Interactive Learning about Biocultural Diversity: University Students Engage Tribes

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Diversifying our approach in studying biocultural diversity

In Dr. Pfeiffer’s San José State University class Nature and World Cultures, students focus on the evolution, conservation, and revitalization of biocultural diversity by focusing on two key questions: (a) What are the reciprocal and dynamic relationships between cultures and the environment? (i.e., how does each influence the other?); and (b) How do socio-cultural and historical factors influence and/or change an individual’s or a group’s relationships with their surrounding environments?

By the final exam, students are exposed to over fifty cultural groups via Netflix films, indie documentaries, and YouTube videos; instructor podcasts and lectures; prose and poetic and scientific readings; and case studies from the Terralingua-Earthscan 2010 text, Biocultural Diversity Conservation-An Global Sourcebook by Luisa Maffi and Ellen Woodley.

Since 2012 students in the class have partnered with Native Californian tribes and tribal communities to complete semester-long group projects on biocultural diversity. Student projects examine the dynamics of nature-culture connections and issue including sacred sites, language revitalization efforts, water rights, endangered culturally significant species, and traditional lifeways. Students have produced tribally-approved micro-documentaries, published articles in the national newsmagazine Indian Country Today, and completed applied projects of cultural relevance. Students also receive extra credit for attending tribal events, the American Indian Film Festival (in San Francisco), public protests organized by tribes advocating for environmental and cultural justice, Californian Indian conferences, and museum exhibits featuring Northern California tribal history and art.

Investigating real-life examples of biocultural diversity

Back in the Dark Ages of the Nature and World Cultures class (i.e. pre 2007), students completed standard term papers on cultures randomly picked from around the world. Students completed papers on their own, and the papers had no life or usefulness beyond the class. That was until the day the instructor began checking in with students regarding their familiarity with California biocultural diversity – native species and Native cultures. The students’ responses inspired her to completely restructure the syllabus.

As student Costandinos Bakouros relates: “Professor Pfeiffer actually said, on the first day of class, ‘Who here knows someone, or has talked to someone of Native American descent?’ Of the forty students in the class, only about two students said they had. It shocked the whole class. It was very apparent that day that [our group projects]
symbolized something more than words. They inspired cultural awareness and overcoming the ignorance we have towards people who resided in California way before any of us did.”

In the current incarnation of the class, students form groups of 3 to 5 people during the first week of the class and define a group project topic that links a Native California tribe or tribal community with a specific aspect of nature. Group topics explore California biocultural diversity: culturally significant species, habitats, or ecosystems, Native languages, and cultural traditions. The projects investigate the cultural evolution of a Native Californian group in relation to a specific aspect of nature, from centuries ago to the present. Projects have studied the Pomo and traditional basketry, the Hoopa and the Klamath River, the Yurok and the salmon, and Winnemem Wintu and Ohlone sacred sites.

To increase the relevance and positive impact of the students’ work beyond the university, each group project culminates in a format accessible to the general public: a YouTube video, a Wikipedia entry, an online (Open Access) article with a newsmagazine, a format accessible to the general public: a format accessible to the general public: a format accessible to the general public: a format accessible to the general public: a format accessible to the general public: a format accessible to the general public: a format accessible to the general public: a format accessible to the general public.

According to Costandinos: “The great part about this class is that the professor lets the groups turn in three versions of the project. Version one is the roughest of all: she gives her full attention and input to this version in order to help make any major changes and/or [address] problems in the research. In the second version, the project information should look a little bit clearer, and if any input is needed, the professor suggests specific changes. After this the peer-review process of the project starts. Each person is asked to pair up with someone, either in their group or out of their group, in order to get others’ revisions or helpful remarks on one’s writing, grammar, and ideas. Once this is done, the groups should have a well-developed idea of what the project is going to look like. But before this happens, like any respectable person would do, the draft narrative must be sent to a cultural representative of the California tribe the group chose to focus on. Once approved the final piece is turned into the professor and the micro-documentaries get posted to YouTube, the Wikipedia entries get updated, and the articles sent out to publishers. It is a long process, but a rewarding one in the end. This structure is what makes this class so unique and great.”

