gratifying to have former students search me out to help them in their college level course work. Sometimes they

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seek my help as a librarian and I help them find sources for a research paper. At other times they seek my help as an English Instructor and ask me to proofread their paper. In either case I get a keen sense of satisfaction, knowing that Diné students are much more likely to seek the help of someone they already know.

Interacting with students in a Reading class has given me some invaluable insights into my patron base that I've been able to translate into collection development. I have added "enticement" to the principles I use for selecting books. What kinds of texts would be enticing for my Developmental Reading students? There are various answers to that question, but the implications affect genre, format, subject matter, fiction vs. non-fiction, and reading level. For example, not being a personal fan of graphic novels, nor convinced that they have any academic merit, they have risen to a much higher level in my collection development habits since I began teaching Reading.

Normally a predominantly oral culture, like the Diné, teaches the young people how to be good listeners, but the present generation has had their attention spans so shortened by electronic media that they are neither good listeners nor good readers. It is somewhat paradoxical that some people are so poor that they live in houses without electricity and yet they have access to electronic media, but that is the case on the Navajo Nation (and many other reservations). A young person might buy a used device from a friend who needs the money and then use it at their grandmother's (or someone else's) house. In any case, there is more widespread access to electronic devices than would be expected given the poverty of the reservation, but the opportunity to use them is limited by access to power and by access to a signal.

In addition to short attention spans, many of our students suffer from the same phenomenon that besets Hispanic students, i.e., they have been raised in a bilingual household with the result that the young people don't know either language very well. Our Diné students have had the development of their entire range of communication skills (listening, reading, and speaking) compromised. It is no wonder that they are in need of developmental courses.

Culture and Language

Pedagogical success is hampered by readings in textbooks that are so far beyond the experience of our students that they have no prior knowledge they can bring to bear on the process of reading to help their comprehension.

Sample readings tend to be urban and inner-city. The Navajo Nation is completely rural and many parts of it are very isolated. Families are large and relationships are established through a complex clan system. Once, I read a story from the textbook out loud to my students, only to spend more time explaining the context of the story than it took to read it.

The story is about a teenage boy, who is an only child, and his single mother. There are many single mothers on the Navajo Nation, but, overwhelmingly, they have more than one child. Siblings are a given. The single mother in the story and her only son move to a city far away from any family. This would *never* happen among the Diné. Many of them move to cities, of course, but they always go where they already know someone, usually extended family. The single boy in the story gets into a fight at school. The point of the story is learning inference from the conversation between the boy and his mother after the fight.

For the Diné, however, the fight would have been dealt with by the boy's brothers or cousins, leaving a very different ending to the story.

Culturally relevant readings and vocabulary building exercises are the most crucial activities that will encourage the success of these students. "Culturally relevant" can refer to topics other than traditional stories, historical episodes, or research about traditional practices. Basketball, for example, is very big on the reservation, for both boys and girls. Encouraging children to run as a healthy practice is traditional and running is also part of some ceremonies. So, Cross Country is also very popular. Rodeo is also very popular among people of all ages, which non-Navajos might find a little odd since we normally associate Rodeo with cowboys rather than Indians. However, ranching is a big part of the economic life of the reservation, especially sheep. My students enjoy magazine articles about these topics, but also stories about Diné who have succeeded in overcoming one or more of the many social problems on the reservation, such as alcohol or drug abuse, domestic violence, or diabetes.

A computer program designed to assist college students in becoming better readers, called Power of Process, allows for instructor uploaded readings. We have experimented with this program, but it is too early to evaluate its success. Power of Process is an extremely flexible program that allows the Reading instructor a number of different options. The instructor chooses the reading and then shapes a process that will assist the student with learning various reading strategies. Many readings and processes are pre-loaded, but we have more success when we load our own readings based on student interest, as I've outlined above. A process, especially a circular process, is much more in tune with the traditional Diné thought patterns than is

a step-by-step procedure. We are finding that Power of Process suits our students much better than a traditional textbook.

It could be argued that all students need their horizons to be broadened and reading about unfamiliar situations can have that effect. It has been our experience, however, that the act of bringing prior knowledge to bear on a reading aids immeasurably in comprehension. Helping the students to be successful in reading is more important than broadened horizons. Once they are successful readers, then they can find out other things on their own.

We have found that many of the problems our students have with reading comprehension and the Accuplacer test stem from not knowing the vocabulary. For example, a typical Accuplacer question would include a short reading, a question, and a choice of four answers:

The worst and longest economic crisis in the modern industrial world, the Great Depression in the United States had devastating consequences for American society.

At its lowest depth (1932–33), more than 16 million people were unemployed, more than 5,000 banks had closed, and over 85,000 businesses had failed.

What does the second sentence do?

- A. The first sentence explains the meaning of the second.
- B. The second sentence provides evidence for the first.
- C. The second sentence proposes a solution.
- D. The second sentence contradicts the first.

There are troublesome vocabulary words in answers B, C, and D: evidence, proposes, and contradicts, respectively. That leaves A as the only answer the students understand, so they naturally choose that one when B is the appropriate answer.

It is difficult to find vocabulary building exercises that are designed for adults, and, understandably, our students find those that are designed for middle-school students (the vast majority) to be insulting. We require all our students to have a dictionary in addition to the class text. Many students feel belittled by vocabulary exercises, as if they should already know what these words mean. Perhaps they should, but that's not the point. The point is that they *don't* know these words and it's my job as an instructor to help them become better prepared for college level coursework.

Cultural context, language, social relationships, and geography all have an impact on how students learn to read and learn to use the library. Social constructs and demographic realities have both pedagogical and bibliographical ramifications. In the case of the Diné, these ramifications present many challenges and a few opportunities. In the end, it is the educational success of individual students that is the goal of both Developmental Reading classes and the library. 🌻