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“One Side Celebrates and the Other Side is Grieving”: Learning and Unlearning in Native American/Indigenous Studies Courses

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Abstract

Currently, few studies examine the learning and unlearning that takes place in Native American and Indigenous Studies (NAIS) courses with non-Native and predominately white undergraduate college students in the United States (US). Due to the unique history, political status, Native nationhood, and sovereignty of the United States' Indigenous Americans, there are unique issues associated with Native American studies content that differs from other diversity-focused courses. For many US-based college students, the opportunity to openly explore the historical and contemporary experiences of groups that are culturally and linguistically different from their own home culture often occurs when taking college courses (Chang 2002). The purpose of the current study was to understand how taking NAIS courses influences undergraduate college students' attitudes towards Indigenous people, their history, and contemporary experiences. This qualitative analysis focuses on NAIS courses as the site of inquiry and is part of a larger mixed methods research study.

Keywords

Native American Studies courses, racial attitudes, student learning, higher education.

Introduction

At many universities in the United States, the majority of students enrolled in Native American and Indigenous Studies (NAIS), including ethnic studies courses, are not Indigenous. The majority of students enrolled in NAIS courses are white, which naturally reflects the demographics of predominately white institutions (PWIs) in the United States. It is important to note that NAIS courses were not designed to educate white undergraduate students. NAIS courses and Native American Studies, as a discipline, emerged out of the resistance movements of the 1960s and, at the height of the curricular reform, Native students advocated for courses taught by a Native faculty, taught for Native students, and that served the interests and needs of Native communities.

Teaching predominantly white students in NAIS courses may have the potential to shift their levels of critical thinking, provide them with opportunities to position-take with marginalized groups, engage in self-reflection, and hear the voices of Indigenous people often for the first time.



Indigenous scholars worldwide have sought to have Indigenous knowledge, viewpoints, historical, and contemporary experiences acknowledged in the curriculum at all levels of education. Addressing questions of 'how is knowledge legitimated', 'who creates this knowledge', and 'whose realities are accepted as valid' has worked towards disrupting the master narratives around US history and contemporary Indigenous experiences. 'Counterstorying', or telling unheard stories from the viewpoint of those whose voices have been subjugated, has been acknowledged as "a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (Solórzano & Yosso 2002, 32). Counterstorying has the potential to challenge the dominant discourse on race. In the case of American Indians in the US context, discourses about both race and the unique political status of Indigenous people must be addressed in the curriculum.

As an Indigenous woman (Arapaho/Saponi/Taino descendant), researcher, and Native American studies professor at two US institutions, my positionality is important to address here. I have a unique perspective and lens through which I view the world and the studying of white students' attitudes from an Indigenous perspective is a relatively new area of inquiry. This inquiry began in my doctoral program while teaching Native American studies courses. As a new instructor, I was thrilled to have the opportunity to teach courses that I was personally passionate about, courses that dovetailed with my education in a Native American social work program, and professional work (direct community level work, research, evaluation and policy advocacy) in Indigenous communities. The courses I taught, *Indigenous Women, Children and Tribal Communities* and *Native American Cultural Expressions* were both designed with a critical lens. Themes of Indigenous resistance, assimilation policy and practices, colonization, and self-definition, in addition to examining tribal community's strengths, challenges, and their continuing struggle to assert sovereignty in the 21st century, were addressed. On reflection, there were highs and lows when teaching NAIS courses, but some days were both frustrating and disheartening. There were many times when my white students resisted the Indigenous content and perspective that I shared. For example, when I used excerpts from Christopher Columbus' diary and those of his contemporaries to examine his treatment of Indigenous people, some students challenged my sources. When I showed video clips with Native elders who had attended boarding schools and suffered trauma, some students thought the videos only served to make them feel guilt. I remember one white, female student standing up and nearly shouting during class, "I didn't pay for this course to feel guilty and bad about myself." In post-course evaluations, I have also had students suggest that, as an Indigenous woman, I was unable to provide unbiased feedback on course assignments, despite providing clear assignment guidelines and grading rubrics. In the case of course evaluations, I cannot tell if some students are resisting me and what I represent, the course content, or a combination of both.