Collaborative projects — challenges and rewards

Finishing a multi-stage, complex project in coordination with other students and in consultation with a cultural representative within one semester is no easy task. In completing their group projects, students face a series of real-world challenges including:

- Defining a feasible topic and finding sufficient resources to research the topic
- Agreeing to a work plan and balancing the effort amongst all the group members
- Conducting 100% of their communications virtually (the class is web-based)
- Keeping on task and on deadline
- Making positive contact with a cultural representative willing to work with them
- Completing a high-quality, culturally-approved product before the semester runs out

Students agree it takes a lot of self-commitment to do a group project, especially within an online course where students never meet one other. With 3 to 5 members in the group communicating primarily by email (instead of face-to-face meetings), it is easy to have miscommunications or misinterpretations of ideas. As one student confessed, “We had to call out each other several times during the project, or push each other to meet the deadlines. Sometimes I felt pretty nervous when the deadline was getting close and we didn’t have our final draft yet.”

Inevitably, tensions emerged between “leaders” and “slackers” in the group, with some students using their relative unfamiliarity with different technologies as excuses to avoid doing the work or for being late in meeting deadlines. One student recommended a more participatory approach to all project activities: “I would have much appreciated it if every aspect of the work – i.e., writing the narrative, contacting cultural representatives, publishing the article, uploading the video, or editing a Wikipedia page – was spread among the members as evenly as possible. By doing so we could possibly turn a ‘technologically challenged’ person into a ‘technologically able’ person.”

Yet a collaborative approach also has its advantages. Student Conrad Sasinski notes: “An individual approach to this project would be completely overwhelming. This way, it enables each student to lead, contribute, and grow in their own way – but also together. Two heads are always better than one, and five are better than two. In a real-life situation, you would not be given such a project to work on by yourself. This class empowers you to learn how to interact with people and include their ideas in your own psyche. The structure and design [of the project] are geared to enable students to dig deep and use their critical thinking, communication, writing, reading, researching, planning, teamwork, and leadership skills. These factors are what make it such an invaluable project. The way in which it was synthesized chronologically from initial ideas, to developing theses and conclusions, to formatting and rendering articles for upload onto the World Wide Web not only teaches students the work involved in publishing online, but also that collectively, they can make a difference in the world.”

According to student Craig Cannon: “A collaborative approach allows all members of the group to bounce ideas between each other, and then produce the best possible solution. We are able to brainstorm and form stronger ideas before breaking off to create our individual portions.” Students also agreed that the group project helps prepare one for the real world outside of academia.

Interfacing with cultural representatives

Cultural approval of the group’s final version of the project is required by the instructor. Although students are encouraged to begin contacting cultural
Help the Wintu Save Their Home (12:52 minutes, 2012):

The primary focus is on their efforts to revive their traditions, culture, and to shed light on their partnership with UCSC in creating the “Relearning Garden”. This partnership is key to introducing their historical society to the present and past generations of the Ohlone.

Winnemem Wintu Video (8:44 minutes, 2012): Group Project on Winnemem Wintu and raising of the Shasta Dam

The Cultural Revival of the Ohlone: Transformation of the Ohlone’s Religious Beliefs (36:47 minutes, 2012)

AmahMutsun (9:46 minutes, 2012): In this Microdocumentary, we are introduced to the Amah Mutsun and given a brief history of their culture and people. The primary focus is on their efforts to revive their traditions, culture, and to shed light on their partnership with UCSC in creating the “Relearning Garden”. This partnership is key to introducing their historical society to the present and past generations of the Ohlone.

Ohlone Revival of the Wetlands Crafts (2:55 minutes, 2012): The project seeks to reiterate the importance of the wetlands and marshes as a cultural and ecological keystone to the present and past generations of the Ohlone. We wish to showcase the efforts being made to revive the various arts and crafts.


Student Marina Chislett shares: “I think one of the most difficult challenges one may face in executing this project is working with cultural representatives. This was one thing Professor Pfeiffer discussed with us from the beginning of this course and was something we continued to learn throughout it. In many cases and class discussions, we came to learn how indigenous people worked with many researchers sharing their history, knowledge, practices, and beliefs – where the end result was far from pleasant for their people. In some cases this meant incurring financial and legal costs, and in others it led to loss of valuable resources; in other cases it led to taking away a tribe’s identity from them. This is something our group actually experienced firsthand with the Nuxalk Tribe. In our original version of our narrative, we mentioned that the Klamath Salmon Festival was a Nuxalk tradition that held cultural importance. Our representative informed us that was untrue: although the Yurok host the Klamath Salmon Festival, the Ohlone village isn’t uncommon given their history of previous outcomes.”

