

CHAPTER 10.

**BENDING THE ARC OF WRITING  
ASSESSMENT TOWARD  
SOCIAL JUSTICE: ENACTING  
CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE  
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT  
AT STANDING ROCK**

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**Research Problem:** Tribal college instructors believed that placement test results did not reflect the job they were doing as writing instructors, and they wondered if students might need an additional remedial writing course. These questions about writing assessment led to a locally based collaborative assessment of student writing that addressed larger goals of culturally responsive professional development and improving the teaching of writing from elementary through college.

**Research Questions:** 1) During writing assessment research, what discourses do educators engage in and how might writing assessment research be used for professional development? 2) Does the professional development during writing assessment reflect the values of culturally responsive pedagogy? 3) Does culturally responsive professional development attached to writing assessment lead to addressing social justice issues?

**Literature Review:** To explore the issue of writing assessment at a tribal college, I use theories of culturally responsive, relevant, and sustaining pedagogies from the field of education, and Christine E. Sleeter's 2014 framework of four dimensions of social justice teaching, as well as indigenous perspectives from Devon Mihesuah, Angela Wilson, Sandy Grande, and Scott Richard Lyons to complicate and critique these theories and to extend the work on participatory assessment to include tribal colleges.

**Methodology:** In addition to quantitative data in the form of essay scores, this project primarily relied on discourse analysis modeled on Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin's grounded theory approach. Analysis involved emic coding resulting from labels that emerged from patterns in the discourse, combined with etic cross-coding, using elements of culturally relevant pedagogy as an analytic tool.

**Conclusions:** Despite the presence of culturally congruent mission and vision statements in local contexts such as Sitting Bull College, large-scale writing assessments have great power over teachers and students; nonetheless, as this study shows, this power can be questioned when groups of teachers work together to assess writing collaboratively. Teacher discourse demonstrates raised expectations, changes in teaching practice, and evidence of modifying testing materials to draw on cultural strengths. There was also evidence of the professional development around writing assessment leading to social justice outcomes when teachers chose not to add another remedial class to their curriculum and instead adopted culturally relevant prompts. Such prompts increased writing test scores. Partnering with K-12 educators also suggests willingness to address structural inequities.

**Qualifications:** The sample size of the writing was very small and not all increases in writing scores were statistically significant. The discourse analyzed may have been particular to this group of educators and not representative of other groups of educators engaged in professional development around writing assessment. Despite the tribal college context, most of the writing instructors were non-Native, so this particular study may not have been the most conducive to exploring how Lyons' vision of rhetorical sovereignty can be applied to writing assessment.

**Directions for Further Study:** How would the discourse differ if there were a greater proportion of Native American instructors participating in writing assessment? How would the results differ if the mode of assessment were further indigenized? What does Lyons' theory of rhetorical sovereignty look like when it comes to writing assessment?

As this chapter was being prepared for publication, the site of this study, Standing Rock Reservation, was garnering national and international attention as water protectors gathered by the thousands at Oceti Sakowin camp

to protest the route of the Dakota Access Pipeline under Lake Oahe, which would put the water supply at risk and disturb sacred cultural sites. From my perspective as a non-Native American ally visiting the camp to volunteer at the camp school, the main conflict appeared to be between a highly militarized (e.g., use of vehicles designed to withstand land mines) response on the part of both the Sioux County, North Dakota Sheriff's office and the National Guard and peaceful protesters seeking to stop the construction of the pipeline. But it was about more than that, too. It was about sovereignty and treaty rights. Similarly, issues around writing assessment at tribal colleges are also about sovereignty, according to Scott Richard Lyons (Leech Lake Ojibwe) (2000), who conceptualizes rhetorical sovereignty as "the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse" (449-450). Rhetorical sovereignty, I argue, also extends to the right to determine how writing is assessed, a topic explored in this two-year study (Fall 2011 to Spring 2013) of professional development at Sitting Bull College on the Standing Rock Reservation.

The affordances of writing assessment for professional development have been well documented in the field. Broad's model of Dynamic Criteria Mapping (2003) has been taken up at many local sites in ways that put writing teachers and their students at the center of writing assessment, allowing us to hear what they really value about writing and also providing space for teaching and learning to be affected by assessment. This has provided a counternarrative to that of large testing companies and their rubrics. Gallagher (2011), in particular, has asserted "the primary agency of faculty and students in education and educational assessment" (p. 461) by using Burkean analysis to expand the scene of writing assessment and redraw the circumference, and, most importantly, to reject the stakeholder theory of neoliberalism that "implies all interest groups are equal—equal stakes, equal say— . . . a 'marketplace of ideas' in which reasoned arguments among sovereign subjects will carry the day" (p. 459). Gallagher's use of the term "sovereign" is interesting because it is by pivoting on that particular term that an argument can be made for reordering the assessment scene at tribal colleges on American Indian reservations, land negotiated by treaties between actual sovereign nations. Just as Green (2016) has argued that "participation" in writing assessment can look quite different at HBCUs where there is a tradition of push-pull theories of language and race, in the following article, I explore how notions of rhetorical sovereignty played out over a two-year period at Sitting Bull College, a tribal college in North Dakota. Rewriting the assessment scene in such a setting is anything but straightforward. Theoretically, extending Lyons concept of "rhetorical sov-

ereignty” to writing assessment is a fitting application, but in practice, there are many challenges to doing so, not the least of which is the legacy of settler colonization and its continuing impact on education.

This research project took place over two academic years and uses both quantitative and qualitative data. The project was initiated by tribal college writing instructors who wished to learn more about writing assessment, find out on their own terms how students were doing, improve their assessment practices, and work with secondary teachers to improve students’ writing skills. As an action researcher from outside the institution, I envisioned my role as reciprocal; I would bring my resources and skills to support them in meeting their goals, and I hoped to learn more about professional development focused on writing assessment.

For the purposes of this study with Sitting Bull College writing instructors, I focused on the ways that college and high school educators in the project talked about teaching and assessment within the context of professional development. Researchers like Margaret Vaughn (2015) have found evidence of promising practice through qualitative research that analyzes teacher discourse. In working with Native and non-Native American teachers on a reservation, she found that “[E]xamining the dialogue and actions teachers engage in during inquiry group discussions may provide insight into the instructional practices and actions teachers conceptualize to support culturally responsive principles and adaptability” (p. 5). I posit that a similar analysis of the discourse of K-12 teachers and tribal college instructors engaged in localized writing assessment will help us answer these questions:

1. During writing assessment, what kinds of discourse do educators engage in and what parts might constitute professional development?
2. Does the professional development during writing assessment reflect the values of culturally responsive pedagogy?
3. Does culturally responsive professional development attached to writing assessment lead to addressing social justice issues?

In this chapter, I describe the elements of culturally responsive pedagogy that could be salient in professional development experiences for educators focused on writing assessment. Then, I describe the cultural context of the tribal college where I was a facilitator of such professional development over a two-year period. Although quantitative data on student writing was collected during that period, this chapter primarily focuses on what the qualitative data reveal in regard to the research questions above, but also—as issues of sovereignty erupted at Standing Rock during the writing of this chapter—how rhetorical sovereignty might be extended to writing assessment.

## ROLE OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE/RELEVANT PEDAGOGY IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

To explore the issue of writing assessment at a tribal college partnering with K-12 teachers, I use theories of culturally responsive, relevant, and sustaining pedagogies from the field of education. First, I will define these terms, then discuss how they lend themselves to a social justice orientation, and then how they can be used at tribal colleges.

