Embracing Epistemological Collisions as Sites of Critical Indigenous Pedagogy

Insights From Partnering for Diné Curriculum Building

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WE, THE AUTHORS OF THIS ARTICLE, are three educators united by a shared commitment to supporting the self-determined educational goals of the Navajo Nation. In particular, we are committed to the education of Diné (Navajo) youth. As one way of living out these shared commitments, we have been collaborating for three years. The principal aim of our current work is to build, implement, and assess a curriculum for which the overarching purpose is to promote positive character and identity development—as understood within a traditional Diné perspective—among youth who attend the Navajo Nation's tribally controlled Pre-K-12 schools. Throughout this article, we refer to this effort as the "Diné curriculum-building project," even as we understand that promoting Diné character and identity development is much broader, more complex, and inextricably intertwined with other aspects of Diné language and cultural knowledge than the phrase "character education" might initially imply.

A complementary aim of our work is to enhance our own and other educators' professional learning through shared inquiry into our collaborative processes. The overarching question that guides our current inquiry is, "How can universities partner with Indigenous nations in support of their sovereignty and self-determination?" At present, we are responding to our shared question by collaborating on the Diné curriculum-building project and by documenting our evolving processes for collaboration on this and other projects. By combining the Diné curriculum-building project with shared inquiry, we seek simultaneously to (1) advance the Navajo Nation's educational goals, (2) learn how we can collaborate with increasing effectiveness in support of those goals, and, along the way, (3) generate in-depth understandings of how universities can

partner more effectively with Indigenous nations than the shallow or extractive ways universities typically engage with Indigenous peoples.

To this inquiry, we bring overlapping, yet distinctive, aspects of our identities and experiences. Each of us is a committed, lifelong learner and professional educator. Hollie began her professional career as an elementary educator on the Navajo Nation before entering academia. Dorthea also began her career as an elementary educator before transitioning to higher education and then into an educational leadership role for the Navajo Nation. Logan began his career as a Latin and music teacher before entering academia. At the same time, we have differing lived experiences associated with other aspects of our identities. Notably, Hollie and Dorthea were raised on the Navajo Nation as Diné people and through Diné philosophies, while Logan was raised primarily amid the diverse European American cultures of North Dakota, where his ancestors homesteaded and where he presently resides.

Although our various professional and personal identities both intersect and diverge in various ways, we understand our collaboration as a mutual effort to sustain a partnership that includes but is not limited to university-based representatives of Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (i.e., Hollie and Logan) and a professional representative of an Indigenous nation (i.e., Dorthea). Our efforts at partnering are informed by numerous intellectual bases, including the scholarship of decolonizing and Indigenous educational research methodologies and the predominantly Western school-university partnership movement.[1] This literature influences our understandings of what it means to partner and the potential usefulness of partnering in order to advance our mutual commitments.

At the same time, however, we are aware that collaborative efforts involving representatives from universities and Indigenous communities constitute a distinctive niche within the school-university partnership literature. Unfortunately, with some notable exceptions (see Norman & Kalt, 2015), prior attempts at engagement between non-Indigenous university partners and Indigenous peoples lack a compelling track record of success, and some have even caused lasting harm to Indigenous peoples (Ambo, 2023). Given these understandings, we acknowledge a distinctive need for care in our collaboration. We recognize our efforts to partner as creating a context within which clashes in our understandings have the potential to cause harm—or, if recognized and learned from—to forge a stronger partnership that is increasingly effective in advancing our shared commitments and, ultimately, in supporting the education of Diné youth.

Through our first years of learning to collaborate, we have consciously striven to think and act in ways guided by characteristics that are valued in Diné epistemologies. Each of us, however, has also been immersed in the epistemological underpinnings of Western schooling, the institution which frames the Diné curriculum-building project. As such, in our efforts to build and implement curriculum focused on Diné character building and identity—which have traditionally been taught in Diné homes and communities, and aspects of which we seek to promote in the Navajo Nation's schools—we routinely encounter moments when Diné and Western epistemologies appear to come into conflict. Such moments sometimes leave us unsure about what to say (or not say), or how to proceed. As we understand them, these moments carry potential either for harm or for significant new learning and unlearning. In the course of our deepening collaboration, we have learned to recognize such moments as *epistemological collisions* (Kerr, 2014)—moments in our work when Diné epistemologies challenge the educational institution rooted in Western epistemologies.

As we partner, we have striven to become increasingly attentive to epistemological collisions and to embrace these moments as vital opportunities to learn together. Yet these kinds of moments are rarely discussed in the predominantly Western literature on school-university

partnerships. Neither is there an abundance of examples in the extant literature on Indigenous character education curriculum-building for K-12 schools. A key premise of our article, therefore, is that deeper understandings of recognizing and embracing epistemological collisions as sites of critical Indigenous pedagogy are needed if contemporary efforts at engagement between universities and Indigenous nations are to succeed in supporting Indigenous sovereignty and futurity where others have caused harm in the past.

