The Writing Project on the Navajo Reservation

The Sage Hotel is a rambling affair, imposingly big, but not in the best of repair. My co-director, Suzanne Bratcher, and I were in Ganado to deliver the first ever in-service workshop to a group of teachers in the Ganado Unified School District. We had no idea what to expect, so perhaps not surprisingly we were a little bit uncertain of ourselves.

We did know that the Navajo reservation covers about 16 million acres, or about 15% of the entire state of Arizona. We also knew that most of that 15% was land nobody else wanted. We knew that the tribe had been virtually wiped out in the 1860s, and marched on their own trail of tears to a barren spot in New Mexico, and then allowed to march back some four years later. We knew that the Navajo tribe is now the largest tribe of Native Americans in the country.

Although we had such demographic facts at our command, we were painfully aware that we didn't really know any Navajos. Out of all the school districts on the reservation, we had really only worked in the capital city of Window Rock, the metropolis of the reservation. Ganado was to be the first time we had gone out into the hinterlands. Our work had been well received in Window Rock, hence the invitation to take the next step into a more outlying area. But still, the unknown frightened us and gave rise to a sense that Ganado was somehow "different" from the non-reservation places where we taught and lived.

Upstairs in the Sage Hotel, where we were to meet, we found a miscellaneous collection of odd-sized rooms, most of them with cavernous echoes, two or three pillars in the middle of the room, and a few scattered chairs and tables. A broken screen lay forlornly in the corner of one room. Two other rooms were completely empty. Still two more were actually the lounges of the men's and women's rest rooms.

The district curriculum coordinator, whom we had never met, had told us to expect about forty teachers. We had never had a summer fellow from Ganado District. In fact, we had never had much contact with Ganado. We knew that it was out there somewhere, beyond Holbrook, the last outpost on the friendly line of Interstate 40. We could see it on the map, but we really only knew two things: Ganado means "cows" and Ganado is on the reservation. So in terms of "know your audience," we knew we were unprepared. We worried.

The hotel employee left us upstairs. "Use any room you want," he encouraged us.

Putting our carefully prepared handouts down in the middle of the bare floor in the first "conference" room, we assessed the situation. It was just after 4 p.m. The teachers were due at 4:30, or so we had been told. No one was in sight yet.

Working quickly, we chose the biggest of the rooms and moved almost all of the tables and chairs from all the other rooms into it. Breathing heavily, we noted the time. It was 4:25 p.m. The room was ready. We could seat fifty teachers. No one was in sight.

Looking out the window, we saw across the way a lovely, almost Gothic-looking church. A herd of cows was ambling slowly through the ground, nibbling at the grass growing up against the church walls.

No one was in sight yet.

Suddenly, we heard a door open below us. The stairs creaked. We looked at our overhead projector, at our handouts, at each other. The cow bells rang cheerily across the way. Evening falls early in northern Arizona in winter and the sky was turning dusky.
Into our room walked a large man with a cowboy hat on his head, wearing a beautiful tan sweater decorated with drawings of horses. "Hi, I'm Phil Big Horse, principal of Ganado Junior High," he announced. Several people had followed him inside the room, but remained standing shyly near the door. They must be teachers, but they seemed anything but eager to begin. Were we already in trouble?

"The teachers are coming," announced Mr. Big Horse.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Big Horse," I said.

"Come over and have a seat," said Suzanne to the teachers.

The teachers giggled and made a beeline for the back row, but before they got there, more teachers began coming in the door, and then more and more and more. Every chair filled up quickly, even those in the front row.

We began passing out handouts. We had brought fifty sets, which we exhausted just as the last seat was occupied at 4:31 p.m.

Teachers were still coming in the door. We hastily set up chairs; no tables were left around the edge of the room. The chairs filled immediately and still more teachers were coming in the door. Some stood at the back and some sat on the floor in front.

"Well, it must be time to begin," I said, hoping this would stop the flow of teachers through the door. But it didn't.

