

Learning Feminist Pedagogy

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For many years I've practiced elements of feminist pedagogy in my classrooms with varying degrees of success. I did not critically examine those elements until the last two years in my work as a faculty sponsor and mentor for a group who now call themselves ISIS, Indigenous Sisterhood of Interdisciplinary Scholars. ISIS came together two years ago as a group of Native students who were drawn to the goals of a small, simple grant. There were just two goals: peer mentor one another to succeed at NAU and conduct field research for the Kaibab Paiute community while mentoring their youth. Though the grant was open to any Native student in any discipline, only Native women responded to the call for participants. ISIS membership is growing, with more than a dozen participants from multiple indigenous groups who are students in all levels and disciplines here at NAU. This group of women, and all of those who came before them to make ISIS possible, have taught me more about feminist pedagogy than I believe I could have learned as just a scholar of feminist literature. I've had to practice daily the lessons they teach. I am like a child in a first grade primer and I am indebted to them for their wisdom and generosity.

I call their names to bring them into this room: Melinda and Cheryl Arviso, Leanna Begay, Jacelyn Bigman, Raelynn Cachini, Raven Commanda, Colleen and Nikki Cooley, Valencia Herder, Kumi Isobe, Stephanie Jackson, Justina Jim, Hollie Kulago, Aleeah Livengood, Amanda Manzo, Annette McCabe, Terry McCabe, Gwendolyn Riggs, Maricelyn Seaton, Valerie Shirley, Kimberly Smith, Valerie Thomas, Philandrian Tree, and Vachera Yazzie.

Their accomplishments far exceed the original grant goals. I never could have foreseen the outcomes to date and they are far too numerous for this conversation today. Besides, you wouldn't believe me. For a delightful presentation of some of their accomplishments, please view their website: <http://www.oak.ucc.nau.edu/smo6/isis>

The lessons I am learning with ISIS teach me to exchange the techniques of power for the habits of empowerment. The ways we do this echo feminist pedagogy:

- Resist surveillance; **publicly proclaim identity.**
- Resist exclusion; **willingly include diversity.**
- Resist classification; **collectively share responsibility.**
- Resist distribution; **actively generate goods.**
- Resist regulation; **vigorously be irregular.**

I am learning to facilitate these lessons by doing four things. I believe three of them are central to feminist pedagogy.

First: **Privilege home knowledge and cultural traditions.** ISIS conducts research in the Kaibab Paiute community in northern Arizona. Though none of the women are Paiute, the ways of a Native community are as familiar to them as white schools are to white students. In a Native community setting, traditional ecological knowledge and cultural ways are honored as valuable prior knowledge. Guess what? ISIS thrives there as learners.

Second: **Make spaces for learners to be who they are.**

Learning is all about the learner, but a place where the teacher fits too, when her voice is a part of the collective voice. Teaching is transferring teaching and learning responsibility to the group as quickly as possible. Many times, I only get in the way. I am learning to respectfully step aside.

Third: **Resist patriarchal and institutional protocols.**

ISIS chooses not to register as an NAU club. Registration requires institutional protocols that are meaningless to ISIS goals. Registration requires patriarchal trivia that dilutes time and energy with little or no reward. The term “indian giver” comes to my mind here – because the term should be “patriarchal givers”. Native women are too savvy for such nonsense; nonsense that gets in the way of becoming. I choose never to make them struggle for **identity** and **land** in this project or in my classroom. I refuse the language of the colonizers and choose to name Native American students as sovereign peoples from sovereign nations. They are not minority students here at the university; that terminology is a patriarchal definition.

The final strategy is my favorite: **Practice give-away – a Native protocol.**

The best lesson originated at the very first gathering of ISIS participants two years ago. There was enough grant money to pay two, maybe three Native students. Nine came to the first meeting; nine students who desperately needed funding for their academic programs. I explained the funding situation. We would try to get additional funding, but were not optimistic. At the next meeting the original participants brought five more. There were now fourteen. The solution was obvious in their minds. Work as volunteers the first semester and share the small pool of money among all participants the second semester.

It has been like this ever since. Everyone practices give-away everyday in multiple ways.

The grant is too small for everyone who wants to participate?

We practice give-away.

The grant period is ended?

We practice give-away.

The university denies multiple requests for financial support even though ISIS recruits and retains Native students, an NAU strategic goal?

We practice give-away.

A new grant comes in and ISIS invites more Native women to participate?

We practice give-away.

It's working.

In December, I was notified that a proposal to the National Conferences for Undergraduate Research was accepted and that ISIS will be funded under NCUR's Lancy Initiative for the coming summer. Give-away pays off. Without give-away the group could not have sustained itself until the funds from the Lancy Initiative were awarded. My thanks to all those who give away and make ISIS possible.