The purpose of this article is to share insights about how we embraced epistemological collisions as opportunities to learn through critical Indigenous pedagogy. To accomplish this purpose, we first review literature that grounds our understanding of what it means to partner for Indigenous futurities, as well as literature that frames our understanding of the relationship between Western educational paradigms and Indigenous epistemologies. We examine how this relationship sets the stage for epistemological collisions at times when university-based representatives attempt to engage with Indigenous nations, as in the case of our collaboration. We describe how we have approached our collaboration through Indigenous methodologies, then share representative stories of three epistemological collisions we have experienced in the course of this collaboration. We conclude by discussing our article's contributions and reflecting upon some implications of this work.

Conceptual Underpinnings

In our work, we are guided by a shared understanding of what it means to partner for Diné futurity—our understandings are anchored in Diné epistemologies. However, our efforts are complicated by the structure of Western educational PK-12 schooling. As such, the concepts of Indigenous futurity, the prevailing Western educational paradigm, and Diné epistemologies are all central to how we make sense of our collaboration. In the following subsections, we briefly review these conceptual underpinnings that guide our work.

Partnering for Indigenous Futurity

The overarching commitment that guides our collaboration is a commitment to the Navajo Nation's self-determined educational goals—a commitment implying that we are theorizing an Indigenous futurity. Such theorizing demands much more than imagining a future for Indigenous people; it requires deep examination of what is assumed to be knowable, the styles of thinking by which knowledge is assumed to be attainable, the types of epistemological practices that prevail, and the logics behind present actions—and how all these assumptions are legitimized by, or guided toward, specific futures (Anderson, 2010, as cited in Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, 2019; Kulago, 2019; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013). In these understandings, any collaboration, such as ours, that proclaims to be working toward supporting Indigenous futurity requires a grounding in Indigenous understandings of futurity.

Yakama and Tulalip scholars Craig and Craig (2022) explained Indigenous futurity in terms of the Tulalip concept of huyadadčəł. As they struggled together in the goal of creating space for Indigenous knowledge within public education, Craig and Craig were reminded of huyadadčəł by a family elder, which the elder explained as being their people's way of life. The elder reminded them, "You already know the way" (Craig & Craig, 2022, p. 30). The authors explained that

huyadadčəł is a call for them to maintain their ancestral lifeways as the foundation, throughline, and future to help build their family and communities—supported by the power of a community of ancestors who protected their lifeways and presently call upon them to teach the future generations.

As Craig and Craig (2022) explained, "Our ancestral ways of life are already within us and are waiting to be accessed and enacted" (p. 30). Similarly, our co-author Dorthea once described how her work is guided by the need to protect Diné lifeways. Dorthea described her work as being rooted in ancestral knowledge and in taking action to support a Diné futurity. She stated, "It's what our grandmas and grandpas prayed about, for us to become someone who will help our People." In our discussions of Indigenous futurity as we go about creating a Diné curriculum for character and identity development, we do not focus on how the Diné community could look in a future where American standards and values dominate. Instead, we discuss how we can contribute to a Diné futurity already in motion but disrupted by settler colonialism.

In addition to the Tulalip concept of huyadadčəł, the Haudenosaunee Two Row Wampum provides another conceptual understanding that we utilize as we theorize what it means to support Indigenous futurity. Kanien'keha:ka language teacher Tsiehente Herne (Kulago & Herne, 2022) describes the Two Row Wampum:

> The Two Row Wampum is a living treaty: a way that the Haudenosaunee and Dutch established an agreement for their people to live together in peace in which each nation was to respect the ways of the other and to discuss solutions to the issues that came before them. The Haudenosaunee made a belt to record a peace agreement between the two nations. The belt has two purple rows running alongside each other representing two boats. One boat is the canoe with the Haudenosaunee way of life, laws, and people. The other is the Dutch ship with their laws, religion, and people in it. The boats were to travel side by side down the river of life. Each nation is to respect the ways of each other and would not interfere with the other. (p. 204)

Herne uses the Two Row Wampum to help her high school students remember that, as Indigenous people, they are always living in the Haudenosaunee row with the European ship in the other row. They must remember that they are rooted in the row that leads to the continued existence of their lifeways, laws, and people. She also states that the students need to remember that, in the current context, they also need things from the European ship such as Western education, but they should always keep their balance between the two. We draw on the Tulalip and Haudenosaunee examples to demonstrate how within Indigenous ways of knowing, futures are already in progress and are described or understood in ways that are distinct to each nation.

Indigenous Epistemology Amid a Western Educational Paradigm

During my time in Haudenosaunee territory,[2] I (Hollie) have been learning about Haudenosaunee ways of knowing and working to build relationships with people and communities. An important lesson I have learned comes from the Two Row Wampum. The Two Row Wampum's design embodies an enduring belief that Western and Indigenous lifeways can coexist peacefully and perhaps even strengthen one another. However, the Two Row Wampum's creation predates the settler colonial context of the United States, which Tuck and Yang (2012) inform us

"is different from other forms of colonialism in that settlers come with the intention of making a new home on the land, a homemaking that insists on settler sovereignty over all things in their new domain" (p. 5). The violence that happens during the disruption of the Indigenous relationship to land is epistemic, ontological, and cosmological and is not temporary and so, settler colonialism becomes a structure (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wolf, 2006). Thinking through the idea of the Two Row Wampum, settler colonialism wants to own the river and eliminate the Indigenous canoe.