In a *culturally relevant pedagogical* approach, teachers “increase the classroom participation and academic achievement of students from different ethnic groups by modifying instruction so that it draws upon cultural strengths” (Banks, 2006, p. 197). Culturally relevant teachers demand that all students “be critical thinkers and problem solvers, not merely students who have mastered minimum competencies in the basic skills” (Irvine, 1992, p. 81). Culturally responsive educators exhibit “the *tenacity* to relentlessly pursue comprehensive and high level performance for children who are currently underachieving in schools” (Gay, 2000, p. 44). Holding high standards does not come at the cost of students’ home cultures, however. Teachers attend to the cultural experiences and the needs inherent in those experiences (Irvine, 1992). *Culturally responsive pedagogy* (CRP), “simultaneously develops, along with academic achievement, social consciousness and critique, cultural affirmation, competence, and exchange; community building and personal connections; individual self-worth and abilities; and an ethic of caring” (Gay, 2000, p. 43). Furthermore, these tenets of CRP particularly lend themselves to culturally responsive professional development: “ways of knowing, understanding, and representing various ethnic and cultural groups in teaching academic subjects, processes, and skills. It [CRP] cultivates cooperation, collaboration, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility for learning among students and between students and teachers” (Gay, 2000, p. 43).

What sets culturally relevant pedagogy apart from the multiculturalism that preceded it is social justice. Paulo Freire’s notion of teaching for social justice and liberation informs CRP. Because social justice is a term commonly used but not so commonly defined, Christine Sleeter (2014) “synthesized various frameworks for social justice education (Carlisle et al., 2006; Chubbuck, 2010; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Dover, 2009; Gorski, 2013; Jones & Vagle, 2013) into four dimensions,” and these four are useful to consider here because she specifically synthesized them “to prompt work that deepens social justice teaching” (p. 4). They are the following:

1. Situate families and communities with an analysis of structural inequities.
2. Develop relationships of reciprocity with students, families, and communities

3. Teach to high academic expectations by building on students' culture, language, experience, and identity
4. Create and teach an inclusive curriculum that integrates marginalized perspectives and explicitly addresses issues of inequity and power (Sleeter, 2014).

Situating the study within the theoretical frames described above, helps expand the assessment scene in ways advocated by Scott and Brannon (2013), and in ways that are relevant to this particular study. That is, to incorporate the K-12 educators the tribal college writing instructors worked with and the larger tribal community. The collaborative nature of culturally responsive teaching is not new to American Indian leaders like Tatanka Iyotake (Lakota Chief Sitting Bull, namesake of Sitting Bull College), who said, “Wakhányeža kiŋ lená épi čha táku waštéšte iwíčhuŋkičiyukčanpi kte” (Let us put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children) (“Vision,” 2016). When one considers the collaborative approach that can be inferred from this famous quote and the undoubtedly culturally relevant focus throughout the history of Native American peoples, calls to adopt a culturally relevant pedagogical approach can seem somewhat ironic, even patronizing. This is perhaps not surprising, given the paternalism that pervades colonial institutions (Harms, Chapter 3, this collection). As theories of culturally responsive and relevant pedagogies continue to evolve, they become more consonant with the concerns of indigenous people. For example, Django Paris’ concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy, is more suitable to Native American contexts because of the greater attention to cultural practices. What culturally sustaining pedagogy offers teachers is a “way of both naming and conceptualizing the need to meaningfully value and maintain the practices of their students in the process of extending their students’ repertoires of practice to include dominant language, literacies, and cultural practices” (Paris, 2012, p. 95).

However, even newer iterations of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy may not be enough for some Native American scholar-teachers: “as Indigenous people, our strategies for decolonization and empowerment are in some ways necessarily markedly different” (Wilson, 2004). That is, these pedagogies retain the deep structures of Western thought (Grande, 2004) and therefore may not lead to the desired social justice outcomes. That is, merely *maintaining* students’ language practices may not be enough. In settings where the forces of colonization have resulted in active erasure of language and culture, decolonizing pedagogies and assessments may be needed.

At the very least, as a step toward social justice, writing assessment should be conducted in partnership with or, better yet, by members of the tribal commu-

nity. Lyons (2000) stresses the importance of tribal inclusion and control with regards to writing and writing instruction:

Placing the scene of writing squarely back into the particular contingency of the Indian rhetorical situation, rhetorical sovereignty requires of writing teachers more than a renewed commitment to listening and learning; it also requires a radical rethinking of how and what we teach as the written word at all levels of schooling, from preschool to graduate curricula and beyond. (pp. 449-450)

The radical rethinking Lyons proposes is not just for teaching, however, but should also be considered for writing assessment. Social justice for Native American student writers, according to Lyons, would mean that Native Americans have control over the systems of writing assessment used at tribal colleges. The Sitting Bull College statement about writing assessment would support such a social justice move, yet the test used for writing assessment—as explained later—hindered it. Could professional development help bend the arc of writing assessment in the direction Lyons suggests?

## **SOVEREIGNTY OF MISSION AT RESEARCH SITE**

Sitting Bull College is an open enrollment, tribal college located in Fort Yates, North Dakota on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, which was created by the Fort Laramie treaty of 1869. The reservation straddles the state line between North Dakota and South Dakota and has a population of roughly 11,000 people, most of whom are Lakota/Dakota. At the time of this study, the size of the SBC student body was about 300 students. The largest student group was Native American women, who made up about 73% of the total student population, and the average age of SBC students was 30. Sitting Bull College fostered (and still does) the academic growth of its students within the guiding framework of their Lakota/Dakota cultural heritage. The mission at the time of the study (it changed in 2012) was “Sitting Bull College is an academic and technical institution committed to improving the levels of education and training, (economic and social development of the people it serves while promoting responsible behavior consistent with the Lakota/Dakota culture and language.” Furthermore, “assessment begins with the Sitting Bull College mission statement,” reads the Assessment of Student Learning statement. “The SBC mission and its corresponding vision, values, purposes, and goals inspire all assessment activity.” (The current mission statement is “Guided by Lakota/Dakota culture, values, and language, Sitting Bull College is committed to building intellectual

capital through academic, career and technical education, and promoting economic and social development.”)

The mission statement for Sitting Bull College is based on the Seven Lakota Virtues: prayer, respect, compassion, honesty, generosity, humility, and wisdom. According to Lakota writing instructor Chad Harrison, each virtue lends itself to the holistic idea of a sound mind, body, heart and soul, which is the center of traditional Native American teachings. He included these additional concepts about the cultural context when presenting on this project at a national conference:

- Lakota/Dakota people possess a culture which is steeped in oral tradition
- The tradition of storytelling allows for the teaching and learning of our youth
- Context plays an important role in teaching and learning
- There is a pragmatic attitude which leads to a need for applicable lessons
- These old traditions and attitudes clash with the instant gratification attitudes of today to make a difficult teaching and learning environment

Harrison pointed to these activities as important to improving writing instruction at Sitting Bull College:

- Collaboration—“norming” for the instructors
- Communication—opening our ears and minds to different ideas from a variety of perspectives, especially students
- Identification—finding a common ground between teachers, teachers/students, and teachers/students/administration
- Experience—helping teachers and students relate through experience
- Consistency—providing a stable way of teaching and assessing in an otherwise unstable environment

In addition to the Lakota cultural context represented by Harrison, Comeau, and the college’s mission and vision statements, part of the cultural context for this study can also be described as white, Anglo-European, or as Sandy Grande calls it, “whitestream,” a combination of white and mainstream.