I looked up. I looked all around me. The room was L-shaped, so I looked around a full 270 degrees. I saw two people peeping out around either side of one of the pillars in the middle of the room. As we later learned, I actually saw 67 pairs of eyes, 67 faces looking back at me. But I also saw that most of them were smiling.

"This evening, we're going to show you how to use writing to help your students do better on the Arizona Student Assessment Program, known affectionately as ASAP." I heard giggles again, and I saw pads being opened and pens and pencils poised. A few wrote "ASAP" at the top of the first blank page in a brand new notebook. One, I discovered later while walking around to the back of the classroom, wrote "Our teacher is A SAP."

Our first evening in Ganado had begun.

Over the next few months, we returned to Ganado several times. We studied Bloom's taxonomy. We wrote. We discussed the various essential skills behind each and every one of the 100-plus ASAP instruments. We wrote. We made lesson plans incorporating the essential skills and enhancing them through writing. We wrote some more. The teachers filled up whole note pads. They kept coming, and Mr. Big Horse kept coming as well. Mr. Big Horse even had a note pad of his own, which he used, and he made a lesson plan, which he demonstrated in front of all the teachers.

In fact, before we were through, 60 of the original 67 teachers made a lesson plan, taught it in their classes, and returned to tell us all what worked and what didn't work. And 55 of those 60 reworked that lesson plan and went back to the classroom and taught it again.

Now, from the other point of view, the one typified by our initial fear and trembling, 7 out of the initial 67 teachers never returned after that first night. And 5 more didn't actually finish the course. And some who did return didn't do the best job I ever saw on their demonstration lessons. But overall, Mr. Big Horse liked the lessons he saw, and he liked the revised lessons even better, and overall the whole district is looking forward to the next administration of ASAP, a yearly event for third, eighth, and twelfth graders in every school in Arizona.

And I got up the courage to talk to that student on the back row, who assured me that she no longer considered me "a sap."

In the time since that first visit to Ganado, I've learned a lot of geography. Window Rock, Rough Rock, Canyon de Chelly, Tuba City, Fort Defiance, Chinle, Nazlini, Kayenta, and a host of other districts have been added to the Writing Project's repertoire.

As my experience on the reservation has grown, so have my memorable experiences. I have discovered that there is a different sense of time on the reservation: I have arrived at lunch time, to check in at the office for a 1 p.m. meeting (which I had confirmed the day before) and been told that the teachers were expecting me at 8 a.m. and found that they were still waiting for me in the library. I have discovered that teachers on the reservation are the same as teachers anywhere — infinitely resourceful.

Unlike Ganado, where too many people came, I have several times arrived at meetings where nobody came. (In these cases I did not deliver my materials to an
empty house, but like the coyote, I have gone outside and howled at the moon.)

I have been stuck in snowstorms and mud, and even in red tape, which I thought surely hadn’t arrived on the reservation yet but has.

In the process:

• I have met and worked closely with hundreds of dedicated Native American and Anglo teachers.

• I have observed excited yet quiet elementary school students learn how to write up a lab report for an experiment involving paper chromatography.

• I have worked with a high school math teacher to design math lessons based on writing.

• I have helped teachers to incorporate writing into lessons on auto mechanics, world history, chemistry, and zoology.

• I have sat in a room full of Native American students and observed learning taking place.

In a word, I have discovered that things on the reservation aren’t really so different from things off the reservation, once you get past the surface. The goals, the dreams, the aspirations, of the teachers and the students are the same as the teachers and the students in all the other districts where I have worked.

Perhaps there is a neglected “reservation” near your Writing Project site. It may be an inner city, or a rural setting, or it may be “snob” hill, but wherever it is, my guess is if you go out there or over there or down there, you’ll find that both the district and you have a lot to learn about each other, and both the district and you will gain a great deal in the process.

This past April we hosted the state-wide Project conference. Two hundred people from all over the state came to hear teachers make their presentations. Four of those teachers making presentations were from the reservation. One of them, not so many years ago, called me “A SAP.”

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