In its manifestations involving the education of Indigenous peoples, the prevailing Western educational paradigm has historically destroyed the balance implied by Herne's (Kulago & Herne, 2022) interpretation of the Two Row Wampum—a balance upset by the dualist epistemologies that shape much of Western education. Some scholars trace the origins of contemporary approaches to Western education to Cartesian dualism, which separates mind, body, and nature and makes possible the claim of a "non-situated, universal, God-eyed view of knowledge" (Todd & Robert, 2018, p. 61). This assertion of separateness extends to a further distinction between spirit and matter associated with the position that "man was able to understand the mechanizations of nature and control nature" (p. 61).

These dualistic understandings have contributed to the rise of Western scientific knowing as a dominant epistemology in contrast to which other epistemologies have been positioned as inferior. Quechua scholar Sandy Grande (2015) described how Western epistemology has come to be reflected in the "deep structures of the colonialist consciousness" (p. 99) and how this consciousness provides the epistemological and axiological foundations of Western education. Grande asserted that the deep structures of the colonialist consciousness, as they are manifested in schools, tend to promote independence, achievement, humanism, detachment from local and personal knowledge, and separation from nature. In this Western educational paradigm, land is regarded merely as an object—property that is assumed to be without spirit or relationship. This assumption pervades the logics of settler colonialism wherein the elimination of the native is the goal (Wolfe, 2006) and which separates Indigenous peoples' spiritual, physical, and emotional relationships with land, community, and knowledge. Colonialism has formalized the hegemony of Western knowledge through a Western schooling system (Meyer, 2008; Pihama & Lee-Morgan, 2018; Todd & Robert, 2018).

In contradistinction to the Western educational paradigm, Kulago et al. (2023) describe Indigenous epistemologies:

> Broadly speaking, Indigenous epistemologies emphasize wholeness (physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual), interconnectedness to land (in all its forms and entities), and relationship with others (family, communities, and nations). Knowledge, in this holistic framework, tends to be both subjectively determined and collectively accountable (Kulago et al., 2021). Indigenous scholars see knowledge as fundamentally relational and community as the primary setting for Indigenous education (Wilson, 2008; Cajete, 2015). (p. 70)

Whereas Western education emphasizes independence, achievement, and detachment, Indigenous education is rooted in values of wholeness (Kulago et al., 2023). Indigenous education emphasizes survival of the individual and community through Indigenous knowledges and intelligences passed down throughout the generations (Cajete, 2015; Craig & Craig, 2022; Kulago & Jamie, 2022; Simpson, 2014).

These themes of Indigenous education are echoed widely across recent scholarly literature. For example, Tewa scholar Cajete (2015) states that Indigenous education's main goal is to find face, heart, and foundation so that Indigenous youth know themselves, their relationships, and their position in continuing their Indigenous lifeways. A foundational understanding of Indigenous education is that "the wholeness of the community depends on the wholeness of its members" (Cajete, 2015, p. 36). Margaret Kovach (Plains Cree and Saulteaux ancestry, as cited in Windchief & San Pedro, 2019) refers to this as "self-in-relation" because it "frames knowledge as a coproduction located in the development of ourselves in relation to others" (p. xvii). Indigenous education's primary concern, therefore, is to educate young people in a way that "nurtures a new generation of Elders—of land-based intellectuals, philosophers, theorists, medicine people and historians" who embody their peoples' intelligences (Simpson, 2014, p. 13). Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson (2014) summed up the goals of Indigenous education, stating that a Nishnaabeg Elder was one who embodied the knowledge and intelligence of the Nishnaabeg because they lived as Nishnaabeg. In other words, Indigenous education is a lifelong process that has no beginning or ending but is always present and taught through the language, the land, in community, and in action as one lives through their Indigenous epistemologies.

Our Approach to Collaborating

In the prayers and ceremonies of Diné ancestors, the pathway to Diné futurity already exists, and the journey is already underway. In our work, we seek to support this futurity even as we partner from different individual positionalities and institutional roles. Despite our differences, we understand the overarching purpose of our work similarly to the Two Row Wampum for how we can partner for Diné futurity and how we can utilize university resources as we strategize, think, and practice collaborating together in ways guided by the logics already set in motion for a Diné existence. In our work, we approach this shared inquiry through Indigenous and decolonizing methodologies and with awareness of the fraught history of university engagement with Indigenous peoples. In Indigenous methodologies, settler colonialism is understood as being continuously reified through Western education and research practices and policies, thereby threatening Indigenous sovereignty, knowledge, languages, livelihood, and relationships to land.