## **WRITING ASSESSMENT AT STANDING ROCK**

In North Dakota, the ACT<sup>®</sup> English score is typically used for placement in college writing classes. Nationally, the average English score for American Indians/



Alaska Natives was 16.3; for whites it was 21.9, a 5.6 point “gap” (ACT, 2016, p. 14). In North Dakota, the average English score for American Indians/Alaska Natives was 14.2; for whites it was 19.9, a 5.7 “gap.” The so-called “achievement gap” is often used to call attention to supposed deficits that underrepresented groups bring to college, but Inoue and Poe remind us that “One cannot assume that just because a test identifies a student as ‘remedial’ for instance, it is a function of the student’s abilities as a writer, especially when larger racial patterns can be seen” (2012, p. 6), as is the case in North Dakota. Because ACT does not reveal the standard deviation of these averages, it is impossible to calculate whether these differences in the average are meaningful. As Casie Moreland’s work in Chapter 5 tells us, incomplete test score data is a barrier to research on social justice in writing assessment. Despite the lack of information about test scores, they are, nevertheless, in North Dakota used to funnel disproportionate numbers of American Indian students into remedial writing courses. Furthermore, potential for harm exists in writing assessment measures that do not reflect the cultural values of tribal people or tribal college missions and the circumstances of the college’s student body.

At Sitting Bull College, the ACT COMPASS® test has until recently been used to place students into writing courses. Nationally, the ACT COMPASS Test has generated much criticism. For example, a 2012 study had found that “up to a third of students who placed into remedial classes due to their COMPASS or Accuplacer scores could have passed college-level classes with a grade of B or better” and colleges are finding greater success switching to the use of multiple measures to place students into writing courses (Fain, 2015). Scott-Clayton’s analysis of the predictive ability of the COMPASS found that “Using high school achievement alone as a placement screen results in fewer severe placement mistakes than using test scores alone—substantially so in English” (Community College Research Center, Columbia University, 2012, p. 37). In 2016 ACT acknowledged the limitations of the COMPASS Test: “[the] ACT COMPASS is not contributing as effectively to student placement and success as it had in the past. Based on this analysis . . . , we have made the difficult decision to phase out the all ACT COMPASS products by December 31, 2016” (Fain, 2015).

Although these studies had not been published at the time of this research project, concerns about writing placement were the motivation for Sitting Bull (SBC) tribal college instructors to initiate a professional development project in partnership with the Red River Valley Writing Project and North Dakota State University. Additionally, two of the three instructors at SBC were former K-12 reservation teachers, so they also had an interest in working with K-12 teachers on the amount and quality of writing instruction in the reservation schools.

Given the mission statement of SBC, it is surprising from a philosophical perspective that the ACT COMPASS test was used at Sitting Bull College for placement into writing courses starting in 2005, where it was “used to complete an analysis of reading, writing, and math skills for all incoming freshmen and transfer students,” according to the college’s assessment report (Assessment Report, 2011–2012). This practice and the baseline scores for placement are determined by the North Dakota University System, not the tribal college. Students were placed into a developmental English course based on their COMPASS scores at a rate of 53% in the first semester of this study—Fall 2011 (Assessment Report, 2011–2012). The average rates of students labeled underprepared according to their English COMPASS score for the years in which data is available is shown in Table 10.1.

**Table 10.1. Number of students labeled underprepared in English, according to ACT COMPASS score\***

Year	Total number of students	Total number underprepared in English	% Underprepared
2008–2009	124	79	64%
2009–2010	118	44	37%
2010–2011	159	72	45%
2011–2012	123	59	48%
2013–2014	83	29	35%
2014–2015	79	37	44%

\* *There is a discrepancy in the assessment report between the percentage and the number.*

Students then repeated the COMPASS test at the conclusion of their Associates level studies; the goal of this repeated testing was to demonstrate student learning for the Higher Learning Commission accreditation (R. Froelich, personal communication, October 14, 2016). Moreover, although the ACT COMPASS test has no effect on graduation or on teaching, it was “required for grant purposes,” according to the assessment report (Sitting Bull College). The repeated testing process showed that although there was some improvement in sentence fluency and support, the overall scores were not necessarily higher and, according to the SBC instructors, did not seem to reflect the learning that occurred. In regard to the disappointing end-of-studies COMPASS scores, Tribal member and SBC English Instructor Chad Harrison surmised, “Assessment may not always reflect the job we are doing.”

## WRITING CURRICULA AT SITTING BULL COLLEGE

The writing curricula at Sitting Bull College at the time of the study were as shown in Table 10.2. (The course numbers 110 and 120 are common to all courses in the North Dakota higher education system.)

**Table 10.2. Writing courses at Sitting Bull College**

Course Number	Course Title	Number of Credits
ENGL 010	Developmental Writing	2 credits
ENGL 110	College Composition I	3 credits
ENGL 120	College Composition II	3 credits

Both 110 and 120 are required for completion of an Associate's degree at Sitting Bull College. Developmental Writing is the course students are placed in if their COMPASS score is low.

When the project began, instructors explained that in addition to the COMPASS test, all students wrote an argument in response to a prompt at the end of English 110 and at the end of English 120. This end-of-course assessment was run by SBC instructors, who administered the same writing task in different ways. For example, some gave it as an in-class, timed writing; others allowed students to take the prompt home and work on it. Instructors also graded their own students' writing and did not necessarily use the rubric in the same way. Results were reported to the department chair, who prepared a report for the college. This procedure had some value for individual instructors, but when it came to programmatic assessment, the methods were problematic because they did not result in data about student improvement in writing across the program. Furthermore, there was little opportunity to collaboratively discuss the meaning of the results and think about how they might influence teaching practices. Also, because instructors assessed student writing only at the end of the semester, they said they were not confident that student writing was improving over the course of the semester.

## DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS

It is significant, in terms of sovereignty, that this project began with an invitation. Karen (Swisher) Comeau (Standing Rock Dakota), who has written extensively about Indian education and the role of researchers (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Swisher, 1996; Swisher & Tippeconnic, 1999), invited me to meet with the tribal college writing instructors in the spring prior to the study. Comeau

was the author of the Lilly grant that funded the first year of this two-year study. The second year was funded by a SEED grant for high-needs schools from the National Writing Project. In addition to the tribal college personnel, a variety of K-12 teachers from reservation schools participated in this project because the tribal college instructors wanted to reach out to those educators preparing students for tribal college work.

Comeau had recently worked to create an Institutional Review Board (IRB) to provide the Standing Rock Community with more control over research done on the reservation. This research project was reviewed and approved by tribal members through the Sitting Bull College IRB and also through North Dakota State University's IRB.

There were three composition instructors at the college and a writing center director. All three participated in the project. Carla Gerriets is a European American female who taught mainly developmental writing courses and commuted daily from Bismarck. Renee Froelich is a European American female who taught Composition I and II courses and lives on the reservation. She also informally serves as the department head for English. Chad Harrison is a Native American male instructor who taught Composition I and II courses, lives on the reservation, and is a tribal member. Lori Hach, a European American female who lived on a ranch on the reservation, was the director of the newly formed campus writing center, called the Academic Excellence Center.

The K-12 teachers were different in each year of the study. There were five teachers the first year and 10 different teachers the second year. Data on race/ethnicity was not collected on this group, but the demographics of this group generally reflected the demographics of the secondary teachers in the state—96% white (Boser, 2014). I am a white European American female with an indigenous genotype (Sami), working as a professor at North Dakota State University and residing in Fargo, North Dakota, a four-hour drive from Standing Rock Reservation. I am a fourth generation descendent of Finnish and Norwegian settler colonizers who participated in homesteading in North Dakota. I lived out west and in Alaska for 40 years before returning to the state in 2008. M. K. Laughlin, a European American female graduate student from North Dakota State University, assisted with the project. Except for Carla, Erika and me, none of the participants had previous experience with the National Writing Project.

