

“There’s so much that can still be done”: The Work of a Navajo Bilingual Teacher

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The table in Verna Clinton’s fifth grade classroom at Tsaile Elementary School on the Navajo Nation was filled with pinon picking contraptions which her students had built using batteries, cardboard, sticks, pulleys and fabric. A committee, which included the principal and several parents, stood around the table reading the instructions for each contraption and discussing its usefulness.

I interviewed Verna Clinton on two occasions both in her home and in her classroom following the protocol of the life history interview. I asked Verna Clinton to speak on the topic of Navajo literacy. My questions or comments were added to continue the conversation. I tape-recorded a portion of our discussion, transcribed the tape, and returned a copy of the transcript to her. A follow-up interview was conducted to continue the discussion of questions which arose from reading the transcripts of the first interview. These interviews have been transcribed and edited.

Clandinin and Connelly (1990) describe the unstructured interview in which transcripts of the interview are given to participants and the transcripts are discussed and become a part of the ongoing record. The authors describe the process of narrative inquiry in which “...the sense of the whole is built from a rich data source with a focus on the concrete particularities of life that create powerful narrative tellings” (p.5)

Alma Flor Ada (1990) discusses the process of engaging participants in dialogue, recording the dialogue, transcribing it, and using the transcript as text. Ada describes the use of the transcript for critical reflection:

They will use this text from which to reflect individually with each participant in order to bring new awareness to the questions and then to pose additional questions generated from the text to the other participants in the research and collectively, with the participants, to challenge and move this thinking (or researchers and participants) beyond where it was when they began their dialogues with one another. (p.5)

Gitlin (1990) discusses the process of writing and discussing school histories. This process involves the subjects of research as well as the researcher in the process of examining data. Grumet (1987) works with teachers’ autobiographical accounts to permit them to “examine their own work with a seeing that is more inclusive” (p. 324).

Linguists Edward Sapir & Harry Hoijer for the purpose of recording and preserving the Navajo language have recorded Navajo language oral histories (Sapir & Hoijer, 1942). Life histories of Navajo men and women have been recorded in English to “give some personal idea of how a Navajo views his life” (Leighton & Leighton, 1944, p. vi). Two volumes Navajo Stories of the Long Walk Period (Roessel, 1973) and Navajo Livestock Reduction: A national Disgrace (Roessel & Johnson, 1974) are composed of oral histories written by Navajos for a Navajo audience. Ruth Roessel (Roessel & Johnson, 1974) writes that the book was written “so that Navajo students and others can learn about Navajo history as experienced by the Navajos themselves” (p. xiii).

Life histories of Navajo women include Kaibah: Recollection of a Navajo Girlhood (Bennett, 1964) and A Voice in Her Tribe: A Navajo Woman’s Own Story (Stewart, 1980). Both autobiographies provide personal narrative accounts of early schooling experiences: Stewart describes her education at Ft. Defiance in the early 1900s. She writes, “We were never allowed to talk to one another in school, or to speak our language where we could be overheard” (1980, p. 17). Bennett describes her first grade year at Todalena Boarding School in the early 1930s. (p. 216)

The dining room had a double door in front. A line of boys entered one side, and moved to the chairs assigned to them on the boy’s side of the room. The girls did the same, until all the children

were in, and each standing back of their own chair. The smaller children entered first, and stood, three at the side of each table, then the older children entered, and one stood at each end. When everyone was in place, the boy's advisor, a white man named Mr. Johnson, blew a whistle, and everyone sat down.

In a study that combines oral history with historical research, Ritts (1991) integrates the life histories of four generations of Navajo women into a unified biography of a group. In Tall Woman the Life Story of Rose Mitchell (Mitchell 2001) p. 62 Mitchell describes the arrival of a policeman who came to recruit children for the school in Ft. Defiance

"After those men left, I asked my mother and father if I could be allowed to go with my niece to the school at Ft. Defiance. But both of them said, "No." Right away they told me, "If you went over there, there would be no one around here to tend to the sheep." Because my mother and father had lots of sheep, a big flock, they were depending on me to stay home and take care of those animals. That's why my parents objected to me going to school. They said, "Who will herd if you go over there? Just let your niece do that." I even cried to go with her, but they refused me. That 's why I never went to school."

Caroline Niethammer has written a biography of Annie Dodge Wauneka titled I'll Go and Do More. Niethammer describes the decision of Chee Dodge, Annie's father, to send her to the Fort Defiance Boarding School. (.2001, p 27)

In the fall of 1918 when Annie was eight, Chee decided that it was time she went to school. However, she was sent to the government boarding school at Fort Defiance, rather than the private schools where her half-siblings were. Perhaps it was because her family wanted her close enough to return to help with the lambing.