On the converse, every time I have taught an NAIS course, a few students come up to me after the first day of class to identify themselves as being Indigenous. I always give those students a heartfelt welcome and invite them to contribute to our class discussion and share as they feel comfortable. My Native American students seemed glad NAIS courses exist and their voices and history are being 'seen' in the curriculum. I have also had white students who email or stop me before heading into class to tell me about their experiences of challenging their friends or loved ones who have 'dressed up as Indians' for college parties or have supported harmful Native representations.

Helping to build allies is definitely one of ‘highs’ of teaching NAIS courses. The majority of students whom I have taught seem to have more of a surface interest in Native Americans and want to learn about stereotypically Native contributions, such as jewelry, art and dance, but are hesitant to engage in deeper critical thinking regarding historical and contemporary policies that have severely damaged Native communities. Students’ lack of critical engagement with the content is supported by Johansen (2003), who states that many of his *Introduction to Native Studies* students “arrived expecting lightweight fare about arrowheads and rain dances” or “hoped to reinforce their New Age stereotypes” (265-266). It is from that position and place that I began examining students’ learning and unlearning processes in NAIS courses. Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy 2006) and Smith’s (1999) decolonizing methodologies work have helped to provide theoretical guidance for this study and for me, personally, as an Indigenous researcher. Brayboy (2006) explicated in *Tribal Crit* that “theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars *must* work toward social change” (430).

Interrogating whiteness is fairly new in US-based Native American studies scholarship, but Moreton-Robinson’s (2003) work that suggests that Indigenous studies includes challenging existing knowledge and power structures and, to do this, “we must engage critically with White theory in order to destabilize it” (74). Exploring and exposing areas where students ‘get stuck’ in their understandings, are unable to challenge their privilege, express biased attitudes, or respond in socially desirable ways, instead of authentically, is paramount to debunking stereotypes and offering a more complex, nuanced portrayal of US and Indigenous history. Much ‘unlearning’ and learning needs to take place.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

To understand the complexities of NAIS courses as being sites to explore the attitudes of predominately white undergraduate college students, this study drew upon critical race theories and college student identity development theory. Two branches of Critical Race Theory (Gladson-Billings & Tate 1995)—Tribal Critical Race Theory (Brayboy 2006) and Whiteness Theory (Lipsitz 1998) help to situate white students’ understandings of Native issues and attitudes toward Native people in relation to their cultural and racial backgrounds. Tribal Critical Race Theory (*Tribal Crit*) is “rooted in the multiple, nuanced, and historically- and geographically-located epistemologies and ontologies found in Indigenous communities” (Brayboy 2006, 427). This theory posits that Native issues require a more nuanced analysis and guiding theoretical framework that takes into account “Indians’ liminality as both legal/political and racialized beings” (Brayboy 2006, 427). The liminal status that Native people occupy and the diversity of Native America are integral components to understanding attitudes toward Native people and the ways prejudice manifests itself. Whiteness theory and college student identity development theories help to situate the privileged spaces many (not all) college students occupy and the opportunity for change. Whiteness theory treats whiteness, not as a biological category, but as a social construct and examines the “normative and dominant nature of whiteness” that often remains invisible and unexamined (Moreton-Robinson 2004). Evans, Hole, Berg, Hutchinson and Sookraj (2009) suggest that (1) whiteness can be understood as a structural advantage that white people occupy in society. (2) “Whiteness is a standpoint from which White people understand the world and their position in it” (898). Whiteness is a set of cultural practices that are also unmarked and unnamed. Whiteness is normative and taken for granted in a “hidden framework that gives meaning to events, social actions, and phenomena; and, it privileges White people over all others in such spaces” (Evans, Hole, Berg, Hutchinson and Sookraj 2009, 898).