Tribal Critical Race Theory posits that colonization is endemic to American society, meaning that "European American thought, knowledge, and power structures dominate present-day society in the United States" (Brayboy, 2005, p. 430), including American education. Given these understandings, Indigenous scholars have critiqued Western research for its "cognitive imperialism" (Battiste, 2000), instead creating and utilizing Indigenous methodologies to guide collaborations involving university-based scholars. According to Hill and Coleman (2019), Indigenous methodologies can guide such collaborations because they:

> aim to assert the dignity and value of Indigenous knowledge traditions and insist that healthier relationships between Indigenous communities and Western university-based research institutions will demand recognition of the distinctive contributions Indigenous ways of knowing can make. (p. 339)

As a way of demanding such recognition, Hill and Coleman advanced five principles within a framework—using the Haudenosaunee Two Row Wampum treaty as a guide—for engaging in

"cross-cultural, cross-epistemological research relationships" (p. 340). The five principles include: relationships are dialogical, importance of place-conscious ceremony, equity within distinctiveness, internal pluralism and diversity, and sharing knowledge, not owning it (Hill & Coleman, 2019, p. 341). This model:

> urges scholars to move away from extractive models, whereby researchers in the sailing ship raid the culture and laws of the Indigenous canoe and to focus instead on developing new models of sharing the river with Indigenous communities in ways that are relationally respectful and accountable. (Hill & Coleman, 2019, p. 344)

Later in the article, we share how we engage the principles of this model in our work and conclude that this is a good starting point for engaging partnerships. Specifically, we attend to the epistemological underpinnings of the Diné and Western education that help us reach deeper understandings of how to partner and collaborate to support Indigenous futurity.

Decolonizing and Indigenous methodologies provide researchers the basis to engage in partnerships with Indigenous communities in ways that are meant to benefit the Indigenous community and to value Indigenous ways of knowing. In our work, although we are aware of the rich literature on partnerships, we intentionally strive to use the phrase "we are partnering" wherever possible, rather than "we have a partnership," because we believe that our work together is a verb, always in action, and alive in our consciousness, rather than a noun—static, objective, and distant. Specific to our project's context, we work to ground our partnering in Diné epistemologies.

At the root of Diné ways of knowing is relationality as encompassed by the concept of k'é. K'é is the concept that describes our familial relationship to other humans, natural entities, and deities (Kulago, 2011). The Diné Character Building Standards have a focus on relationships, and the curriculum, more specifically, has a focus on k'é. While we work to support the Diné curriculum building project rooted in k'é, we also work to partner and research through k'é. This means that we come together with the best intentions to support Diné youth within schools (a Western educational structure) by shifting values away from the "deep structures of the colonialist consciousness" (Grande, 2015, p. 99) because they counter and constrain Diné epistemologies.

In our efforts to partner, we are critically aware that each of us has experienced the Western education system in our own way and thus are able to understand the Diné curriculum-building project also through a Western perspective. Indeed, we continue to experience Western education through our professional work in educational institutions. In one sense, we have all successfully navigated Western education, earned degrees, and ultimately chose to situate our professional work within this system. Yet we strive to navigate our collaboration as critical scholars.

When we came together to partner, we were all conscious of the colonizing and detrimental processes of Western education upon Indigenous peoples. We knew that the "governmental policies and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation" (Brayboy, 2005, p. 429). For this reason, we intentionally collaborate to create a Diné-centered curriculum. And while we have been intentional about centering Diné knowledge and goals in this work, we occasionally find ourselves inadvertently going through the motions of Western colonizing practices that assume neutrality in the everydayness of school, pedagogy, and curriculum building. When we consider our practices through the deep structures of colonialist consciousness, we can pinpoint, feel, and/or relate experiences to ways they have manifested in our own educational experiences, transferring those

critical insights to our partnering. With these insights, we have learned that we can interrupt the flow of those structures in certain ways. This learning has created increasing space for epistemological collisions to occur throughout various moments of critical self-reflection, in discussions between us (the co-authors/project partners), and during interactions and work with the Diné teacher participants. These moments of epistemological collisions deepen our understanding of how to partner and work in ways that center Diné epistemologies.

Our Analytic Focus: Epistemological Collisions as Sites of Critical Indigenous Pedagogy

While both Western and Indigenous epistemologies can guide education and educational institutions, conflicts between these ways of knowing tend to occur in Western education institutions as "epistemological collisions" in which the "mechanistic assumptions of modernist ontologies are challenged by Indigenous perspectives based in contrasting ontologies" (Kerr, 2014, p. 92). Kerr (2014) explained that "modernist epistemological commitments emerge with and through the structures of coloniality, and it is through this intersection that the challenges of bringing Indigenous perspectives meaningfully into educational spaces are fully understood" (p. 92). An epistemological collision does not occur merely because an Indigenous perspective exists but because of an "embodied ethical challenge of Indigenous peoples to colonial violence and silencing in real places" (Kerr, 2014, p. 92). In other words, because Western educational institutions are colonial institutions, these institutions' epistemological commitments go unchecked unless other epistemologies are present, arise, and assert themselves.

