



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
2013 Volume II: Interpreting Texts, Making Meaning: Starting Small

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## **Seasonal Dine/Navajo Poetry: Interpreting the Seasons through Dine/Navajo Culture**

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### **Introduction**

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I am interested in teaching my students about our Dine/Navajo culture using poetry and language as a bridge to help create a cultural connection for my students. I plan to expose my students to both the Dine and English language. I would encourage my students to translation words and phrases in the Dine language to the English translation. I will provide a selection of seasonal poetry for my students to engage and learn about their Dine culture. My focus would be to teach my students about our Dine/Navajo culture by analyzing the daily activities of the Dine people. Students will gain the understanding and knowledge of the traditional ways of living for our Dine people.

Here is a quote taken from the book titled *The Unbreakable Code* by Sara Hunter, "He wasn't as scared of going to a new place any more. His grandfather had taught him who he was and what he would always have with him. He was the grandson of a Navajo code talker and he had a language that had once helped saved his country." (Hunter, 26) This statement resonates with me because I understand the importance and value of our Dine language. I understand the importance of our cultural heritage as Dine people. I want to provide the same opportunity for my students to be cognizant of their Dine language, culture, and knowledge of key historical event such the Long Walk and Navajo Code Talkers' in our Dine culture. I want my student to see the value in how our Dine relatives lived the traditional way of life.

### **Overview**

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My goal is to cultivate the Dine language and culture with my students by focusing on poetry written in English and the Dine language. The poetry will provide a visual picture of the Dine traditional way of life through each celestial season. In order for my students to reach this goal of understanding, I want my students to be knowledgeable about their Dine culture, who they are as young Dine men and ladies as they learn to state their clans, and focusing on the importance of the Dine traditional way of life.

## Context

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I work in the department of Exceptional Student Service, otherwise known as special education. I am a teacher, case manager, and facilitator to both my students and parents. I teach in the middle school setting grades sixth thru eighth on the Dine/Navajo Nation in the Window Rock Unified School District. The population of my school and district is at least 98% Navajo students with the 2% for non-Dine/Navajo students. Our middle school enrolls over 500 students each year with 65 of students having an identified exceptionality or disability at my middle school.

I teach students who have a range of exceptionalities such as learning disabilities, autism, emotional disabilities, intellectual disabilities, other health impairments, speech-language impairment, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Each student holds a current Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that states the academic, learning style, language, and behavioral strengths and target areas of each of my students in reading, writing, and math. Each IEP provides supports through accommodations and modifications to address the learning modalities and learning goals of each student through the process of an IEP team meeting, where student, parent, teachers, administrators, and support staff are present for the benefit of the student.

## Rationale

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My goal is to cultivate the cultural awareness of my Dine students by focusing on the importance of the traditional way of life—to bring my students to understand their Dine culture by integrating poetry that depicts the lifestyle of the Dine people as they are connected to land, seasons, and the natural world. Additionally, my goal is to integrate speaking, listening, and reading skill-sets for students to develop their Navajo oral language skills by using Poetry written in English and Navajo. Another goal is to provide a platform for students to say key words and phrases in the English and Navajo languages. My goal is to have my students read poems such as "Breakfast", "The Hogan", or "The Cornfield" in English and Navajo, which reinforce the content taught in Navajo Language class.

My unit in no way replaces the Navajo language class content or standards; but is a supplement to the Navajo language class by creating a small group setting in the special education classroom to teach my students the Dine/Navajo cultural aspects through literature and poetry. To provide prior knowledge to my students that will allow them the opportunity to utilize the oral language of our Dine culture in their Navajo language class.

These goals derive from the challenges my students might experience while attending their Navajo language class—the challenge of not knowing enough about their Dine culture, the limited use of their Dine language because English is their first language, and the possible lack of a strong cultural background from home. By incorporating the use of the historical literature and seasonal poetry of our Dine people, I will help to plant the seed of knowledge for each of my students. The literature and poems that are written in both the Dine language and English will aid in the reinforcement of oral language, which is the foundation of the Dine culture. The challenge may appear in the form of not knowing the traditional Navajo way of life, in which families participate in activities of caring for livestock such as sheep, horses, and cows, tending the cornfield, preparing wool for weaving, and eating in the central part of the Hogan. I want to provide my students with

exceptionalities the opportunity to understand their own Navajo culture. Many of my students are provided a class schedule that includes social studies and science in the general education classroom while they may receive language arts (reading and writing) and math class with their case manager or ESS teacher for one class period. For the remainder of their schedule they are given an elective class and this can range from Physical Education, Music, Technology, Industrial Arts (wood shop), or Navajo Language.

When my students are enrolled in a Navajo Language class they enjoy the comforts of listening to the Dine language, as words are spoken by their teacher, who is a fluent Dine language speaker. My students are given a variety of activities in the Navajo language classroom that may be challenging to them. The activities may include reading basic Dine language sight words, matching Dine word with a picture, and being given short stories written in Dine from which they translate the words and sentences using a Navajo dictionary. In addition, students who know they struggle with reading will be reluctant to read aloud in class. The Navajo language teacher may provide options for my students to read with a peer or have a peer read the story to them. The teacher supports students with exceptionality by providing choices to work with a partner or small group. I know there are other opportunities for my students to participate and speak the Dine language at school when given the supports in small classroom settings. But there is also a window of opportunity to teach my students their Dine language and culture through the alternative medium of literature and poetry presented in small chunks. Integrating literature and poetry allows for the students to interact with the story, the history, and the language in smaller chunks, and that allows the student to take ownership of their learning about their Dine culture.