Student development theory conceptualizes the change experienced by college students as part of their higher education experience. A subset of this theory explains how college students come to understand themselves as beings with intersecting identities with respect to race, class, gender, and other social identities (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton and Renn 2010). Students often grapple with concepts of race and racism in relation to self-understanding. This can be compounded when understanding the intersections of race and political status for Native American individuals and communities.

An analysis of the literature regarding attitudes towards Native Americans and the impact of course-based interventions revealed that much of the literature focuses on Native people as the center of inquiry (Brantmeier 2012). Much of the literature found focuses on best practices for teaching Native American students; a plethora of literature on the problems of Native American and Indigenous communities, and much research on the health-related challenges that Indigenous communities face (examples: domestic violence, mental health, child sexual abuse, PTSD, diabetes). In sum, there is little research that puts white students at the center of inquiry. Further, there are little or no empirical studies that discuss dominant identity students as participants in Native or Indigenous studies courses.

Learning About America's First People

For most white undergraduate college students in the United States, the only Native American history they receive is a gross misrepresentation of historical facts as part of their K-12¹ schooling (Good 2009). Those privileged to write and tell history traditionally have been white, male property holders; this reality has served to exclude Indigenous voices. The distortion of historical facts, exclusion of the Native American voice, romanticization of the Native image, and the fact that Native people are only brought into the school curriculum at one time during the academic year in the US (Good 2009) has led many mainstream, white Americans to believe that Indigenous people are a people of the past. Many white students' lack of understanding and experiences with Native American people are compounded because many students who take NAIS courses have had little to no authentic contact with Native people. Native Americans make up between 2 to 4% of the United States population (American Community Survey 2009), so many non-Native people have few direct interactions with Native people, although, according to Ducote-Sabey (1999), everyone has attitudes about them. A great deal of the information non-Native students learn about this country's original inhabitants "is through historical writings, the media or hearsay", which excludes the Native voice and much of which is a holdover from contentious early white-Indian relationships (Ducote-Sabey 1999, 3). There is often little to no recognition of Indigenous people as resilient, not static, and adaptive to the present times. This misconception has led to misrepresentations, romanticized stereotypes, and both subtle and overt racism (Rankin & Reason 2005; Harper & Hurtado 2007).

Given the history of miseducation in the K-12 schooling experience, the process of learning and unlearning in college-level NAIS courses could be particularly challenging for students. In short, NAIS courses expose college students to a story that contradicts and turns on its head the well-loved stories of America's first Thanksgiving, the love story of Pocahontas and Captain John Smith, and Christopher Columbus as the 'discoverer' of America and a hero worthy of a national US holiday.

The Role of Native American and Indigenous Studies Courses

Native American and Indigenous studies courses offer a counter-narrative to disrupt mainstream, dominant narratives. Ideally, these courses engage a critical lens to interrogate structures of power that operate in society and expose colonial policies of wealth stripping, paternalism, racism, and land theft. In critical approaches, stories are interrogated for historical authenticity and Indigenous accounts are brought to the fore and given voice. As mentioned above, Native American studies, as a discipline, was not designed to educate white students, but conceptualized as a mechanism for Indigenous decolonization and as a way for Indigenous people to name themselves and the issues that are important for Native communities. By definition, Native Studies is an “interdisciplinary academic field that examines the history, culture, politics, issues, and contemporary experiences of Native peoples in North America” (Heitshu & Marshall 2007, 10). Cook-Lynn (1997) maintains that two key concepts help to define the discipline, indigenism and sovereignty.

Undergraduate students learn that colonization of the North and South Americas’ first people had devastating and lasting impacts on that include: disease; the policies of forced removal from traditional homelands; the introduction of alcohol, war, and assimilationist schooling policies; and the resultant loss of land and self-determination (Weaver 1998). Students are exposed to Indigenous people’s struggles for wellness and efforts to address issues such as poverty, family violence, chemical dependency and suicide—a public health crisis on Native lands. On the converse, students are also able to learn from and examine Native nations’ progress towards economic prosperity through community development, reclamation of tribal sovereignty, and a growing resurgence of self-determination and activism. In the section to follow, I will discuss students’ experiences of learning and unlearning in two Native American studies courses by examining a slice of data from a larger, mixed methods study. The data presented here answers the research question, “How does taking a Native/Indigenous studies course influence undergraduate college students’ attitudes toward Native Americans, their history, and contemporary experiences?”