Because the writing instructors chose to forego anonymity when they published an article on the work for *Tribal College Journal* and presented on the project at a national conference, their real names are used in this piece as well. The K-12 teachers did not choose to make their identities known for the research project, so their real names and schools are *not* identified and pseudonyms are used to protect their anonymity.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Audio recordings of the writing assessment meetings were made and transcribed. Exit slips were given to all participants, and the tribal college instructors were each interviewed to learn more about their perceptions of student writing and assessment in general. Meetings were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded using Strauss and Corbin's methods, which included an emic approach to coding. That is, the codes arose from patterns detected in discourse analysis, these patterns were labeled, and then the data was reviewed again, looking for occurrences or references to these labels.

Preliminary emic coding revealed the following labels: Student writing issues, pedagogy, comparing high school and college, comments on writing assessment, new learning, identification of needs/wants, changes in student writing, general discussion about writing, and cultural considerations. This preliminary coding showed the professional development concerns that naturally arise when educators are engaged in collaborative writing assessment, but did not answer my second and third questions about culturally relevant pedagogy and social justice. For that, it was necessary to do some etic cross-coding, using elements of culturally relevant pedagogy as an analytic tool. These elements included increasing academic achievement by modifying materials to draw on cultural strengths, holding high standards and changing expectations, and collaborative community building.

### YEAR 1: DEMYSTIFYING WRITING ASSESSMENT

At the preliminary meeting in Year 1, the three composition instructors (Froelich, Gerriets, Harrison) and the writing center director (Hach), along with Comeau, discussed their concerns about student writing. They identified attendance, retention, motivation, and a lack of improvement on the ACT COMPASS test given at the beginning and end of their degree as the main issues. Froelich described students as "reluctant writers," who "draw a blank" when asked, "What do you think?" about an issue they are writing about. In contrast, Comeau said students connect with opportunities for using more sophisticated language. Hach and Gerriets were most concerned with readiness for college writing, estimating that about 60% of their incoming students are not prepared to write at the college level. Harrison identified the following problems that impact his work as a composition instructor:

- Attitudes—Contemporary, technological and traditional attitudes add up to a tough teaching situation
- Environmental—Poverty and social ills are contributing factors for underachievement

- Loss of traditional ideals and the holistic approach to life

As these comments illustrate, the tribal college instructors had different perceptions of student writers and writing assessment, but they decided to work together, with my assistance as facilitator, to answer these questions that they collaboratively created:

1. How can we determine if student writing is improving from 010 to 110 and from 110 to 120?
2. Is there a need for an additional course between 010 and 110?
3. How can we improve ACT COMPASS scores at the end of their program?
4. How can we work with high school teachers and students to prepare students better for college level writing?

These were pragmatic questions that were important to the instructors at this institution, and as an outsider to this context, it was important to respect their questions. Through the process of engaging in answering these questions, new questions about the nature of professional development during writing assessment arose and some questions, such as #3, became less important.

## **YEAR 1 PROTOCOL: PRE/POST TESTING**

For the first year of this study, the writing instructors decided to use the same prompt and rubric (see Appendix for a list of all the prompts) for all of their writing classes at the beginning and end of each semester and to score these essays collaboratively as a group using a norming process that sought to increase accuracy in scoring of student writing. For example, in Year 1 at the beginning of the year, this ACT-style prompt was used:

The Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) requires all school libraries receiving certain federal funds to install and use blocking software to prevent students from viewing material considered "harmful to minors." However, some studies conclude that blocking software in schools damages educational opportunities for students, both by blocking access to web pages that are directly related to the state-mandated curriculums and by restricting broader inquiries of both students and teachers. In your view, should the schools block access to certain Internet websites?

In your essay, take a position on this question. You may write about either one of the two points of view given or you may

present a different point of view on this question. Use specific reasons and examples to support your position.

Other prompts included topics on whether high school should be extended to five years, the length of the school day, and the importance of arts in the curriculum. The second paragraph was the same on all prompts.

The rubric used to score papers in this study was ACT's older (pre-Common Core) six-point holistic rubric. According to this ACT rubric, papers at the highest level, exhibit characteristics like taking a position on the issue in the prompt, dealing with the complexity of the issue (which includes responding to counter-arguments), and logically and fully developing ideas. In addition, a top-scoring essay will have clear organization; transitions that "reflect the writer's logic"; clear, effective, and well developed introductions and conclusions; "varied and precise" sentence structure; and "a good command of language." Recognizing that these are first drafts, written in about 30 minutes, even a top-scoring essay (a 6) is not required to be error-free, but the few errors should not "distract the reader." This rubric offers differences between the scorepoints, such as the following: a 6 essay offers a "*critical* context for discussion," and a 5 offers a "*broad* context." In addition to these fine distinctions between individual scorepoints, there is a clear difference between upper half (scorepoints 4 through 6) and lower half (scorepoints 1-3) in that a 4 essay offers "adequate skill" in responding to the task, whereas those in the lower half do not. Indeed, the language in the lower half focuses more on deficits (e.g., transitions may be "innappropriate or misleading") than in degrees of competency.

A rubric like this privileges a certain kind of discourse—whitestream discourse. If we go back to Sandy Grande's point about the "deep structures of Western thought," we can see evidence of such structures in the language of this rubric. For example, the act of "taking a position" may be problematic for students with other worldviews. Some of my Alaska Native First Year Composition students at the University of Alaska struggled with thesis statements because circumspection is a cultural value (Blalock, 1997, p. 85). Furthermore, "The value the composition teacher and tutor place on direct assertion in the thesis statement erects a serious cultural barrier to the rural Native student," who values humility and circumspection over anything that could be construed as bragging (Blalock, 1997, p. 89). One of the whitestream characteristics Grande points to is "reason as the preferred mode of inquiry" (2004, p. 3), and we see that reflected in the multiple references to logic in the ACT rubric. The language about errors not distracting the reader may also be problematic, as readers may have differing attitudes about "correctness" in language use.

Professional development around writing assessment provides space for edu-

cators to analyze rubrics, a first step toward deconstructing the values implicit in such rubrics and, hopefully, replacing them with a more culturally relevant way of describing student writing.

I must acknowledge that the SBC instructors' decision to do their assessment in this way runs counter to the way writing assessment is used at most colleges—as a single test to determine readiness/serve as gate-keeping for college or as a single measure of outcomes. Colleges seldom use a pre- and post-test model to look at student growth from the beginning to the end of a class. Doing so is time-consuming and the gains are most likely modest, if at all. Yet, this is what the tribal college instructors desired for their open enrollment institution because “we have to work with students where they are at,” as one instructor explained. They wanted to know if each and every student in their classes was making individual improvement as a writer. The small class sizes allowed them to include every student in the assessment, instead of just samples, as is often done at larger institutions.

To use ACT-style prompts and rubric seems paradoxical in a setting where tribal college instructors felt that writing assessment was something “done to” them and their students. However, this approach was similar to the timed essay they were already using (and which some of them felt was handled in a biased way). The ACT COMPASS results did not show improvement in student writing, and they wanted to know why. They wanted to increase their understanding of how such large-scale assessment worked. So, we began a process of demystifying high-stakes assessment, starting with professional development on the basics of assessment, drawing from the demystifying assessment section from *Writing on Demand* (Gere et al., 2005). I believed that some demystification would occur that might free them to take greater ownership over future decisions about how to do local assessment.

Writing instructors read and discussed the prompt, then analyzed and talked about the rubric, scored a set of “anchor” essays, and talked through their differences on the scores. We tried to come to consensus, so they would know how this works with large-scale writing assessment, but consensus was not forced; there was time and space to discuss our differences. We then begin scoring student essays using the first set as anchor essays to help make scoring decisions. The rubric was chosen because it is one commonly used for assessing college-ready writing, and two of the three courses focus on preparing students for English 120, which is considered the first-year college composition course. SBC instructors chose to undertake this assessment activity in collaboration with middle and high school teachers as a way to begin a conversation about the high school to college transition in writing. Moreover, collaborating with K-12 teachers was an intentional goal of the grant from the Lilly Endowment.