Critical Indigenous pedagogy provides a mechanism through which Indigenous epistemologies can be present, arise, and assert themselves in ways that challenge the Western educational paradigm. Kulago and Jaime (2022) described how frameworks for critical Indigenous pedagogy (e.g., Garcia & Shirley, 2012; Grande, 2015; Jacob, 2013; Lee & McCarty 2017; Shirley, 2017) generally integrate three components: 1) deconstruct, disrupt, and scrutinize power relations and colonizing processes; 2) center, reclaim, and empower Indigenous languages, culture, and knowledge; and 3) promote community accountability, sovereignty, community- and nation-building efforts. They assert that sites of critical Indigenous pedagogy can be spaces where "the perpetuation, cultivation, and revitalization of Indigenous languages, community, and lifeways continue our Indigenous existence" (Kulago & Jaime, 2022, p. 8) and offer as examples:

> classrooms in which truthful histories and narratives are shared and Indigenous knowledges and languages are centered; gardens where traditional planting techniques and lessons are utilized; gatherings where ceremonial processes, prayers, and teachings happen; bodies that practice dances, languages, and lifeways; [and] movements that protect lands and water from ecological destruction. (p. 8)

Saponi Ska:rù:rę'/Tuscarora scholar Richardson (2011) articulated how some Western learning philosophies, such as constructivism, purport to be open to the inclusion of Indigenous epistemologies through frameworks such as culturally relevant pedagogy, which may use cultural knowledge as a vehicle for mainstream concepts but continues to use inclusion as enclosure that "contains Indigenous epistemologies within a materialist philosophy" (p. 332). He claimed that, when the philosophical foundations of educational theories go "unnamed or critically examined, the theoretical formulation for the inclusion of Indigenous epistemologies becomes not simply a

container, but an active form of neutralizing Indigenous intellectual traditions" (p. 333). Richardson's considerations underscore the significance of embodying and thinking through Indigenous philosophy when epistemological collisions occur—lest the sites of these collisions become violent if left unattended. The sites of critical Indigenous pedagogy manifest because of our responsiveness to the goals for the Diné curriculum and our goals for partnering to support Indigenous sovereignty within the reality of Western educational institutions.

Collisions and Insights: Epistemological Collisions as Sites of Critical Indigenous Pedagogy

In our collaboration, we strive to amplify Diné voices in the very places—such as curricula for PK-12 schools—where they have so frequently been silenced in the past. As we have listened to elders speak about Diné philosophy, and facilitated discussions with Diné teachers about standards, curriculum, pedagogy, and other educational considerations, we have heard histories of colonial violence. The elders' stories have served to underscore the importance of crafting a Diné character building curriculum grounded in Diné ways of knowing. As our own perspectives, assumptions, and questions have surfaced throughout our regular meetings and interactions, we have felt epistemological collisions occurring and, over time, we have learned to respond to them collectively by recognizing them as potential sites of critical Indigenous pedagogy and opportunities for important learning and unlearning that supports our shared commitments.

In the following section, we engage storytelling (from first-person point-of-view) as a way to share teaching, learning, and healing moments where we confronted epistemological collisions and transformed them into sites of critical Indigenous pedagogy. Stó:lō scholar Archibald (2008) describes seven principles that make up an Indigenous storywork theory for sharing Indigenous knowledge to bring together the heart, mind, body, and spirit through storytelling. As partners, we share stories about our experiences with each other through respectful, reverent, responsible, and reciprocal ways that support our learning and a holistic understanding of our positionalities. Then, we re-center Diné epistemologies in our work. We share these stories because we see sites of critical Indigenous pedagogy in each one because they embody an understanding of the context, the centering of Indigenous knowledge, and action towards supporting Diné furturities. The epistemological collisions we experienced provided us with insights into sensitivities that might otherwise go "unnamed or critically examined" (Richardson, 2011, p. 232). As we embrace these moments, we learn and unlearn, striving to steer our learning into work that supports Indigenous futurities. These are only a few stories out of many we could have related, but we share them here in order to illustrate how epistemological collisions can give rise to learning that supports Indigenous futurities.

Logan's Collision: Problematizing the Neutrality of "Useful" Tools

In Summer 2022, we gathered with Diné elders, educators, and community members at the Navajo Education Center in Window Rock, Arizona. Following introductions and a prayer of convocation, we witnessed the elders' teachings about the lifelong process involved in the character development of a Diné person. Then, as the workshop's facilitators, Dorthea, Hollie, and I worked with teachers, assisting them as they synthesized what they had learned from the elders

into a framework to articulate the essential components of character development of Diné youth that they believed could and should be taught in PK-12 schools.

Soon enough, teachers had constructed a working draft of a curriculum framework, organized according to grade levels, and we set out to build a model lesson plan based on the framework. Our plan was to craft the first one or two lessons together, using a common template, then teachers would break into work groups to develop lessons across all grades PK-12.

In preparing to facilitate this portion of the workshop, Hollie and I had proposed to Dorthea that we use Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), often called "Backwards Design"—a commonly utilized process and template for curriculum-planning and one with which we were both familiar. In a prior faculty position, Hollie had taught teacher candidates to plan using Backwards Design, while I had been taught to use that same framework during my first year as a middle school teacher. I recall that we laughed together during our planning meeting because (it seemed to me) that we both had the same idea at the same time—let's use Backwards Design!