Life histories of Navajo men include Navajo Blessingway Singer (Mitchell, 1978), the life history of Frank Mitchell which was tape- recorded in Navajo and transcribed in Navajo, then translated into English to provide a record for readers both in Navajo and English. In The Journey of Navajo Oshley: An Autobiography and Life History, McPherson (2000) documents the life of a Navajo man who lived between the 1890s and 1988. In his introduction to an earlier life history Son of Old Man Hat (Sapir in Dyk, 1938), Edward Sapir discusses the purpose of ethnographic life histories:

And so the Son of Old Man Hat, not by hinting at human likeness or difference but through the sheer clarity of his daily experiences, resolves all cultural and personal conflicts and remind us that human life is priceless, not because of the glories of the past nor the hopes of the future, but because of the irrevocable trivialities of a present that is always slipping away from us. 9p. ix)

In previous transcriptions (Chee et al., 1991a, 1991b, Lockard 2000) I have attempted to find a balance between word-for-word transcription and edited transcription that gives voice to the "irrevocable trivialities of everyday speech". To accurately convey the meaning of the stories I have edited portions of the transcripts and combined the two interviews to create a single autobiographical account.

When Verna Clinton asked her fifth grade students at Tsaile Elementary School to raise their hands if they spoke Navajo at home with their grandparents, only one third of the students responded that they did. Like the majority of her students, Verna Clinton's first language was English. She learned Navajo as a young adult when she returned to the Reservation from San Francisco and realized that it was necessary for her to use Navajo in her work as a teacher. Verna Clinton has worked as an artist, a teacher in Navajo Headstart, and as an illustrator and curriculum developer at Rough Rock Community School. She currently teaches Sixth Grade at Chinle Elementary School. The interviews between Verna Clinton (VC) and Louise Lockard (LL) were conducted on October 21, 1992 and on April 18, 1993 at Tsaile Arizona. This interview was part of an unpublished doctoral dissertation (Lockard 1993).

LL: Tell me about your early schooling experiences?

VC: It goes back to my early childhood. Navajo was not part of my language when I was a baby. My dad was working on the railroad and I picked up a lot ore English. I got shoved into a BIA school. This was Seba Dalkai School; ironically that's where I've been a school board member for four years.

They plopped me on a high chair and grabbed my braids and cut it off and shaved it jut right up to the top of my head, cut my bangs and made me look like everybody else, put me in coveralls.

LL: Where did you go to high school?

VC: Winslow.

LL: Did you travel back and forth?

VC: From the BIA dorm to the public school. From BIA rules to public school rules. It was not fun at all.

LL: Did they have separate classes for Navajo students?

VC: Our elementary schooling was on the campus surrounding the dormitory. It used to be an old army barracks. The dormitories were old quarters. The walls were torn down. We went to school there until we got to be sixth graders. Then we had to walk 10 blocks or more.

LL: In the winter?

VC: In the winter; rain wind. They didn't have buses to take us back and forth to the public school. We had to walk. They still do. They still walk even today. When the lunch bell rang at the high school, we ran back to the dorm, 10 blocks. We ran and got in line.

LL: Were there any Navajo teachers?

VC: None. I was in boarding school for ten years there and the only time I went home was for major holidays, Christmas, the end of the year. I was probably one of the worst students there. I had a bad attitude. I had bad behavior. I gave all the ladies a hard time. I am responsible for the bathrooms being spic and span because I was given a toothbrush. I took care of the crevasses. I was telling my girlfriend, "I love these two colors: teal and pink." One day I went to the bathroom over at Chinle Junior High and these same exact colors were in the tile. I said, "You mean to tell me that the colors were forced on me?"

My senior year I really planned to get away the furthest I could get. I got a grant to go to an art school in Cleveland, Ohio. The BIA did everything for us: the school, the place we stayed, a bi-weekly stipend; they took care of everything. The art school was about 60 per cent Black; there are a lot of Black artists. I got to know a lot of other Indian students from all over the place: Alaska, Canada, Wisconsin, New York. I stayed there for a year, then I got lonely, I wanted to come home. I dropped out. I got on the bus and went home and there was nothing for me –there's the sheep.

There's so much that you can do in your late teens. If you come home, you announce to the community that you're available for marriage. I knew that was going to come so I wanted to leave before anybody could find out I was back. And so I contacted my aunt in South San Francisco. She went there to school on one of those programs and she married an Italian.