## **YEAR 1 RESULTS: IMPROVEMENT IN STUDENT PRE/POST SCORES**

Data from the first semester showed that student writing improved by almost one point on a six-point rubric in all courses. This answered the first question created by the instructors: How can we determine if student writing is improving from 010 to 110 and from 110 to 120? They were relieved to see that even with use of the ACT instrument, their students' writing was still improving. These results also supported their decision to answer the second question—should an additional remedial course be required—with a definitive “no.” This decision was important from a social justice perspective because if they had chosen to add a course, it would have further slowed students' time to degree. By the end of the first year, instructors also decided that the third question—how can we improve ACT COMPASS scores—was no longer important to them. There was much less talk about COMPASS after they got these results. This left the fourth question, “How can we work with high school teachers and students to prepare students better for college level writing?” as the focus for Year 2 of this project. Participants had recognized the professional development benefits of collaboratively assessing student writing and wanted to continue the work.

## **YEAR 2: STEPS TOWARD SOVEREIGNTY IN WRITING ASSESSMENT**

In Year 2, the Lilly grant ended. After one year of collaborative writing assessment, the instructors took a more active social justice stance—they sought and were awarded a SEED (Supporting Effective Educator Development) Grant for High-Needs Schools that would support them in working more intensively with secondary teachers on the reservation while continuing their exploration of writing assessment. This grant had different goals and support structures, which affected how the activities unfolded. For example, elements of the National Writing Project Summer Institute model became a part of the work. This meant a dedication to providing writing time and support for all educators, with the philosophy that educators with an active writing practice themselves are better teachers of writing. Another element was the inclusion of teaching demonstrations by all participants to model and share best practices in the teaching of writing and to support each other in developing leadership skills to share those practices at their own schools. Another element was time to read into the research on the teaching of writing and to discuss it. So, while the collaborative assessment continued, it was embedded in a different kind of professional development experience that deemphasized assessment and focused more on teaching and learning.

## YEAR 2 PROTOCOL: MAKING PRE/POST TESTING MORE CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE

With the second and third questions answered, the tribal college instructors focused on questions one and four: 1) How can we determine if student writing is improving from course to course? and 4) How can we work with high school teachers and student to prepare students better for college-level writing? The protocol was similar to Year One, but as facilitator, I encouraged them to think about how they could change their assessment to be more responsive to their students' needs. In Year 2, Sitting Bull College instructors moved toward using more age-relevant and culturally responsive prompts. The prompt they decided on for the fall pre-test of Year 2, had to do with Native American identity:

People define “Native American” in many different ways. Some people believe that being Native American means going to pow-wows, doing beadwork, speaking the language, etc. Others believe that being Native American does not necessarily rely on traditional activities like those above. In your opinion, how would you define what a Native American is and what being Native American means today?

## YEAR 2 RESULTS: CONTINUED IMPROVEMENT IN STUDENTS’ PRE/POST TEST SCORES SUPPORT SITTING BULL COLLEGE INSTRUCTORS IN CHANGING THE NARRATIVE ABOUT TESTING

There were continued gains in year 2 of the writing assessment. The writing assessment resulted in the quantitative data shown in Tables 10.3 and 10.4. The scores shown are the average score on a scale of 1-6, with 6 being the highest.

**Table 10.3. Pre-essay scores for all students in SBC writing courses**

Date	Prompt, number	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	n
Fall 2011	1	2.67	1.17	5	49
Spring 2012	3	3.15	0.97	5	60
Fall 2012	5	3.13	1.28	5	63
Spring 2013	6	3.25	1.42	5	60

**Table 10.4. Post-essay scores for all students in SBC writing courses**

Date	Prompt, number	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	n	<i>t</i>
Fall 2011	2	3.39	1.03	5	49	3.18**
Spring 2012	4	3.16	1.14	5	59	0.05*
Fall 2012	Same as pre	3.38	1.40	5	29	-0.80 <sup>nss</sup>
Spring 2013	Same as pre	3.92	1.22	4	39	1.21 <sup>nss</sup>

Note: *nss* = not statistically significant; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

These data help tell a different story about student writing gains than the one told by the institution's COMPASS scores. The improvement in writing from the beginning to the ending of the fall 2011 and the spring 2013 semesters were statistically significant; the other two were not, though all sample sizes were small, so inferences that one can make are limited. There is practical significance seen in the steady improvement in student writing, not just from the beginning to the end of each semester, but also overall, from semester to semester, which could suggest improvement in the writing program as a whole. What the data provided was an opportunity to change the narrative about how these Lakota/Dakota students did on writing tests. Changing the narrative is the prerogative of those with power and an exercise of rhetorical sovereignty. I will now discuss each of the themes that emerged from analysis of this qualitative data.

## FROM TEST SCORES TO BUILDING TEACHING PARTNERSHIPS AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY

As the following analyses illustrate, a community had been built among the K-12 and college educators, a community that could enter into a supported and sustained discussion of teaching and learning, but also of the larger scene, which included devastating topics, such as suicide. What is important is not just the scores on the writing assessment—though everyone was heartened to see quantitative evidence of the success of Sitting Bull College students—but also the partnerships that we were building between many different levels of educators. The discussions—grouped by the following themes from culturally relevant pedagogy: *increasing academic achievement by modifying materials to draw on cultural strengths, holding high standards and changing expectations, holding high standards and changing pedagogical practice, and collaborative community building*—are important for the educators' own professional development, development that, in turn, benefits future students.

## INCREASING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT BY MODIFYING MATERIALS TO DRAW ON CULTURAL STRENGTHS

According to instructors, the Year 1 sample prompts on Internet blocking, length of high school, start time of the school day, and school curriculum did not appeal to the tribal college students very much. While using these ACT prompts and the accompanying rubric gave participants a clear idea of what purchased tests like the ACT COMPASS test looked like, there is an obvious reason why they did not find them appealing: the average SBC student is not a recent high school graduate. These issues have very little relevance to their lives. However, some who are parents did find the prompts of interest from a parenting perspective (R. Froelich, personal communication, October 14, 2016).

In Year 2, Sitting Bull College instructors moved toward using more age-relevant and culturally responsive prompts—a prompt on the topic of Native American identity. As part of the professional development activities conducted around the writing assessment, participants analyzed the prompts and even wrote a response to them. This was part of a larger effort to provide more opportunities for educators to do their own writing because of the grant from the National Writing Project in the second year. The shift from identifying as “teachers” to identifying as “teachers who write” was transformative, but also painful for some. Some of the pain was simply because some teachers did not like to write. They may have had a bad experience in the past or had been away from their own personal writing practice for a long time. Another kind of pain was in trying to write assessment prompts or to write out of one’s comfort zone. For example, non-Native participants in the group struggled with the Native American identity prompt from Year 2. Whereas they had no shortage of things to write about with the previous prompts and also demonstrated confidence in sharing their thoughts about the issue at hand, with this prompt there was much more hesitation. Non-Native instructors experienced the same struggle that their students had most likely been feeling on the earlier standardized prompts: “I don’t have the personal experience that could be used for specific reasons and examples.”

Another change observed with the use of more culturally relevant prompts was improvement in student writing, especially in higher order thinking skills. Productive conversations during the assessment helped educators think about these changes in student writing and consider the impact on their teaching practice. For example, engaging students in discussing topics relevant to their day-to-day lives on the reservation to develop the rhetorical skills they needed to write strong arguments. This revelation led to creation of new teaching materials as well.

At the final meeting of the two-year project, instructors discussed how the final prompt was chosen and what their plans were for the future.

Carla: We wanted to do the same prompt, but the Salazar has truly affected a lot of entities on the reservation . . . You responded to it and finished it because it wasn't finished. So what we do within all of our classes the same week, we give the prompt and then all of our students write on the prompt.