When we presented the framework to teachers, however, there was no laughter. Just as I had done countless times in my own classroom, I passed out thick, binder-clipped stacks of paper that seemed to communicate the seriousness of the business we were about to undertake. This time, it was photocopies of the Backwards Design template and the standards for which we were building curriculum. Hollie and I tag-teamed a brief explanation of the framework to the teachers. Straightforward, logical, aimed at desired outcomes, and useful, right? Let's go ahead and get started…

We got LOTS of questions—questions about how to use the framework, questions about whether it was like other frameworks, but perhaps most significantly, a question about the framework's nickname.

> *Backwards Design? Why is it called that? There is nothing backwards about this process. There is nothing backwards about Diné character development, either.*
>
> *Hm… Good point. Well, it's really just about beginning to plan with a clear end in mind—the standards, goals, outcomes, the vision…*
>
> *But why "backwards"? That's not Diné. That's not US. And why all the square boxes on the template? That's also not Diné.*
>
> *Hm… Another good point. I only brought photocopies of Backwards Design, though. And some of the teachers here like that choice because they've used it, too, and it's familiar. Now what?*

Teachers went to a whiteboard we had placed in the room, and they began to draw. They sketched multiple different conceptual frameworks that we could use for Diné curriculum planning. One was represented by a circle, another by a corn stalk. They then began to compare and contrast these frameworks with the Backwards Design framework. The insight was quick to come: these frameworks were more alike than different. They had many similar ideas, expressed in different terms and formats, yet we seemed to agree on the substance of the process we needed to pursue. So, what should we do now?

We considered rejecting Backwards Design altogether. We also considered adapting the framework by relabeling its components in the Diné language—mapping Diné concepts onto Western ones. Ultimately, though, we settled on reframing it in the context of a shared understanding that Backwards Design could be a powerful tool for doing the work of Diné character building while satisfying the demands of a federally mandated Western educational

system. We could use this Western tool, but not on its own terms. Rather, we could intentionally steer its power into the service of perpetuating Diné knowledge and lifeways through the institution of schooling.

Each time I recall my experience of this epistemological collision, I am reminded to proceed with gentleness, care, and due caution throughout this work, particularly as we establish ways of working. I am reminded how quickly a widely used planning tool, such as Backwards Design, can so quickly dominate our ways of working without even being noticed—imposing its taken-for-granted logic of knowing through the unstated assumption that it is commonsensical, every day, routine, inevitable. Through the vitally important moment we experienced together in Window Rock, we learned to problematize Backwards Design, even as we intentionally adapted it to serve the educational aims of our context.

Hollie's Collision: Valuing the Spiritual Connection to the Work

We had been partnering for over two years by the time I, Hollie, felt the depth of where I fit within the partnering work as an individual and as a representative of a Western education and research institution. I am Diné and was raised through Diné philosophies that guided my family's lived experiences every day. I grew up in a small community located near the location of the NNDODE in Window Rock, AZ. I attended public school there and have worked within the community as an elementary teacher, a high school athletic coach, and with NNDODE and other tribal offices. I now live 2,000 miles from home and work for Penn State University where I can count the number of Diné people I know on one hand (not including my children). However, I continue to organize my research agenda around the needs of the Diné youth specifically and Indigenous communities generally.

When we started our first Diné character building curriculum workshop in the summer of 2022, we began the two-week long workshop with stories/teachings from the elders. The first thing the elders did was pray for the work that would be done to support our Diné youth and communities. This resonated with me because, although I know that this is how gatherings get started in my home community, I was now there as a representative of an institution where such things do not happen. It was beautiful to me to know that work I was doing through Penn State University was being prayed for on our own lands, in our language, and for our people. To me, this is an important protocol that positioned us in relationship with the future that is already in motion and brought us and our work together in a spiritual relationship.

However, as we continued with the work after the summer workshop, and into the monthly teacher meetings, our written agendas often lacked that important beginning. We noticed this after a few meetings in which at least one of the teachers would ask if we started with a prayer. In the moment, we would say no, and often, Dorthea would do it or ask one of the elder teachers to pray. This had me thinking about how we write agendas and begin our meetings/sessions without a spiritual component within the university and through Western education institutions where there is separation between "religion" and state legally, but also within the Western paradigm meaning, our physical self is detached from anything spiritual. It is contradictory to believe that our spiritual selves are not implicated in these spaces when thinking through Diné ways of knowing.

During one of our partner planning meetings, we were preparing the agenda for our next meeting with the teacher participants. I said, "Oh, we better include a prayer at the beginning. We've been forgetting that, and someone usually asks about it." Dorthea and Logan agreed, and I

went on to say, "Who should we ask to do it?" We sat there for a few seconds. Then, Dorthea said, "What about you?" I was taken aback by Dorthea's suggestion because I never considered this option. I felt as though the institutional parts of my identity cracked like a shell I was trying to outgrow suddenly, and my Diné identity got called to attention like it had never been before in a professional setting. I believe I giggled and then said, "Ummmm, okay, I can do it." So, we wrote it into our agenda, and I had some work to do. I contacted my mom, and she and Dr. Audra Platero, Principal of Tséhootsooí Diné Bi'Ólta', helped me create a prayer for the Diné curriculum-building project, the wellbeing of our Diné youth, and all who come together to do the work.

