

## **Facilitating a Natural Way: The Native American Approach to Education**

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Creating a Community of Learners:  
Using the Teacher as Facilitator Model  
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*McClellan Hall describes how the Native American community uses accumulated knowledge to educate youth. Their lifelong processes of mentoring establish a natural Teacher as Facilitator Model.*

Prior to European contact, the indigenous people of Turtle Island, as North America is known to many Native American tribes, represented diverse cultures, ranging from large political confederacies, to densely populated farming communities to small hunting and gathering groups. The population at contact has been estimated as high as twenty million people, speaking hundreds of different languages. Their cultures incorporated a sophisticated understanding of the Creation and, in their role as caretakers of Turtle Island, the indigenous people enjoyed an intimate relationship with the Creator.

Native communities had an organized system for educating young people, based on generations of accumulated knowledge about the natural world. A complex experiential process, which included learning by doing, watching, listening, and experimenting, under the caring mentorship of elders and extended family members, was well developed. Customs, skills, spiritual practices, and languages were effectively transmitted according to locally determined priorities. The extended family, clan, and the larger community provided a safety net for all children.

The understanding that it takes a village to raise a child, commonly attributed to African tradition, was the norm in Native communities. There was no concept “of other people’s children. A child was regarded as a gift from the Creator and members of the community shared responsibility for the upbringing. Many tribes were matrilineal, tracing relationships through the mother’s lineage, reflecting the deep reverence for Mother Earth. The traditional indigenous ways were egalitarian and respectful of both sexes.

Learning was understood to be a lifelong experience, which began before birth. Through songs and ceremonies for the unborn child, infants were prepared for a place in the community. Children commonly spent the first months of life in a cradleboard. Generally, the cradleboard was taken everywhere and was propped up, allowing the child to observe the activities of the family, community, and the environment.

Elders were held in the highest esteem in this system, and grandparents played important roles as teachers of traditional knowledge and carriers of the family genealogy and history. Aunts, uncles, and others who may not be blood relatives all played roles. Clearly, it was commonly understood that responsibility for teaching was not confined to the biological parents.

As children grew older, a variety of teaching approaches were incorporated. Oral tradition was the most common practice; through what is often called storytelling, although the process is much more sophisticated than the name implies. Different tribes utilized various forms of symbolic writing, as in the case of the Cherokee syllabary, a system that uses a symbol for each distinctive sound in the Cherokee language. Among the Delaware and other Northeastern tribes, picture writing on birch bark was used, and significant events and valued teachings were recorded on scrolls. In the plains, picture writing on animal skins, sometimes called Winter Counts, were commonly used to record specific events and record tribal histories. Symbolic paintings and carving on rocks are found all over the continent. These are only a few examples of mnemonic devices used across Turtle Island. Skills in observation and memorization were vitally important in these teaching approaches.

Learning of appropriate roles was accomplished through emulating examples observed in the community. There was great respect given to individuals and individual differences. There was a lot of flexibility shown in the adoption of sex roles, as children grew older. Mentoring occurred, both on the individual level as well as with groups of youth. Games were also an important vehicle for teaching and learning. Young people were generally free to develop at their own pace.

Puberty ceremonies and other rites of passage were critical times in the lives of indigenous young people. These occasions offered opportunities for instruction in culturally specific knowledge as well as role expectations. Passages from one stage of life to another were commonly celebrated by the entire community. Ceremonies varied from tribe to tribe—some were individualized, such as the Navajo puberty ceremony for girls, called Kinaalda. Others recognized groups of young people together, as in the Sunrise ceremony, the Apache version of the girl's puberty celebration, and the Kiva initiation of boys and young men in pueblo societies in the Southwest.

One of the most important concepts of traditional thought and worldview shared by indigenous people of Turtle Island is the emphasis on positive thought. As Cherokees, we are taught that balance, harmony, and beauty are essential to the survival of the planet and that these are achieved through prayer. Our prayers are offered for all of the Creation—humans, animals, insects, plants, minerals, and the elements. Humans can create a positive environment through a process of thinking or conceptualizing, speaking, and singing about the desired outcomes.

Vine Deloria, Jr., the Lakota educator and author, provides important insight into the traditional approach. "The old ways of educating affirmed the basic principle that the human personality was derived from accepting the responsibility to be a contributing member of a society," he states in his book *Indian Education in America*. Further, he reminds us that "Kinship and clan are built upon the idea that individuals owed each other certain kinds of behaviors and that if each person performed his or her task properly, society would function." Deloria continues, "Education in the traditional setting occurs by example and is not a process of indoctrination." He adds, "The final

ingredient of traditional tribal education is that accomplishments are regarded as the accomplishments of the group or family, not the individual.”

The concept of punishment was not part of the traditional learning process. As an example, the Dakota, of the Northern plains, believed that physical punishment would “enslave the child’s spirit.” The concept of natural, logical consequences for behavior was well understood as the result of intimate involvement in nature and provided further parameters for appropriate behavior. Dreams, visions, and other messages provided direction and guided the lives of Native people. Elders and spiritual leaders were called upon to provide interpretation of these events.

Indigenous educational approaches provide the foundation for learning based on context and relationship. By expanding the boundaries of the classroom through involvement with the broader community, including the environment, schools can build new relationships, validate the cultures of the young people they serve, and make learning meaningful and appropriate for our future.

## References

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