

Digital Pathways
Best Practices in Distance Education for American Indians

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Presented by:

New Mexico State University Office of Distance Education
Dr. Carmen Gonzales, Vice Provost for Distance Education

New Mexico State University American Indian Program
Dr. Donald Pepion, Director

The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation

Best Practices Panel

Cultural Considerations in Administration and Learning for Distance Education and American Indians



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*Cultural Considerations in Administration and Learning for
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Panel Summary

Cultural preservation is one of the most pressing issues facing American Indians living in a society that often regards assimilation as more important than protecting and celebrating diversity. Maintaining cultural relevancy within the educational system is a primary step to keeping traditional American Indian culture alive and thriving and was the central theme during this best practices panel. American Indian learning styles, culturally-appropriate curriculum and content, and an awareness of culture and its implications on program administration are among the issues that were addressed by panelists.



Dr. Lorelei Lambert

Assistant Director, Distance Education, Salish Kootenai College

As an internationally-renowned researcher and lecturer, Dr. Lorelei Lambert has presented in Australia, Finland, Norway, Canada, France and Russia. She is a medical ecologist whose research area is health in circumpolar ecosystems. Dr. Lambert graduated from nursing school in Boston, Massachusetts. After working in the Philippines for two years, she returned to the United States to complete her graduate work. She received her Ph.D. in Medical Ecology-Northern Studies from the Union Institute of Arts and Sciences in Cincinnati, Ohio, and her Master's degree in Environmental Science Education from Beaver College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She holds an additional Master's degree from Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Dr. Lambert recently completed a post-doctoral certificate in distance education and technology from the University of British Columbia. She has received distance education course funding support from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, W. K. Kellogg Foundation, Rural Utility Service, USDA, and Canadian Government. Dr. Lambert was awarded the *Sloan-C Award of Excellence in Asynchronous Teaching* in 2001.

Presentation Summary

Dr. Lambert presented conference participants with a picture of distance learning at her institution, Salish-Kootenai College. She highlighted how native culture has been infused into curriculum and instruction in a fully-online setting. The following is a summary of Dr. Lambert's presentation during Session 1. Please see the conference CD media gallery for complete audio of the presentation.

Salish Kootenai College (SKC), a four-year degree-granting institution, is located among seven tribal reservations in Montana. SKC has a history of flexible and culturally-responsive distance delivery, most notably with their television programming and health education outreach. This philosophy of outreach lead SKC to naturally move in the direction of online learning and the college now offers several degree programs that are totally web-based.

To determine what exactly was required to build a culturally-responsive online education program, SKC conducted a number of surveys and inventories to assess indigenous learning styles. Findings were transformed into a broad range of culturally-appropriate constructivist-style curriculum and instruction customizations: a dialogical orientation to learning that includes tribal storytelling; student-designed local case studies; cultural values incorporation; protection of student privacy; group structuring of classes; community-building; mentors; a reliance on a hands-on, visual approach to learning using a multitude of culturally-appropriate graphics and demonstrations; and immediate feedback.

Assessment at SKC is based on the belief that the quantity of information acquired does not determine the educational level attained. Rather, SKC bases assessment on performance objectives using a variety of instruments to measure learning including inquiry-based research, portfolios, art and poster presentations, and writing research papers.

Faculty at SKC are supported in online teaching efforts with the aid of design experts. They are also offered ongoing professional development in culturally-responsive pedagogy.



Dr. Elvira Bitsoi Largie

Executive Director, Navajo Education Technology Consortium, Inc.

Dr. Elvira Bitsoi Largie is Dine, American Indian (Navajo) from Tseyati, Navajo Nation, New Mexico. She is a professional bilingual educator and parent. Dr. Bitsoi Largie graduated in 1989 from the University of New Mexico with a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education. She was the first Navajo student to obtain a Navajo Linguistic minor from the Linguistic Department at the University of New Mexico. In 1993, she earned her Master's degree from the University of New Mexico. She completed a Doctor of Education degree from Arizona State University in May 2003.

Dr. Largie is currently the Executive Director of the Navajo Education Technology Consortium.



Cedric Wyaco

Technical Coordinator, Pine Hill Schools, New Mexico

Cedric Wyaco, a member of the Zuni tribe, is the technical coordinator for Pine Hill Schools in New Mexico. Mr. Wyaco has a Bachelor's degree in Information Technology from University of New Mexico in Albuquerque and is a veteran of United States Marine Corp. He is married with two children.