Methodology

Participants and Setting

The participants for this study were undergraduate college students enrolled in the courses *Native American History* and *Federal Indian Law* at a medium-sized university in a western state of the United States. Both courses took place during the spring 2012 semester and, to complete this study, the assistance of two NAIS professors was sought. Both professors assisted me by providing access to their students, providing their course syllabi, and by encouraging student participation in this study. As part of the larger, mixed methods study, students participated in a pre-post online survey instrument related to attitudes towards Native Americans that included open-ended questions. For the purpose of this article, I will concentrate on focus group sessions that were conducted to understand students’ learning experiences after the course. Students who self-selected into the focus group opportunity were not reflective of the course’s overall demographics. Eleven students out of 60 possible study participants participated in three focus groups. Three of the 11 students self-identified as African American, Latino or Native American, with one of those students being male. The rest of the students identified as being white and two of those students

identified as being gay or lesbian. One of the white students identified as being a non-traditional, commuter student.

Instrumentation

A review of literature in the areas of diversity education and multicultural education provided guidance regarding the types of questions that could be asked when examining students' classroom learning outcomes and experiences. Four focus group questions were developed and, for the purposes of this article, I will focus on data from the question, "As a result of participation in a Native studies class, what have you learned and/or unlearned regarding Native people that has been particularly significant?"

Data Collection and Procedures

Three distance focus groups were scheduled, based on student interest and availability, and were conducted by me at the end of the semester, with 11 students. Focus group methods were chosen because their strength is the interaction between and among participants and the opportunity for the interactions to broaden and extend perspectives. The students and I had never met before or corresponded, other than me collecting their study consent forms via email and scheduling the focus group sessions using an online scheduler. The nature of distance focus groups to conduct this study offered both benefits and drawbacks. One of the benefits of this modality was the students' inability to see my face and, potentially, respond in socially desirable ways, so that they would not offend me, although issues of social desirability are difficult to measure and a threat when assessing students learning. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour to an hour and a half, and addressed questions regarding students' experiences in the course and their process of learning and unlearning.

Data Analysis

The qualitative focus group data focused on post-course learning experiences and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis techniques involved a process of coding and categorization. In the focus group data analysis process, the recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then reviewed for accuracy and, in instances where I had unclear quotes or meaning, I went back to the participants to check my understanding of their statements. The first round of codes were open and stuck close to the data. Sending memos was undertaken with an outside researcher and this technique was used as an analytic tool (Glaser 1998). This process helped me to see connections between codes, construct themes and reflect on learning from the data.

Findings: Learning and Unlearning in a Native American/Indigenous Studies Course

The subthemes represented in the focus group data point to key areas where participating students' understandings grew while taking the course. It is also important to note that a much larger sample of students (82%) did not participate in the focus group opportunity, which authors, such as Applebaum (2010), suggest may be evidence of a "culturally sanctioned discourse of evasion" (43). The majority of white students simply opted out of a potentially difficult discussion and exercised the privilege of non-engagement. The nonparticipation made a huge statement.

For the small sample of students who participated in this study, these subthemes illustrate critical gaps in students' understandings and suggest that Indigenous people were still the *subject* of inquiry. While the small number of participating students increased their knowledge in the courses *Federal Indian Law* and *Native American History*, they did not discuss or acknowledge their own complicity in the systems that subjugate Indigenous people. To discuss the learning that took place, four subthemes were constructed under the overarching theme of learning and unlearning: (1) Inadequacy of K-12 Education, (2) Historical Myths and Stories We Tell Ourselves, (3) Heroes and Villains, and (4) Contemporary Circumstances Have Historical Roots. An analysis of these four subthemes follows.