When I reflect on the feelings I experienced in that instance, I realize that it had the potential to be an epistemological collision that could have inflicted violence on my Diné identity if I let the Western epistemology that is supported by the institution of research lead me to say no. That move would have perpetuated the paradigm that views a separation of the spirit and subjectivity from research as necessary. It would have supported a move towards settler futurity in the research, the Diné curriculum-building project, and an assimilated mindset with my identity. However, my Diné identity and need to keep Diné character building at the front of my mind during this work led me to view Dorthea's suggestion as important. It was a very intentional decision for me that helped me gain a deeper understanding of what it meant to be a Diné researcher within a PWI and how the work to support Diné futurity and sovereignty implicated myself. It became a site of critical Indigenous pedagogy as my professional knowledge of colonizing educational research came to mind and ways that the Western paradigm works to separate the spiritual aspect from my work. I also understood how appropriate Dorthea's suggestion was because my personal identity knew my existence was also dependent on an existing Diné futurity, and I now have a prayer for my work to support Diné futurity.

Dorthea's Collision: Working in Education Means Confronting Western Structures

I, Dorthea, grew up in a time in my community where I can say there were a lot of elders. Today, those elders are very limited; there are very few, less than a handful left. I am grateful I was able to know my great-grandparents. Not so many people can honestly say that. I lived with my great-grandmother up until 1998. She passed away about the age of 86. My nalí, she passed away in 2010. My grandfather, he died of old age in 2008; he reached 102 years. My grandmother died in 2003 in a more tragic way. She was hit by a drunk driver. I was also able to see my Dad's nalí, her name was Asdzaa Tótsónii, and she died when I was 8 years old. I had that context during my formative years, when I was able to comprehend and remember things and ask questions. I am grounded in Diné teachings, and I know my language, culture, and spirituality because of that. I know who I am, where I come from, and I also know my purpose here on Earth.

Throughout my career with Western education, starting with going to college, I always found it difficult to understand "theoretical stuff" and to conceptualize certain things that were written and talked about in English. Reading the English language is still difficult. The only way that I could understand the things I was reading about in the university was to talk about it with somebody. I would present it to my parents and my elders because they were still living at the time when I was going through college. When I presented it, they would talk about their experiences and share stories of their understandings from their perspectives. They helped me understand it from within our traditional Diné context and then helped me relate it to the readings and concepts from my classes. I often wondered how they already knew all this theory that was written, when it

is not written down for them? So, thinking about those concepts from my Diné perspective, that's what helped me get through school. From then on, I thought about how important it was for our children to think in that capacity, where they really know who they are as Diné and can think through our ways for deeper learning and understanding.

When I got a job as a teacher, there was a point in my first year by October when I went home to my parents, and I said, "You wasted all your money. I'm not going back to teaching. It's so hard." I remember wanting to be the "cool teacher," but the students' behavior was not what I envisioned. I did not want to be too strict, but there also needed to be structured. The student behavior was terrible, and there was no respect. When I told my family that I wasn't going back, my mom asked, "So, what are your students really asking, and what are they wanting to learn? Where are they coming from? Understand that."

I asked my students, and their reasons made sense. They wondered why they had to go to school. They needed meaning and purpose. I decided to put it into the context from our Diné stories. I created a thematic unit around the Navajo Long Walk in which they did research to understand what the Diné went through, that our ancestors survived that experience so we can continue. Helping them understand their purpose from that perspective really helped them want to do well in school. I understood what they needed was a real connection to life to support their deeper learning and understanding.

When I decided to go back and do my graduate work, I ended up at Arizona State University and worked as a recruitment and retention specialist. I was tasked with supporting the Indigenous students on campus along with my colleague and another graduate student who had conducted research on this very subject. Again, we went through similar processes of identifying Indigenous students' needs and then helping them understand the systems and processes they needed to navigate to be successful in the university. We helped them interpret their place in the university from their own Indigenous ways of knowing. After this, I worked with the Navajo Nation Rural Systemic Initiative, which was focused on supporting students in math and science. This included working with researchers outside of the Navajo Nation to apply research and use data to inform teacher practice. This was difficult for me because the theoretical discussions about the research that informed the classroom practice were from outside of a Diné way of thinking. I would go home with huge headaches when all I wanted to know was what it meant and how it informed the way we should work with our students.

The way I was able to survive in that job and make sense of the information for our students was to talk with my husband in our language and discuss the theories from our ways of knowing. We would discuss stories elders told us, map out our thinking on flipchart paper, and then make sense of it all from our perspective so that I could then go and support the Diné teachers and students. From the experiences I have shared and the discussions I have with the co-authors, I can name specific instances where I have felt Western ways of thinking, education, and systems collide with my Diné ways. For me it creates a wakeup call for deeper understanding. It makes me step back, reflect, then look at the whole process again.