Presentation Summary

Mr. Wyaco presented for Dr. Largie. His presentation described the Navajo Education Technology Consortium (NETC) organization and its contribution to American Indian distance education, especially in the area of culturally-relevant content development. The following is a summary of Mr. Wyaco's presentation during Session 1. Please see the conference CD media gallery for complete audio of the presentation.

The Navajo Education Technology Consortium (NETC), serving 80,000 American Indian students and their teachers across the United States, is divided into two main organizational and functional units: the TechShare Project (<http://nettrain.unm.edu/>), responsible for the development of culturally-relevant online K-12 curriculum; and the Education Technology Improvement Plan (ETIP) Project (<http://www.nau.edu/~ifwfd/ETIP.htm>), which provides culturally-aware professional development online for educators of American Indian students. The mission of the Navajo Education Technology Consortium is to "provide educational services on or near the Navajo Nation related to the improvement of education of children and adults through the delivery of instructional technology; to create strategic advantages by incorporating district standards and culture and to increase student achievement by identifying and promoting learning styles appropriate to the population being served."



Figure 13.

The TechShare Project is responsible for online curriculum development hosting a vast website, NETtrain, housing some 5000 culturally-relevant learning modules for use by American Indian students in the K-12 classroom (see Figure 14). Many of the modules are developed by educators participating in the ETIP Project (see below) while others are submitted by students. Since the majority of students participating in the project are of Navajo heritage, the modules are infused with criteria essential to Navajo learning styles, and are created with special attention to multi-cultural themes and methodologies.

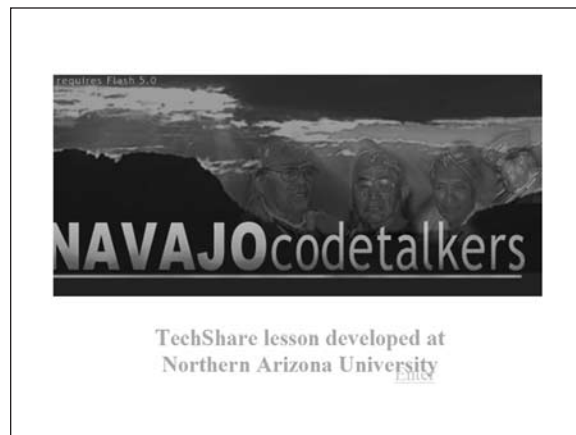


Figure 14.

ETIP prepares teams of trainers (comprised of administrators, teachers and parents) from each of the 98 member schools in the latest theory and methods of integrating standards-based instructional technology in the classroom to improve student learning. A four-year “scaffolding” approach to technology training is used providing systematic and sequential learning for participants. Content for this professional development is called the *Integrated Technology Training Curriculum* (ITTC) and promotes the integration of technology to support content standards and embedded assessments featuring culturally-relevant curriculum content in support of content standards. Outcomes of this training include the development of K-12 modules for the NETtrain site (information adapted from the ETIP website).

While NETC predominantly serves Navajo schools, much of their curriculum and services are

available and appropriate for other American Indian tribes. NETC can: provide economical professional development training for your district; demonstrate NETtrain lessons for endusers; assist with district technology, curriculum, and instructional plans to improve the achievement of students; and be contracted for culturally-relevant curriculum development services.



Dr. Shelly Valdez

Founder, Native Pathways

Dr. Shelly Valdez is a member of the Pueblo of Laguna Tribe, located in the central part of New Mexico. Dr. Valdez's educational background includes a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education, Master's degree in Elementary Education, and Ph.D. in Multicultural Teacher Education focusing on research in the area of science education. She has worked in the education field for 18+ years in various capacities including: classroom teacher; Title VII Indian Education Coordinator; Educational Consultant with Sandia National Laboratories Educational Outreach Programs; Project Director for the *Four Directions Technology Project: An Indigenous Model*; and Associate Director for K-12 Programs at the American Indian Science & Engineering Society (AISES). Currently Dr. Valdez owns and manages an educational consulting business, *Native Pathways*, located in New Mexico.

Presentation Summary

Building on her presentation from the *Digital Pathways* morning panel, Dr. Valdez delved further into the cultural impact of the *Four Directions* Project on web-based education for American Indians. The title of this model is *Four Directions: An Indigenous Model*. The following is a summary of Dr. Valdez's presentation during Session 1. Please see the conference CD media gallery for complete audio of the presentation.

The *Four Directions* Project (www.4directions.org) was created to promote a culturally-based model of American Indian education integrating technology across the curriculum. Similar to NETC (see Dr. Elvira Bitsoi Largie/Cedric Wyaco's presentation summary above), *Four Directions* serves the educational needs of both students and their teachers in 19 American Indian member schools located across the United States.