Inadequacy of K-12 Education

The first subtheme constructed from the focus group data deals with participants' reflections of the education they had received prior to taking a Native American studies course. Students reported having a cursory understanding of the major events in Native American history, such as the Trail of Tears, but taking a Native American studies course highlighted the depth and complexity of Native American history. One student stated,

I heard there was a Trail of Tears, but I didn't know what exactly that meant or that there was more than one. Like I thought there was just one, but didn't know about all the people that died or the extent, or the stuff that happened afterward.

In essence, this student and others like him are taught the most basic information about the atrocities committed as part of American history. This incomplete story leads students to the conclusion that events like the Trail of Tears were a single, negative event in history, not one of many that occurred during the colonization of the Americas. In a typical Native American studies course, students learn about more than the Trail of Tears. They also learn about the Long Walk of the Navajo and the other forced relocation efforts faced by Native Americans. Students examine the images of those relocations and the historical documents. Students see Native people being walked hundreds of miles in the middle of winter and hear that many people died along the way, especially older community members and children. Focus group participants often expressed surprise when learning of the persistence and multiple methods used to reduce the Native population through biological and cultural genocide. The depth and detail of historical facts appear to be excluded from mainstream students' educations, until taking a university-level Native American studies course.

Enrolling and participating in an NAIS course seemed to help students to fill in gaps in their historical knowledge and provide them with a more complete picture from multiple vantage points. The story of the Native-US government relationship, as learned in the K-12 schooling context, is taught in such a way that the students believe Native Americans simply lost the war and were overwhelmed by the might and intelligence of the white settlers. In actuality, Native people were not always in a powerless relationship. One student reflected,

It's interesting to know the true history because I think it's taught in education systems that, um, you know, Europeans were more like a powerful power in terms of military might, but, in reality, they needed the Native people and they helped them survive. The tribes were in a much different position than they are now. Europeans actually made treaties to survive.

The learning and unlearning taking place, as evidenced by this student's comment, is the idea that K-12 education in the United States provides a history that strips Indigenous people of their agency in the colonial encounter. Native people are framed as victims and mainstream society feels remorse about the Native American experience of colonization, similar to the way we may feel sad when reading a Greek tragedy, but Indigenous people actively resisted colonization historically, as they still do today. The failure of K-12 education to provide multiple voices in American history, in addition to incomplete coverage of pertinent content, has led to myths and misunderstandings of the Native American contemporary experience and history, from the perspective of focus group participants. Native people are perceived as passive figments of the past who lacked and still lack agency to change.

Historical Myths and Stories We Tell Ourselves

A key aspect of learning and unlearning Native American history, from the perspective of focus group participants, seems to be a critical examination of the stereotypical Native American holidays, specifically Columbus Day and Thanksgiving. These US fall [autumn] celebrations seem to be the only times in a year that the general population thinks about Indigenous people and children are taught about America's first people. When participating students were asked the question, "Has your view of holidays such as Thanksgiving and Columbus Day changed or remained the same after taking this class", a student reflected, "I never really thought about it from the historical viewpoint, but at the same time, when I was in elementary school, I always wondered why Native Americans are only talked about at one time of the year, that was the only time they were discussed". This question stimulated quite a bit of conversation and two students' new knowledge, perspectives, and passion were evident in the focus group for the Federal Indian Law course. The focus group discussion also seemed to create cohesiveness, when students did not feel alone in their more critical ideas. The transcript excerpt below uses pseudonyms and is provided to elucidate the strength of focus groups as a method to assess learning outcomes.