In the best-case scenarios, students became scholar-apprentices to a tribal staff person and managed to complete a project of direct use to a tribe or tribal community. This was the case for a 2013 student group whose joint work with a Chumash tribe was of such high calibre the tribal staff person recommended their work be included with the tribe’s archival entry to the Smithsonian Institution.

In the worst-case scenarios, students are candidly informed by the cultural representative that their work contains too many errors – despite being directly based on primary sources in the literature – and is denied approval. In this instance, the students are given a powerful lesson in the unending frustrations Native groups face with inaccurate, stereotypical, and misleading representation.

Marina comments: “While anyone can gather information online, the requirement of validating the information with a tribal representative ensures that all our information is factual and that their culture is being portrayed accurately. This is something our group actually experienced firsthand with the Yurok Tribe. In our original version of our narrative, we mentioned that the Klamath Salmon Festival was a Yurok tradition that held cultural importance. Our representative informed us that was untrue: although the Yurok host the event, it is actually aimed at tourists and had less significance than we initially thought.”

Improving our approach

According to student Conrad Sasinski: “The class is well thought-out, chronologically and ideologically. As the class progresses, you learn more about biocultural diversity, and as you gain knowledge you are able to include that in your project.” To succeed with the assigned project, students must be able to draw clear connections between culture and nature, something many of them hadn’t consciously done prior to taking the course. As implied by the course title, nature and culture are often...
seen as separate entities. When we embrace the term biocultural diversity, however, we see that the two are inextricably linked, and the loss (or conservation) of one is directly linked to the loss (or conservation) of the other. In the words of student Tien Pham, “When more people appreciate biodiversity and the variety of cultural groups, biodiversity will have a better chance of surviving and tribal groups will have a better chance of preserving their cultures.”

Overall, students agreed that the group project is definitely a challenge, one that pushes students to go explore and deepen their understanding about the world. As one student testifies, “Going outside of the university walls allows students to gain cultural knowledge of cultures other than his or her own. The process of learning from an outside source not only influences a student academically, it ultimately changes the student’s perspective of culture and his or her own way of living.”

More importantly, for students attending a California State University, gaining deeper familiarity with the First Nations who occupied the land- and seascape provides students with a new set of eyes to interpret the world around them. The instructor encourages her students to constantly ask the question “Who was here first?” when visiting State and National Parks, driving along State highways, and commuting through urban areas. In another student’s words: “Students need to develop an understanding of their country’s history and the people that lived here before it was even a country. They need to realize that higher education is a tool, but it’s not the end-all cure-all explanation of the universe.”

According to one student: “It would be much more beneficial to meet in person with the tribe members and see what they are working on – this would not only inspire the students, but help them write.” Another student, Trevor Raff, appreciated the virtual effort of seeking knowledge firsthand outside of the classroom: “Because a book can only tell one so much I feel it’s hard to really appreciate something for what it is unless you observe it with your own eyes. I also was taught at a young age to question authority and go out and seek the truth for myself. I feel it’s crucial for all to learn about the Native Americans and all of the knowledge they have to offer that you really literally can’t find in books.”

Direct, one-on-one interactions with Native Californian tribes and tribal communities requires instructors and students to make an extra, and in some cases, extraordinary effort. Most tribal reservations and Rancherias are geographically isolated: the average San José student would have to drive at least four hours (round-trip) to reach the closest land-based tribal group. To overcome this distance, the instructor relies heavily on films, video clips, podcasts, and online guest speakers; yet when students are able to make the trip – oftentimes a group of students will carpool to an event – they are delighted to have made the effort.

Biocultural diversity is best understood through lived experience: by hearing personal testimony, by participating in a hands-on event, or by getting to know a practitioner. In this Nature and World Cultures class, students are given every opportunity to do so, on all counts. In most cases, according to post-class student evaluations, it is a life-changing event.

**Further Reading**

Dr. Pfeiffer’s YouTube Channel: http://www.youtube.com/user/DrPfeiffer

Indian Country Today news articles by San José State University students:
- Tule River Tribe Knows Basket-Weaving Is Interwoven With Cultural Identity
- How Archie Thompson Saved the Yurok Language
  http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2013/08/16/how-archie-thompson-saved-yurok-language-150910

![](Pomo Basket- Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History By Daderot (Daderot), via Wikimedia Commons)