Four Directions' self-paced online courses for educators foster a creative process for professional development by focusing on: cultural-responsiveness, Native American learning styles, current brain theories, partnerships and collaboration between schools and communities, reform initiatives, and leadership (individual and community).

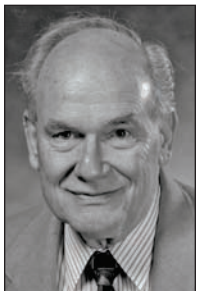
While the *Four Directions* website is a public access entity in many regards, notably its online curriculum resources, the most attractive feature for consortium members is the private access area equipped with a First Class BBS communication system. This groupware application featuring chatrooms and threaded discussions is used for internal collaboration and conferencing during professional development and mentoring events. The BBS system has a high level of structural organization with areas for curricula, email, a virtual library, technical support, user folders, and a student café.

Mentoring services provided by *Four Directions* have had great success, receiving national attention and acclaim. Mentoring is available in different contexts, for example, teacher-to-teacher mentoring, tech mentoring, and native professionals mentoring services. In one case, American Indian astronaut John Harrington served as a mentor to both students and teachers.

A pioneer in online educational services for American Indians, *Four Directions* faced and overcame

many challenges. Finding funding for sustainability, receiving tribal approval for member schools, coping with infrastructure limitations, overcoming techno-phobia on the part of both teachers and students, maintaining cultural sensitivity, and understanding the native way of knowing as it applies to the virtual knowledge environment were among the top issues dealt with by *Four Directions* during its existence.

The *Four Directions* project is continued under the auspices of Center for Educational Technology in Indian America (CETIA) <http://www.ldoe.org/cetia/about.htm>, based on the Pueblo of Laguna Indian Reservation. More information, including a *Four Directions* video, is available through CETIA.



Dr. Roland Tharp

Director, Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence, University of California, Santa Cruz

Dr. Roland Tharp is director of the Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence, overseeing the work of some 70 researchers nationwide seeking to improve education for students at risk of academic failure due to cultural, linguistic, and racial differences. A leading education reformer and professor emeritus at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Dr. Tharp's work spans some forty years and has deeply influenced the field of diversity education. Tharp is the author of books, articles, and a CD-ROM series on effective education for at-risk students.

Presentation Summary

With extensive experience and knowledge in the area of culturally-relevant curriculum and instruction for native populations, Dr. Tharp presented his views on the challenges of providing sensitive and responsive learning. The following is a summary of Dr. Tharp's presentation during Session 1. Please see the conference CD media gallery for complete audio of the presentation.

The Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE) (<http://www.crede.ucsc.edu/>) leads research that seeks to improve the educational experiences of students at risk due to cultural barriers, geographic isolation, or poverty. CREDE has supported numerous data-gathering and model-testing experiments with groups such as Hawaiians, Zuni, and Inuit. CREDE's current research focus is based in large part on the 40 years of academic inquiry conducted by Dr. Roland Tharp. Throughout these decades of research undertakings, a solid understanding of what it takes to maximize the learning experience and therefore educational achievement of these populations has been realized. Much of the research has been translated into practical application in the form of pre- and in-service training for teachers. This professional development is delivered in the form of videos using high-end observational models to illustrate culturally-relevant best practices. These videos are archived and available through CREDE's website.

CREDE strongly recommends that this observational learning be paired with traditional mentoring to cement learning. Mentoring creates a vital emotional connection between the mentor and mentee and embeds critical cultural values through the relationship-building process. Distance education must look to devise creative mentoring connections and assure that this component is present in order to effectively support the educational experience.

Questions & Answers

All questions and answers have been summarized and edited for clarity.

Question (directed to C. Wyaco): *You mentioned the cultural context as important to improving learning. Could you please expand on that?*

Answer: There are three satellite Navajo tribes all with their own dialects. The numbers, as far as culture and Navajo languages, are going down – English is now the first language, and we want a return to Navajo language. We are using the NETrain site and ETIP to promote language revitalization. (C. Wyaco)

Question (directed to L. Lambert): *Do you survey students to assess readiness?*

Answer: No, students self-select, and we have an orientation program with modules on time management, learning styles, different ways to approach course work, etc. Faculty wanted the orientation course to be developed. Student retention is much better - about 80-90% retention now. (L. Lambert)

Question: *What is the ideal approach to improving success rates? Is it needs assessment, profiling students, evaluating learning styles, determining the student's role, or feedback?*