<p>N: So ... if everyone feels comfortable and doesn't have anything to add, I'd like to move on. So my next question, as a part of this course I'm sure you may have touched on key historic events. I'm just wondering if this course impacts the way you discuss key historic events? I was thinking about maybe Columbus Day or Thanksgiving as an example? Do you think you will talk about or view those events differently after taking this course?</p>
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<p>Long pause.</p>

<p>N: Any thoughts?</p>

<p>Two begin at the same time (garbled). Hmmm ... Laughing ... go ahead ... sorry.</p>
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C: This is Craig. I guess, um, growing up and in school, we grew up learning the holidays—like Columbus is a great person and the Native people were nice and just our (white settler) friends [Mocking tone of voice]. We know so little ... Like Columbus thought he had the right to conquer the Americas and the people on it because he was Christian and the Native people weren't. Like the Pilgrims, they totally took advantage of the Native people ... at Thanksgiving we think everybody was just cool and down with each other ... It's so off base! There are just all these cover-ups. ... We don't look at the history too closely because then we realize that Columbus didn't discover America and he enslaved and killed millions of people. The holidays were designed to make you spend money, so you don't really focus on what the holidays are about and are really historically rooted in patriarchy and land ownership ... I think I look at them (the holidays) differently ...

J: This is Joy. I think Craig hit it on the head! I agree that I've never been a huge fan of the holidays. It's like he was reading my mind. It's really nationalist propaganda to keep us happy and proud about ourselves despite the terrible things we've done ... an unacknowledgement ... it's super sad ... We've done such horrible things [and] we can't even be honest about it ... I completely agree with everything he just said.

Students critiqued the practice of talking about Native American people at only one time of the year and the hidden, unseen space Native Americans occupy in US society. This hidden identity, in students' minds, also led to a reframing of history from the colonizer's perspective and a lack of acknowledgement of Native American stories and contributions. One female, Native American student stated, "People think that Native Americans are dead—that we don't exist anymore..." This student also mentioned the lack of acknowledgement by mainstream Americans of Native Americans' contributions to democracy:

There's such a glazing over of history ... we think, oh, how great, like, George Washington was, when at one point he was considered a terrorist in England; we count Ben Franklin one of the most amazing geniuses of our time, but he stole the idea of democracy from the Iroquois Nation ... things like this, people don't know.

As part of learning and unlearning Native American history all students reflected and critiqued Native American myths and the ways certain American icons and monuments do not have the same positive association for Native communities. One female student, who is exploring her Native ancestry, commented on a recent family trip to South Dakota and her realization about the positive association or myth around a site that has caused much controversy in Native communities,

Last year my family went on to a trip to Mount Rushmore. It totally caught me from a different perspective. That Native Americans were grieving that there are American faces on their sacred mountain. We've got this huge monument in the US that's celebrated. One side celebrates and the other side is grieving.

Critiquing and reflecting on the role of Native American myths beyond the holidays, including sacred sites and positive association with sports' mascots, could provide additional insight into students' attitudes in this study and the process of learning and unlearning.

Heroes and Villains

The framing of historical figures as heroes or villains was revisited multiple times throughout the focus groups and several students noted that even people we see as American heroes were not sympathetic to Native people. One white, female student in the Native American History course stated,

I was shocked by the ways some of our Presidents thought about Native American people. Abraham Lincoln, for instance, gave an order to hunt down and kill a bunch of Native Americans and especially their leaders. I was shocked to learn that.

Students in both classes were also attuned to the realization that certain groups (in this case, Native Americans) are more vulnerable to government interference. Learning about history from multiple vantage points and hearing the voices of those that are often silent seemed to call into question what students have learned about other great historical figures and their contributions to the world. A white, male student in the Federal Indian Law course stated,

We create these myths of American history and we make people more than they are. They (some of our countries forefathers) were racist slave owners and, in many cases, they took advantage. George Washington owned slaves. Thomas Jefferson owned slaves and we make them out to be these people with great morals who were just out to create the greatest country in the world. They didn't create the greatest country in the world because, in reality, they created problems that we are still dealing with today.

During the focus group discussion students grappled with the actions of key historical figures and the single story that students in the US are taught. The actions of Presidents Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln were discussed and their actions towards Indigenous people. A female focus group participant stated,

He [Abraham Lincoln] was an abolitionist and ended slavery. I guess he was man of his times and it wasn't uncommon to own slaves, be violent, or kill people who were on your land. I think their actions aren't just about the person, but a commentary on the times that they lived.