I enrolled in art school. The art school that I went to was so fascinating. I just threw myself into it. That was the San Francisco Art Institute. At that time Native American Indians were going to San Francisco, it was kind of like we were the undercurrent. Something was coming, this was in 1966. At that time there was also an awareness of Native American culture, a self-awareness. I enrolled at City College and later I went to San Francisco State and stayed there for one semester.

In 1968 the San Francisco Indian Center on Mission Street burned down. The college students in that area decided to do something about the Indian Center to obtain the lease on the land. Some older women professors and adjunct professors at UC Berkeley and San Francisco State had done research in ownership of mission lands and Indian land and water rights and their work was being published in the universities.

Meantime, the lease for Alcatraz Island came up. The city of San Francisco advertised to the whole world that they were calling for proposals for Alcatraz Island. Whoever had the best proposal could get the lease. That's when we entered in. The students said this would be an opportunity to take back the island based on Indian land rights. Alcatraz had been taken from the Modocs and other coastal tribes. They all got together and worked that out and the students left the universities.

We had plans for an Indian center for education and a cultural center with four wings for the four directions for each of the tribes. There would be a knowledge center with a library. We had plans. We were trying to get a release from the city of San Francisco. It didn't go through and we just more or less took it over and we stayed. I commuted by boat every day from there to City College. I'd go by trolley to City College and I'd go back and forth in the cold. We tried to keep people going out to the

island. My roommate on the island was Grace Thorpe: Jim Thorpe's daughter. It was really educational. I learned a lot about other tribes. I heard what they were saying about preserving their culture and their language. I met a lot of good people there.

I wanted to get away to the mountains of the Reservation, so my girlfriend and I moved to Pinon. She was working for the U.S. Public Health Service and I was more or less on her coat-tails and we got a trailer right behind that church behind the boarding school on the old road to Forest Lake. Meantime, all this livestock reduction and relocation was starting and I could hear my family and these people who were waiting for this storm to come and they didn't quite know how to get ready for it. There were people that were working for the government; they began to talk about fencing off the area. They were willing to join the tribal police departments to help move Navajos out of here. There were people that were listening for, "How much money do I get if I move?"

We young people were just sort of holding up our elders, making sure they didn't have heart attacks, trying to ease the pain of livestock reduction. That they were no longer weaving, that was the worst thing that could happen to them. That was what I was preparing myself for when I was in San Francisco; all that anger against the city and the United States Government: the genocide, how the west was won, fighting for what was yours, trying to preserve what was yours.

Our own relatives, our own people, Hopi and Navajo, build these fences. They were the first ones to leave to get a brand new truck and a house like where you live. I told them, "You don't have a job. You have to pay for water, taxes, pickup payments, groceries." They didn't listen.

LL: Where were you teaching?

VC: I put my application in everywhere. I was painting all the time. I was selling a lot of artwork. I went down to Chinle. Somebody told me they needed Headstart teachers. I walked in and put my application in and they contacted a couple of references and they interviewed me, and they said, "You're hired." I said, "What?" It was within a week I was hired. The guy behind the desk said, "We're going to give you either Blue Gap or Whippoorwill. Take your pick." And they were saying, "Whippoorwill is top priority." They gave me the situation for both schools and then I thought, "Blue Gap is way out in the canyon and Whippoorwill is just right off the road." I had a Volkswagen at the time so I didn't dare drag my Volkswagen to the mountains. They told me, "If you get an enrollment of so many students, you've got your school. If you don't, we're going to close that school." There wasn't any electricity. There was a butane refrigerator and a butane stove and wood stove in the classroom. We had to chop wood. We had to do our own bus run. We hauled our own water in these little containers. We hauled the water in the bus for the kids' baths. We hauled our own wood. If we wanted to have a major meeting, we cooked outside. I really enjoyed it.

My great learning experience was Whippoorwill. I learned to communicate with people I did not know. I decided the only way I would get these kids back in school was to go house-to-house, so I dragged along the cook and the bus driver and the teacher assistant. They introduced me and I would make my pitch. I really did a lot of footwork, a lot of talking, and we had a lot of bingos, a lot of parent meetings. We got our enrollment. We had people coming from Pinon to our bingos, cakewalks, too and drawings. I had kids that we had to turn down. The whole community flocked to the school.

From there I went to the Chinle School District Title IV Curriculum Development Project. I illustrated books for all the teaching assistants who were teaching Navajo culture. When the opportunity came for me to learn more, I grabbed every chance I could get. I attended Navajo Community College and I learned Navajo language in one summer.