When I think about a collision, I think about two things bumping into each other hard and making a mess. From my previous experiences and in my role now, I feel like it's my job to figure out how to clean up this mess when creating Diné Character Building curriculum for Western education structures. I wonder what is the best way for us to create experiences that are meaningful for our children, and I make decisions and try to lead the project in that way. Throughout my life, I had the opportunity to go back to my family and talk out things I did not understand and was fortunate to have them help me understand it through our Diné ways. In the partnering work we

are doing here, my focus is on what is best for our Diné children's character development and, at the same time, working to understand the Western education frameworks of school accountability to help the teachers create a curriculum based on our Diné ways of being. I still have to go back to my family to discuss the work and gain deeper understandings.

Contributions and Implications

In our efforts to collaborate in a positive way, we strive to embody Hill and Coleman's (2019) principles previously listed by understanding that *relationships are dialogical.* As partners, our steps have been cautious and slowed by our critical consciousness as representatives of various professional positions and individual positionalities. In our partnering work, we center the needs of Diné partners, rather than university partners. When we started working together, Hollie and Logan asked the Navajo Nation Office of Diné School Improvement (NNODSI) what their needs were and what work should be supported. The NNODSI needed support in building research-based curriculum focused on Diné character building, and so our project works to address that need. As partners, we also work to recognize the *importance of place-conscious ceremony* and make efforts to respect that dimension through informed refusals and focal points. It is within the partnering processes guided by Diné ways of knowing where we have felt the hegemonic Western education structures reveal themselves, and we worked towards *equity within distinctiveness*. We as partners often shared and discussed our various perspectives and valued the *internal pluralism and diversity* that enriched our understandings and informed our decision making. Our focus on the processes of creating Diné character building curriculum helps us *share knowledge* that can be useful to others who partner to support Indigenous sovereignty and futurity.

Even with all these careful considerations, our stories reveal that there are still moments within our partnering work where collisions we experienced could easily have become moments of cultural destruction. Although we were initially caught off guard when these moments occurred, the more that we centered Diné philosophies and lifeways, the more consistently we found ourselves able to shift the collisions into sites of critical Indigenous pedagogy—valuable opportunities to learn together through self-reflection and dialogue. On the basis of these understandings, we advance our article's three key contributions.

First, our article contributes new insights into how to recognize and respond to moments of epistemological collision that can be channeled into significant learning experiences. The characteristics of these moments—points when ambiguity, uncertainty, or awkwardness might be felt—can serve as powerful bases for critical reflective practices for all partners and for university-based representatives, in particular. These moments get recognized and/or felt by partners who have critical understandings of the context of their work. With these characteristics in mind, partners can learn to notice and "lean in" (Rutten et al., 2024) to such moments as they occur, thereby becoming better equipped to mediate these moments toward Indigenous futurity. In our case, we complicated certain aspects of the school-university partnership literature that has emerged largely within a Western educational paradigm by engaging a critical Indigenous pedagogy that works to question, critique, and deconstruct practices that perpetuate settler futurity and colonizing research.

A second key contribution of our article is about what is necessary to transform epistemological collisions into sites of critical Indigenous pedagogy. It was not only the shared noticing of the moments but, within them, the steadfast assertion of deep Indigenous knowledge.

In the context of efforts at engagement between universities and Indigenous nations, this insight implies the need for highly skilled Indigenous knowledge holders and/or educational leaders, such as Dorthea, Hollie, and the teachers, whose conceptual understanding of Diné futurity was a steady presence throughout the work. Dorthea's skill as a facilitator of open, reflective dialogue enabled the unpacking of these collisions and the learning that resulted. This insight also implies the need for non-Indigenous, and/or university-based, partners to be willing to share their experiences freely with Indigenous partners, yet always with an eye toward supporting and centering Indigenous futurity. Sharing of our collisions prompted learning for all three coauthors about effective collaboration and, as such, contributed to the overarching goal of this project. The insight signals the potential for future partnering projects and inquiry that explores how Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners learn to co-facilitate collaborative processes through Indigenous perspectives.

This article's third key contribution is an illustration of how moments of epistemological collision can offer meaningful entry points to learning about partnering in ways that center the aims and perspectives of Indigenous partners so that there is the possibility of restructuring how Western institutions engage in partnering, collaborating, and researching. The learnings that happen within these sights of critical Indigenous pedagogy point to the depth and hegemonic practices of Western education that go unquestioned. Indigenous knowledges and perspectives cannot continue to be a topic of research, or contained within Western paradigms, but should inform the ways that partnering and educational research is conducted through Indigenous ways of knowing in support of Indigenous futurity.

As stated previously, Western educational institutions are colonial institutions, and the epistemological commitments go unchecked unless other epistemologies are present, arise, and assert themselves. We went into this work knowing that we would follow the lead of the needs of NNODSI and value Diné philosophies and ways of knowing. We also knew that we were creating a curriculum for school with content that does not necessarily align with Western educational structures. As we experienced and recognized these epistemological collisions, we saw opportunities that revealed important pedagogical sites. The depth of the learning that happened within these sites revealed important curricula that accentuated the decision to either deny or support Diné futurity.

Notes

1. Logan has contributed to such literature over the past several years (e.g., Dvir et al., 2023; Rutten et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2024; Rutten & Badiali, 2020, 2024; Wolkenhauer et al., 2020, 2022).

2. Penn State University is on the traditional homelands of Haudenosaunee and other Indigenous nations.

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