The Salazar that she refers to is the class action lawsuit *Cobell v. Salazar* that was finally settled in 2011 after 15 years and awarded \$3.4 billion to the plaintiffs for mismanagement of Indian lands held in trust by the U.S. government (Secretary Salazar, 2011). The funds are used to buy back land fractionated by the Dawes Act, pay individual claimants, and to support education (Indian Trust Settlement, 2011). Checks were starting to arrive on Standing Rock at this time, and individuals were receiving different amounts at different times. According to the Sitting Bull College instructors, some students stopped attending when they received their checks, and the casino, a major local employer, had many employees quit as soon as they received checks. Chad Harrison, the only tribal member among the college instructors, is the one who proposed this topic for the prompt:

In December 2009 the government announced having reached a settlement in the *Cobell v. Salazar* class-action trust. The \$3.4 billion was placed in a bank and \$1.4 billion will go to individuals, mostly in the form of checks ranging from \$500 to \$1,500.

Prompt: Some say that there are negative social effects of the disbursement of these checks, such as a sense of entitlement or large numbers of people quitting their jobs or leaving school. Others believe that the entitlement money has a positive effect on society, improving the economic status of individuals and the larger community. What is your stance on the settlement money? Support your argument with examples.

This prompt and the previous one were more culturally relevant than the prompts used in Year 1 of the project, and, significantly, locally developed. More significantly, this last prompt was created by Chad Harrison, the only tribal member in the group of writing instructors, an act of rhetorical sovereignty.

It also was conducive to having students do research in order to do the post-assessment, something that was lacking in Year 1 of the project. By "same prompt," Carla means having students do a timed writing at the beginning and at the ending of the semester, using the same prompt, rather than using a different prompt at the beginning and at the end of the semester. This is an important

shift because it was a way for instructors to get at looking at the growth they were interested in with their first research question, the growth from beginning to ending of a course. It also mirrored the instructional approach to writing process, with its emphasis on revision, used at the college. And with multiple semesters of this kind of growth, they finally had data that could speak back to the dismal story told by entry-only COMPASS scores.

## HOLDING HIGH STANDARDS AND CHANGING EXPECTATIONS

Raising achievement and holding high standards for all students is a hallmark of culturally responsive educators (Banks, 2006; Gay, 2000; Irvine, 1992). Much of the talk about student writing levels, especially in preliminary meetings and earlier in the project focused on how low student writing ability was; for example, “What I learned is that our students absolutely do not know the purpose for writing” and “The trouble is we know that they don’t know how to write.” This focus on weakness was also evident in the written exit slip questions from Year 1 that participants responded to:

### *Exit Slip Questions—Year One*

1. What was the most useful part of the day?
2. What did not work well or should be changed?
3. What did you learn about assessment?
4. Will today’s experience affect your teaching of writing? If so, how?
5. What did you learn about SBC students’ writing

All comments about student writing were negative except one, which was, “Some students put a lot of thought into what they are writing.” One was neutral, acknowledging that, “their abilities and use of language varies.” All other responses were negative, expressing dismay at the low level of these college writers or surprise that the writers have the same problems with writing that the teachers see in the high school and even in the middle school. One wrote, “[I learned] that I need to step up my writing instruction. If some of these kids were mine, I am embarrassed. It showed me that we aren’t doing enough to prepare kids to write in college.” Although the deficit thinking was sadly apparent, in the last quote there is also acknowledgment that thinking about student writing can serve as motivation to change their teaching practices.

However, when educators characterize students as being unable to do certain writing tasks, it appears that expectations for student performance are low. Like the suggestion that clerical work is the goal of education (Harms, Chapter 3, this collection), these low expectations could be a residual effect of the boarding school era, when Indian children were trained for “manual labor—such as

farming skills for boys/men and bourgeois homemaking ones for girls/women” (Robbins, 2017, p. 200). Therefore, I paid attention to instances in the data when educators were working against this trend by holding higher expectations or convincing each other to expect more from students. These instances tended to occur when educators were assessing the post-essays. At these times, conversation about student writers shifted from one that focuses mainly on their weaknesses to one that looks at the changes and improvements in their writing.

At the first writing assessment meeting, one of the non-Native K-12 teachers was talking about how students struggle with writing arguments, “It has to be so spelled out to them.” Chad, the Native American tribal college instructor, tried to both empathize with the K-12 teacher, but also reframe his assumption: “It happens at our level too, not the spelling it out, but once you start to giving them different options, it actually opens their eyes to all the different possibilities.”

During the norming portion of the writing assessment meeting, when the group was working to come to consensus on a set of anchor papers, Chad again positioned himself as someone in the group who held higher expectations. He tended to score essays lower than the rest of the group (comprised of non-Native participants). I have observed Native teachers in Native schools with high proportions of non-Native teachers at another site also holding higher expectations than their non-Native colleagues (Sassi & Lajimodiere, 2016). In arguing for lower scorepoints, he frequently referenced textual elements of the essay, such as content, organization, and sentence clarity. Once he argued that the group was reading more into the essay than was actually there:

Chad: *We’re jumping to saying that’s what they’re saying. To me they’re not saying that at all. That’s not what the sentence says.*

This example is only a representative example of many times when Chad was the low scorer on an essay and resistant to raising his original score so that the group could come to consensus. This was challenging and a conflict for me as the facilitator, because I both wanted to develop a solid set of anchor essays to support consensus in scoring but also honor Chad’s efforts to get the group to raise their expectations because holding high expectations is a characteristic of culturally relevant pedagogy. In some cases, Chad compromised a bit from his original position, but often he helped convince others to raise their expectations, including me.

To counter the negative characterization of student writing that was abundant throughout the data, I specifically asked teachers to compare end-of-term essays with beginning-of-term essays in terms of improvements.

Kelly: What are the things you saw them getting better at?

Carla and Dave [in unison]: Introductions and conclusions.

Carla: Organization. Don't get me wrong, there is room for improvement, but the difference between the pre and post essays!

Carla: I noticed command of language. I thought it increased.

Chad: I like the idea of a prompt that does raise some bristles. I have students ask, is this an appropriate conversation, can I use this word? And I tell them, you guys are adults . . .

Chad: In terms of the six I read, I think they improved in the thinking process. Even in the lower-scored ones there were a lot of ideas brought up.

Clearly, instructors had many positive things to say about student writing. Perhaps comments on the positives of student writing would have arisen without prompting, but as a facilitator, I did explicitly elicit these comments, both verbally, as the example above shows, and below, in the written exit slips prompts that participants wrote to. Note the shift from asking about the strengths of the writing to asking about the strengths of the writers:

*Exit Slip Questions—Year Two*

1. What are the principal strengths of the writers whose essays you scored?
2. Since you first participated in a collaborative writing assessment, how has your confidence in scoring essays changed? Greatly increased—somewhat increased—about the same—decreased somewhat—greatly decreased
3. Will today's assessment experience affect your teaching of writing? If so, how?
4. Please evaluate the value of this experience in relation to your own professional development. Highly valuable—somewhat valuable—neutral—not very valuable—not at all valuable

The following strengths in student writing were identified: well developed and detailed supports for their opinions, strong and varied oratory, riveting and entertaining details. In addition, teachers recognized student writers' abilities to voice their opinions, organize thoughts, develop a good introduction and conclusion, and evoke an emotional response in them as readers.