LL: One summer?

VC: One summer and I was an expert. I was just like a sponge. I absorbed every sound, everything. I hadn't perfected it, but I got enough to learn how to write: to write curriculum materials.

LL: Who taught you Navajo at Navajo Community College?

VC: It was Teddy Draper, the veteran Navajo Code Talker. He said to me, "If the Navajo language doesn't want you, you will never learn. You've got to really have it, be very reverent about it." So I said, "I'm very reverent. I want to learn." He said, "If your mind is not ready for it, it will not come to you."

LL: Did learning to write change the way you spoke Navajo?

VC: You do reawaken when you write. You find yourself reading it and you say, “This is how you say it correctly. I was saying it wrong all the time.” I did learn how to speak correctly when I started to write because I was listening to the sound and how it was put together.

When I was growing up, I didn’t speak very well. I was like my daughters are now. I could understand, but I could speak only in short phrases to carry on conversations. Then, after I learned to read and write, I was going before the Relocation Commission and speaking for the elders and speaking in chapter houses.

LL: You’ve learned through trial and error

VC: Really, trial and error is correct. I heard my mother say, “When I was your age,” and I said, “Here we go again. I’ve heard this a thousand times.” I memorized it. I knew what she was going to say. My daughters say, “I know, Mom. You told us that already.” I tell them, “I just have to do this because that is the way I was brought up.. I have to keep bringing this up to you, and if you hear this a thousand times, you will learn it.” We pattern ourselves after our own parents. I try to make it smoother for my daughters at home and my students. I try to tell them what’s ahead and what they have to learn, why they have to do research now.

LL: What kind of research do you do? In the fall you were making pinon-picking contraptions.

VC: Oh, that was very successful. We did our pinon nut recipes. We did the cooking.. We had a pinon nut recipe tasting. We had all kinds of dishes that were made from pinions. Now we’re typing up our recipes and entering them in the Arts Showcase down in Chinle.

In May we’re going to research community issues and we’re going to visit the Wheatfields Chapter House. We’re going to have an election, elect chapter officers. We’re going to research community issues and prioritize them and make recommendations to the Chapter. Nelson Gorman, the Speaker of the Navajo Nation is going to come.

There’s so much that still can be done. Right now a lot of kids know how to write Navajo. They can produce their own materials. There are stories that can be recorded, and biographies. We have to teach the Navajo language now.

LL: How have your own experiences helped you to understand the needs of your students?

VC: I just got that awareness real early and to this day I can go back and recall the smell, the feeling, the air, the food. I didn’t talk Navajo but I can remember all my senses. There was a lot of time when I was alone. I remember carrying my little black doll with little porcelain legs and a body all made out of cloth. I would carry that around and that was my only toy. I didn’t care what I looked like. I didn’t care if my clothes were clean or dirty or if I smelled bad. I think that has a lot to do with how I look at kids now. I don’t try to judge the kids by the way they look. I say, “I wonder if this child goes home and has a quiet evening? Do they go back to a comfortable bed or do they have to share a bed with somebody?” I always try to think of the child and of what they’ve been through and how I felt when I was their age.

Verna Clinton has faced silencing in the public place of the school in childhood because of her native language and culture and has gained a voice as a teacher within the same institution. Clinton says, “I didn’t talk Navajo, but I can remember all my senses.” Now, as a teacher who has reclaimed her language, Clinton talks to her principal about one of her fifth grade students, “The daughter is teaching the mother how to talk Navajo now.”

In an efforts to transform the institution of the school, she uses a variety of curricular and pedagogical strategies which involve parents as active participants in the education of their children. Clinton says, “I want parents involved in my classroom and I tried to get them involved in my pinon picking contraptions.” She speaks with hope for the future.. She found her purpose for learning to write in her native language not within the institution of the school, but within a community of Native American students who studied Indian land rights issues in order to rebuild the San Francisco Indian Center on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay. “I learned a lot from other tribes. I heard what they were saying about preserving their culture and their language...to preserve yourself and to have babies and teach them everything you know about preserving your culture.”

Verna Clinton describes her fifth grade students, “I just taught them a few things, a few steps and they can stand up and look you straight in the eye and say everything they really want to say in

Navajo. I was surprised. One of the students is not a Navajo speaker and shocked her parents because she could stand up and say these things.”

This teaching should be part of every child’s schooling experience, and should allow every child to ‘stand up and look you straight in the eye and say everything they really want to say.’”

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