This student felt that, in many cases, historical figures were just products of the times in which they lived. Unfortunately, fully exploring this comment using the focus group to gain other student perspectives on the 'products of their time' argument was missed due to time constraints. This line of questioning, considering the actions of historical figures and the role of NAIS courses, deserves discussion. The role of NAIS courses is not to simply paint heroes as villains. One of the roles of NAIS courses is to provide multiple perspectives and hear the voices of groups who have been silenced due to colonialism and systems of oppression. An integral aspect of NAIS courses is to help students think critically about the ways in which systems privilege some members of society at the expense of others. Contextualizing historic realities is also important.

Contemporary Circumstances Have Historical Roots

A theme that ran throughout students' statements was the realization that contemporary circumstances have historical roots or the idea that history truly lays the groundwork for circumstances today. Learning about Native American history seemed to put contemporary experiences on a historical continuum so that students see the progression

of history, rather than seeing historical events as static. One male focus group participant in the Federal Indian Law course stated,

Circumstances today are rooted in all this law ... I would have never thought about it that way and used to just think, "Oh that happened a long time ago", so it doesn't really challenge you. Everything is built upon the history. I think it is a good realization that you just can't undo this. You're trying to undo a law that goes back to the history of the United States. It's not only historical, but has contemporary implications.

Students who were enrolled in the Federal Indian Law course reflected on this idea in depth because the legal decisions that are deemed historical still have weight in contemporary Native American lives. A white, female participant stated,

What blew my mind though ... was the racism embedded in the law ... Like when we learned about the doctrine of discovery, learning that some of this stuff is still considered okay and constitutional. Like in the statues they use terms like heathen and savage. It's just clearly absolutely racist and not right. Some of this stuff still has legal standing in 2012 ... It just makes me think that maybe we haven't come that far ... It just reaffirms for me that, even though its 2012, we still think Native people are beneath the white, 'superior' race. I find it disturbing, even though I am white.

A Native American, female student in the Native American History course echoed a similar sentiment,

I was able to take a Native American course when I was in high school, so I knew some of this stuff, but it reaffirmed for me the ways racism is embedded in the law. It kind of reaffirms for me that, even though we've made big strides, we haven't come as far as we think. We're pro-human rights, color blind ... but racism still exists. We have to actually do something to change it.

Reflecting on history and legal doctrine as having a large impact on contemporary circumstances led students to reflect on their roles and contributions for making changes. As one female student stated, "The history books, kind of just present, like, 'Oh this thing happened', but it doesn't talk about the implications today. Why people live on reservations ... The problems Native people have today ... were essentially chosen for them." Learning and unlearning for these students seemed to put historical events on a timeline that takes events out of the past. Viewing events as being 'just in the past' seems to remove responsibility, while viewing historical events as a progression to the realities of the present seemed to move students to a place of trying to figure out their role in changing the future. One white, male student stated, "I'm realizing there are still implications today, it's not just historical facts. This stuff is still affecting people. I'm still trying to figure out how to make a change." The learning from taking a Native studies course, for many students, also seemed to take students from a place of dismissing or distancing themselves from historical events, but allowed them to reflect on history as a progression that leads to present day realities, contemporary implications, and possibilities for change.

Implications and Limitations

Understanding and exploring learning outcomes for predominately white students who participate in NAIS studies courses is rather a new area of inquiry in the United States, but seems to be better established in other white settler countries.

As mentioned earlier, examining the learning and unlearning process of white students who take NAIS courses is outside of the original purpose of NAIS, as a discipline. The questions, then, are:

Does the purpose of NAIS courses need to be expanded, given the majority student demographics in predominately white institutions?

Should a critical component and purpose of NAIS courses be that majority white students engage in critical self-reflection regarding their roles in a system that privileges some and oppresses others?