Fifty percent of the educators reported that their confidence "greatly increased" from participating in assessment and 50% said it had "somewhat in-



creased.” When it came to affecting their teaching of writing, responses varied widely. Some wanted to duplicate the scoring and norming session with their own students, while others said they would generally work on improving student writing. One wrote, “I enjoy writing, but had felt my students were lost as I made writing assignments. These sorts of assessments not only help me, but help the students as they develop their stories.” This kind of self-reflection can help educators raise awareness of how their own attitudes toward writing are not the same as their students’ attitudes. On the final question, fifty percent reported that the experience was “highly valuable” to their own professional development and fifty percent said it had been “somewhat valuable.”

These data show that the collaborative writing assessment activity was an impactful professional development experience for educators of all levels. Productive conversations during the assessment helped them consider connections to their teaching practices and the needs of their students.

## **HOLDING HIGH STANDARDS AND CHANGING PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES**

Instructors shared strategies that they thought had been most effective. One of the strategies was grant-related. SBC created a Center for Academic Excellence and hired Lori as the director of the Center. She worked closely with the foundations instructor, Carla, to provide intensive one-on-one work in the Writing center. Chad talked about how he engaged students in discussing topics relevant to their day-to-day lives on the reservation to develop the rhetorical skills they need to write strong argumentative papers.

To facilitate this discussion, participants read the NCTE policy brief on writing assessment, *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve the Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* (Graham & Perrin, 2007), the ND Common Core State Standards (2011), and *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (National Council of Teachers of English, Council of Writing Program Administrators, & National Writing Project, 2011). Discussions of policy and research as well as sharing of stories about our classroom practices made the discussions especially rich. In terms of pedagogy, a key social justice issue that emerged was that in some K–12 classrooms, Standing Rock students are not given many opportunities to practice writing. For example, a teacher named Jill has been resistant to providing writing opportunities to her students throughout the year. This meeting is in April of Year 2, and she is discussing changes to writing instruction she has made to her teaching:

Jill: I don't mind writing, but I hate to grade writing. There-

fore, I don't assign much writing. Because I am a perfectionist, and if you miss a comma or a period or write the word "I" with a dot at the top, i, it just eats me. And so, I'm . . .

Erika: [whispers] . . . let it go.

Group: [laughter]

Jill: I am . . . Erika is tutoring me to let that go. I had my kids write, um, a letter from after the end of the book *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. I had them write a letter to the father.

Writing research shows that students need many opportunities to write for a variety of purposes and audiences to develop fluency. That Jill could maintain a resistance to allowing her students to write within a writing project context suggests how strong this resistance is. Jill clarifies why she does not have students write—she hates grading it, and the reason she hates grading it is that she cannot stand the errors in writing conventions she sees, liked missed punctuation or using a lowercase “i” when referring to self. In Chapter 3, Keith L. Harms identifies Jill’s dilemma thus: “If others, frequently more powerful others are demanding a standard English from our students, the thinking goes, then what power do we have . . . to resist this?” Because this discussion took place within the context of writing assessment-focused professional development, Jill had an opportunity to air and confront her attitudes toward grading student writing.

In the excerpt above, we see some peer pressure at work on Jill. Erika whispers, “Let it go,” when Jill explains why she hates to grade her students’ writing. The spontaneous laughter from the rest of the group further underlines how untenable they find her position. Jill then begins to describe how, with Erika’s help, she is starting to let it go and experiment with providing more opportunities for her students to write, an important step toward being a social justice educator who holds high expectations for students, and, significantly, provides an opportunity to learn (OTL). Theories of OTL have been greatly expanded by the sociocultural perspectives that “draw our attention, explicitly, to what learners—with minds and bodies, home and peer cultures and languages, previous learning experiences, interests and values—bring to their learning environments and how that shapes their interactions with those learning environments” (Moss et al., 2008).

## COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY BUILDING

Professional development centered on writing assessment has the potential to drive people apart as they air their personal standards for measuring writing,

disagree with others on scores, and struggle with coming to consensus. However, such activities also bring people together because scoring an entire set of essays requires collaboration. The participants in this study expressed humor and tolerance throughout the process sharing of pedagogical practices discussed above helped create a sense of community.

Another research-based pedagogical practice the group studied was the use of models to help student writers, both in the form of mentor texts and also the modeling of the writing process by teachers who write. This was also something that Jill resisted, which is surprising because she is a good writer. The reason for this turned out to be more complex than one might think.

Erika relates Jill's concern: "She [Jill] had shared her own writing before they wrote and that was something they said they demoed last . . . time that we talked about was consider sharing and and um one of your [Jill's] concerns was that they were just going to use this exact thing that I wrote, that modeling is going to lead to them copying."

Besides the fear that students will just copy her writing, Jill had another fear in sharing her writing—that it would make her emotional. This comes out in the following excerpt:

Kelly: Was that the . . . was that the first time you've shared your writing with students?

Jill: Um no, I have shared my writings before.

Kelly: But you have been hesitant to in the past?

Jill: Yeah, because a lot of times I write things that make me cry.

Erika: . . . [Y]ou don't go into that real personal and never have because I have seen some of your writings when I was in your classroom.

Jill: 'Cause you know when our secretary George died, I wrote a poem . . . and put it on my door so they could read it, and so, everyone said it was pretty good. And then I wrote another one, it might have been in here, yeah, I did, and it was one of our students killed themselves.

Kelly: Hm, yeah, I have experienced that before. It's so hard. Yeah.

Erika: But if you're feeling that, think about what the students are feeling.

Kelly: Hhhmmmm.

Erika: You know, they see that personal side, and that's what makes writing valuable.

Kelly: Uhhmm hmmm.

Erika: You know, if it's not surface level, then that's how they become good writers as well as, you know, compassionate people, that's our goal, that's our goal in education.

For Jill, using her own writing as a model in her class is risky because she writes about emotional topics such as deaths of school staff and students. The Standing Rock community had experienced a series of teen suicides. This is also a social justice issue, as the rate of death by suicide by Native female adolescents is nearly four times that of white females (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2011). This tragedy is something that needs to be talked about and acted upon, and it was through a discussion of writing that educators were able to discuss suicides on the reservation. The transcript continues with this discussion for quite some time. The group shared ideas for how to provide opportunities for both students and staff to write about their losses and also efforts for prevention. The community building that occurred over the course of the study led to safe, supported discussions about hard topics like these.

## CONCLUSION

The content, rubrics, and structures of large-scale writing assessment have tremendous power over people, resulting in their use even in contexts like Sitting Bull College, on reservation lands where the Native Nation is a literal sovereign state and where the mission statement explicitly calls for consideration of cultural context in assessment practices. At the beginning of this two-year study, the tribal college instructors seemed to feel accountable to the external measure of writing used by the state of North Dakota and had internalized some deficit thinking that accompanies a focus on measures like these. Steps toward a more socially just writing assessment were possible only after educators proved to themselves that their students were making gains on a whitestream measure.

An analysis of educator discourse does help answer the research questions about writing assessment, professional development, and social justice.

*During writing assessment, what kinds of discourse do educators engage in and what parts might constitute professional development?*

Participants in the study, who came in with varying degrees of assessment literacy, discussed student writing issues, pedagogy, comparison between high school

and college, comments on writing assessment, new learning, identification of needs/wants, changes in student writing, general discussion about writing, and cultural considerations as part of writing assessment meetings. There is evidence of educators teaching each other, whether through convincing each other to have higher expectations, using different teaching practices, or demonstrating their own approaches to assessing writing. That is, teacher-to-teacher talk about actual student writing during assessment is what makes professional development possible.

*Does the professional development during writing assessment reflect the values of culturally responsive pedagogy?*

Analyzing qualitative data gives insight into the nature of the professional development that happens between and within the activity of collaborative writing assessment. Using the elements of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy as an analytic tool revealed the following practices were present in the study: increasing academic achievement by modifying materials to draw on cultural strengths, holding high standards and changing expectations, and collaborative community building. However, many elements of culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy were not present in the data. For example, social consciousness and critique was minimal or not present in most discussions. There was no apparent evidence in the data of Lakota ways of knowing being explicitly integrated into teaching processes and skills. Furthermore, critiques of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies (Grande, 2004; Wilson, 2004) were not explicitly considered, nor was decolonization explicitly studied or discussed.