Answer: We use feedback. All courses have quantitative and qualitative course evaluation. They have turned out to be the best courses we've ever had at SKC. We are amazed at how well culture can be incorporated. (L. Lambert)

At NETC, students give feedback on the modules for assessment and improvement purposes. (C. Wyaco)

CREDE has a built-in feedback system after every lesson about values, objectives, etc. The feedback is vital. (R. Tharp)

Question (directed to L. Lambert): *Is there a psychological or personality profile (such as Myers-Briggs) for the successful distance learner?*

Answer: No, we didn't find that. (L. Lambert)

Question (directed to L. Lambert): *People often think of distance education as meaning just web-based. Do you do blended programs as well?*

Answer: We do. We have our Bachelor of Science 2+2 in Nursing. These are hybrid courses: the students come in once or twice a quarter for face-to-face learning. Part of the elementary education program starting this fall will also be hybrid with some online and some face-to-face elements. There's lots of different ways to design programming and courses. (L. Lambert)

Question: *Television has done so much damage to our society. The undercurrent here is that we need more time to learn about these new technological opportunities. We are concerned that they are only promoted to allow the universities to collect more revenue. Is there a cash back return policy for technology?*

Answer: Well, with regards to quality, the interaction in online courses is truly improved and the rate of learning as far as content acquired and satisfaction are great. Let's bear in mind, though, the traditional lecture model is still dominant in traditional universities and interaction is typically absent (and therefore authentic dialogues). But, I contend that very high-quality, deep interaction in culturally-based learning and communication will be difficult to achieve online and we will need to try variations to achieve an optimal interaction environment. (R. Tharp)

Question (directed to S. Valdez): *Were the teachers from 19 tribes associated with the Four Directions Project native or non-native?*

Answer: Because they were Bureau of Indian Affairs schools, they were a mixture of native and non-native educators. However, the focus of professional development courses was to give teachers tools to meet the learning style needs of native students. This was accomplished in great part through role modeling. Online courses are very interactive, but

what is most important is the human connection and we showed how to apply hands-on methods through this role modeling. (S. Valdez)

Question: *I am an online instructor and distance education coordinator of Hispanic origin and many of you have addressed the issue of cultural diversity. I try to be as conscientious as possible as not to offend. I have had some wonderful classes in multiculturalism that taught me about diversity. I have also attended American Indian powwows. I can see how the Indian community varies so much from my own household. The ways of showing respect and deference vary from culture to culture and teachers need to be aware of that. Would I be effective in addressing the cultural needs that you consider so very important? Where do we learn these things?*

Answer: Native people come from a background that emphasizes human interaction on a daily basis...your family, peers, community are always there around you. Tribal leaders do encourage our students to go away for a time and experience the world outside of the reservation or pueblo. But the connections and relationships at home are the most important. (J. Suina, as a session participant)

On the issue of cultural awareness, one of the things I try to emphasize in our [*Four Directions*] curriculum is the need to build relationships with your native students. Native people are also very private people, and don't always want to share their thoughts and knowledge with the public as can be the case in online learning forums. That is why with the BBS system, we can have private folders that allow only certain members of certain tribes to access and share. (S. Valdez)

Question: *We are concerned with the quality of mentoring online...can it really be done?*

Answer: We have tremendous mentoring relationships with our students...we know much about each other and we keep regular contact. I know more about them than about my on-campus students. They also have peer-to-peer mentoring, support, and study groups, so I find it is a very good way to build relationships. An individual who is completing his doctorate at the University of British Columbia is studying our distance education programs at SKC and he has found that the number one retention strategy is the relationship to the instructor. The relationship is key. I believe that if you care about them and they know it, then they will succeed. (L. Lambert)

We were discussing how native students show respect and deference in relationship to students of other cultures and native students have a need to build a relationship before they can even begin to pay attention to course material. They want that connection with the instructor first. (Donald Pepion, session participant):

Question: *What do instructors need to do to build successful mentoring relationships with their students?*

Answer: The key is to get into real dialogue and not withhold yourself as a person. Traditional professors are not really good at listening, and we need to do that to build those relationships. (R. Tharp)

It takes time to show you really care as an instructor. You need to be really careful when writing back and forth (email or chat, for example) of what you put on the screen. It can be interpreted much more differently from the receiving end than what you intended. If you make a mistake (as an instructor), then don't be afraid to admit it. Emphasize that we are all "colleagues at different levels of learning" – it changes the feel of the class entirely and allows students to open up and share more. Respond to everything they say in their communication. There's a reason we have two ears and one mouth. (Larry Olsen, session participant)