Should NAIS courses engage our predominantly white student population in an experience that asks them to interrogate their own whiteness and the privilege that that status holds?

In this study, despite seemingly positive learning outcomes and although the data point to changes in knowledge of contemporary and historical Indigenous experiences, there are key gaps, questions, and limitations unanswered by data gathered for this study. When looking at the students who self-selected into the study opportunity, I mentioned earlier that students on the margins participated at higher rates. Essentially, the dominant identity students, who I define as white male and female, traditionally-aged, heterosexual students, opted out of the study. They simply chose not to engage in the online conversation regarding their experiences in these courses. Their silence can be seen as a facet of privilege and also a discursive strategy that students may use when faced with discussions about systemic privilege and oppression (Applebaum 2010). Howard (2006) refers to this as the luxury of ignorance. Coupled with the 'legacy of privilege' and the assumption of rightness, the luxury of ignorance helps to sustain the white dominance paradigm (2006). When discussing the learning and unlearning processes, the students who participated in the focus group self-selected into the opportunity, which indicates a level of interest and openness, yet they did not engage in self-examination or unpack their own privilege. The case could be made that, if seemingly engaged students lacked critical reflection regarding their personal privilege and role in the subjugation of Native people, students who opted out of the study may have made even less progress.

This begs the question, 'Is engaging in self-reflection a component of NAIS courses in the United States?' In many cases, I think critical reflection is an implicit course goal, but not an explicit course goal. When reviewing the syllabi for the two courses that students enrolled in to participate in this study, *Federal Indian Law* and *Native American History*, critical self-reflection was not evidenced as a primary learning outcome. Without explicit, purposeful, and structured guidance students may not be prepared for the difficult work of unpacking their own privilege or engaging in a critique of themselves and systems of privilege (Brantmeier & Brantmeier 2015).

Conclusion

The qualitative data presented in this article resulted in interesting and notable themes that were constructed and analyzed through a critical lens. The experience of taking Native studies classes seemed to help to reposition the Native American experience within the context of the American experience. Students' responses suggested that were able to see historical events as an interdependent continuum that leads to present day realities. Native experiences and historical events have been silent in history books in the United States

and in representations seen and heard on television, film and other media sources because the atrocities of the past have been purposely erased from the mainstream American psyche. In many cases, students recognized that myths have been created about the Native American experience that empower and lift up mainstream American society to the detriment of Native individuals and communities (Fryberg 2003). To quote one student from the interviews conducted in this research, “One side celebrates and the other side is grieving...”

The learning outcomes outlined are a step in a positive direction, but there are integral missing pieces. One of those pieces may be intentional learning opportunities structured to further understandings of the self and critical engagement with the ways that students are complicit in the subjugation of others. NAIS professors may also be challenged by students who enroll in our courses based on romanticized Native stereotypes and are comfortable with Indigenous people and their communities as the subjects of inquiry, but, when asked to discuss their own privilege, they choose to disengage. Understanding the influences of Native American studies courses and the opportunity to influence attitudinal shifts and disrupt harmful narratives is integral because students enter the world of work, after college, as professionals, where they will have decision-making power.

I have the perspective that understanding non-Native students’ experiences of taking Native studies courses can move them toward being social justice allies and that, through hearing the counterstories and voices of Indigenous people, dominant, harmful discourse and related discriminatory practices can be disrupted. Native American and Indigenous studies courses are a decolonization tool that can help to address lingering and corrosive colonial narratives, negative stereotypes, selective memory, and passive acceptance of dominant narratives. The university experience and learning obtained there prepares students to assume positions of power in our government and communities—to deliver health and human services, to become business leaders, to educate young people, and to influence policy. They have the power to impact social change. Working for social change, understanding, and reconciliation was the foundational purpose of this study.

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ⁱ Throughout this article the term K-12 education is referred to. In the United States, the **K-12 education system refers to the combination of primary and secondary education that children receive from kindergarten until 12th grade, typically starting at ages four to six years and continuing through to ages 17 to 19 years.**