However, there was shift between the beginning and the end of the study from focusing almost exclusively on student weaknesses to productively discussing students' strengths as writers. Just as discussions that build on student strengths are more productive than those that focus on deficits, we might consider how facilitating capacity-building activities that value and build on reservation educators' experiences may be an effective way to work collaboratively in a tribal college setting to benefit students.

*Does culturally responsive professional development attached to writing assessment lead to addressing social justice issues?*

Using Sleeter's 2014 analysis of social justice frameworks, one can comment on each of the four dimensions of social justice she identifies. The first is to situate families and communities with an analysis of structural inequities. Sitting Bull

College instructors had noticed that the COMPASS test results their institution was using for program analysis did not correspond to their own conception of student improvement in writing. The misleading test results were about to be used to add an additional required remedial course to the sequence of writing courses that students at Sitting Bull College take. An additional required writing course would have added to the time to degree and also the cost of college, both of which may have resulted in an even higher non-retention rate. With better data from the writing assessment they collaboratively constructed, SBC writing instructors decided against adding this course, thereby avoiding what could have been construed as a structural inequity. By choosing to partner with K–12 schools in undertaking their writing assessment, instructors implicitly tackled some structural inequities in schools.

The second of Sleeter's dimensions is developing relationships of reciprocity with students, families, and communities. As a researcher, I worked with a spirit of reciprocity, prioritizing the questions of the participants in the project, facilitating work that would allow them to answer those questions for their own programmatic needs, encouraging them to share their work at a national professional conference (a first for all of the instructors), and supporting them in sharing the results with peer institutions through *Tribal College Journal*, even though doing so would not "count" in my own tenure case, as *TCJ* no longer does peer-reviewed articles. This chapter comprises the first "taking away" of data from the research site, and I hope that I have brought to the site a comparable amount of resources, time, energy, and opportunity for the participants to feel that the project was reciprocal in nature, but that is a judgment for the Standing Rock Community to make.

The third dimension is to teach to high academic expectations by building on students' culture, language, experience, and identity. The results of the study show that there was some movement toward higher expectations, as seen in the parts of the scoring discussions led by Harrison and in the group discussion around Jill's transformation from a teacher who did not provide opportunities for her students to practice writing to one who did so.

The fourth and final dimension is to create and teach an inclusive curriculum that integrates marginalized perspectives and explicitly addresses issues of inequity and power (Sleeter, 2014). This dimension was somewhat addressed in this study. The students of the educators who were involved in this project benefited in that there was an increase in achievement as measured by an assessment of impromptu essays written at the beginnings and endings of each of four semesters and that scores improved as more culturally relevant prompts and pedagogical practices were used. Educator discourse also reflected culturally relevant and responsive themes, which may have had an indirect effect on pedagogy. However,

additional research would be needed to determine what this effect might be. There was little work on culturally sustaining pedagogy.

If we return to Lyons' notion of rhetorical sovereignty, this project falls far short of the robust picture he paints of what this could be. Lyons states, "Sovereignty is the guiding story in our pursuit of self-determination, the general strategy by which we aim to best recover our losses from the ravages of colonization—our lands, our languages, our cultures, our self-respect" (2000, p. 449). Standing Rock tribal members had control over whether this research project could even take place by putting their own Institutional Review Board in place, and tribal member Chad influenced how the writing assessment was done by arguing for higher standards in scoring and drafting the only culturally relevant prompts used, but as only one person in a group of 12 or so (numbers of participants varied over the two years), perhaps his exercise of sovereignty would have been greater had there been more members of his Native Nation participating in the writing assessment. As the outsider in this project, I made efforts to read about the community, hang out in the community, read the works of Native scholars and even took two courses in Dakota language during the project, reflecting on my own position and interrogating my assumptions, but even "deep hanging out," Sandy Grande's indigenous version of Gallagher's "being there," is not enough when it comes to sovereignty in writing assessment. This is only a partial picture of writing assessment as social justice in this particular cultural context.

In the end, how can the findings of this study influence future work with writing assessments at tribal colleges? First, state institutions and funding agencies that serve indigenous populations should avoid requiring tests that serve as barriers to student success. At the institutional level, it is important that the demographics of the teaching force reflect the student body. Although the white educators in this study were knowledgeable and caring, with a great deal of experience with and dedication to teaching Native students, there was a clear difference between their discourse and the Native instructor's discourse (though he may not be representative of all Native educators' discourse), and because the Native instructor was a minority in the group, his voice may not have had the same weight had the group included more Native educators. Another step that could be taken is to implement alternative means of evaluation, such as the "Indigenous Framework for Evaluation" developed in Canada (LaFrance & Nichols, 2010), which synthesizes indigenous ways of knowing with Western evaluation practice. Researchers can and should take a more critical approach to the theories that undergird their studies, recognizing that even culturally responsive, relevant, and sustaining pedagogies may "retain the deep structures of Western thought" (Grande, 2004). The roots of settler colonization run deep

and future work on writing assessment professional development should consider using social justice as a framework for instruction and assessment as a step toward rhetorical sovereignty and decolonization.

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## APPENDIX

Table 10.5. All pre/post testing writing prompts

Number	Prompt
1	The Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) requires all school libraries receiving certain federal funds to install and use blocking software to prevent students from viewing material considered "harmful to minors." However, some studies conclude that blocking software in schools damages educational opportunities for students, both by blocking access to web pages that are directly related to the state-mandated curriculums and by restricting broader inquiries of both students and teachers. In your view, should the schools block access to certain Internet websites?
2	Educators debate extending high school to five years because of increasing demands on students from employers and colleges to participate in extracurricular activities and community service in addition to having high grades. Some educators support extending high school to five years because they think students need more time to achieve all that is expected of them. Other educators do not support extending high school to five years because they think students would lose interest in school and attendance would drop in the fifth year. In your opinion, should high school be extended to five years?
3	Some high school administrators debate whether to begin the school day several hours later in the morning, even though this would result in a later end to the school day. Some administrators support this schedule change because they think most teenagers are more alert later in the morning. Other administrators do not support this change because they think it would limit students' opportunities to work or participate in extracurricular activities after school. In your opinion, should high schools begin the school day several hours later in the morning?
4	While some schools offer art and music courses to their students, these courses are not always mandatory. Some teachers, students, and parents think that schools should emphasize traditional academic subjects like math and science, as those skills will help the students more in the future when they join the workforce. Other feel that requiring all students to take classes in music or the visual arts would teach equally valuable skills that the students may not learn otherwise, and would also help them do better in traditional academic subject areas. In your opinion, should art or music classes be mandatory for all high school students?
5	People define "Native American" in many different ways. Some people believe that being Native American means going to pow-wows, doing beadwork, speaking the language, etc. Others believe that being Native American does not necessarily rely on traditional activities like those above. In your opinion, how would you define what a Native American is and what being Native American means today?

<p><b>6</b></p>	<p>In December 2009 the government announced having reached a settlement in the <i>Cobell v. Salazar</i> class-action trust. The \$3.4 billion was placed in a bank and \$1.4 billion will go to individuals, mostly in the form of checks ranging from \$500 to \$1,500.</p> <p>Prompt: Some say that there are negative social effects of the disbursement of these checks, such as a sense of entitlement or large numbers of people quitting their jobs or leaving school. Others believe that the entitlement money has a positive effect on society, improving the economic status of individuals and the larger community. What is your stance on the settlement money? Support your argument with examples.</p>
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