Our Dine/Navajo Nation adopts the same form of government as the federal government but at a tribal level. As Dine/Navajo people we elect an executive leader to lead our Dine/Navajo Nation through the politics of working with the state and federal laws and mandates and to find a common ground as our Dine/Navajo Nation is a sovereign nation.

Our Dine/Navajo history has shown over the years the evidence of many strong and progressive leaders of our nation, leaders who have been called chief, leader, chairman, and president. Our leaders and presidents were elected either by a simple voting by hand or elected by their clan or in an official electoral process. Our Dine/Navajo leaders provided a direction of sustainability, resiliency, and progressiveness as they led our nation into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. Two former Dine/Navajo Nation leaders are at the forefront of moving our Dine/Navajo Nation forward to balance both our traditional way of life as we as valued our culture and to the balance of western society's culture. They are former presidents of Dine/Navajo Nation, Peterson Zah and Peter MacDonald. I will confine my citations, however, to the published position statements of Peterson Zah.

Peterson Zah, former Navajo Nation Chairman/President, emphasizes the importance of culture to our Dine youth: "my hope is that the young Navajo people today will not abandon the value of helping and will continue to honor our traditions." (Zah, xi) This simple statement encompasses the importance of tradition and valuing our Dine/Navajo culture. Peterson Zah states his "hope" that the Dine youth will continue to help one another as a community and family. Zah's use of "young...people today..." makes me think that I am the "youth" of my generation; and that I am helping my community, my school, and my Dine/Navajo children. Then he continues to say, as I interpret his words, that young people today need to be urged not to abandon our traditions because they are of value to us as a nation and to your self-identity as a Dine/Navajo. (Zah, xi) These words are powerful to me as an educator, as I plan and prepare this curriculum unit to help my Dine/Navajo youth to sustain our cultural values and to stay true to our traditions. It is my focus for this curriculum unit to sustain the cultural authenticity for the students I teach.

To begin the journey to self-identity, we as Dine/Navajo people will identify ourselves through a clanship system called Ke. Our Dine/Navajo clan system helps us to identify self in relation to other Dine/Navajo relatives. Our clan system is valued because it tells us who we are and the origin of our family. Even Peterson Zah expresses this kind of acknowledgment in his book: "I would like to like to express my gratitude to the people of my clans." (Zah xi) Zah gives tribute to his mother clans to identify himself to other Native American tribes and to Dine/Navajo relatives. It is his way of saying this is who I am; these are my clans; I know you are related to me; I know you are my relative even though we are not of the same blood line. This creates the sense of family and the teaching that was passed down from our Dine/Navajo ancestors. This is the environment that I would like my students to understand in order to connect with their Dine/Navajo culture. I want my students to understand that knowing your clans is important and is the very essence of their self-identity as a Dine/Navajo youth.

Dine/Navajo culture is a matrilineal society, meaning that the children carry on lineage of the female side through the clans and teachings. Peterson Zah pays tribute to his mother by saying, "My mother was an extraordinary teacher, weaver, and carrier of tradition. She taught me to be caring, generous, and appreciative of all that life has to offer." (Zah, xii) I connected to his statement about his mother because that describes me, LeAndrea James, I am a teacher, an educator, and mother who will carry the traditions for younger generations to be appreciative of. I am next in line to teach, to weave, to carry on the traditions of my Dine/Navajo culture. I was given knowledge through stories and personal experiences of my cultural heritage. I want my curriculum unit to focus on the goals of self-identify and culture through Navajo poetry that is written in English and Navajo.

Peterson Zah highlights that the Dine/Navajo lifestyle is changing; "Navajo culture is not static. It's changing - it's going to continue to change." (Zah, 144) This is true for many of our youth and young adults. They are attracted to the advantages of the "modern conveniences" of urban culture off the Dine/Navajo reservation and lose track of being grounded, of learning the traditions while living a Dine/Navajo lifestyle on the reservation. Zah acknowledges the progress afforded by the modern world, as many Dine/Navajo young people are encouraged to go out and get an education; but he also points out that as a nation we should be encouraged to look for more knowledge about our culture. As he states, what we "should be saying is to get your local Navajo cultural education." (Ibid.) Navajo cultural education would include Navajo teachings, values, religion, lifestyle, and the composition of the Dine/Navajo culture. (Ibid.). The statements that Zah shares about knowing our Dine/Navajo culture is my second focus as I teach and instill in my students their self-identity: "Who am I? What is my language and culture?"

Peterson Zah shares that while he was at ASU (Arizona State University) he would listen to many Navajo young adults wanting to attend college, but that they would first and foremost introduce themselves with their clan: "They're very proud of saying that. You could have never heard that thirty years ago. Navajo youngsters wouldn't tell you that - they wouldn't know." Then he explains that the educational system at that time was trying to take the "Navajo-ness" out of the Navajo people. But now that these attitudes have changed, "the Navajo Nation is making great progress. If we keep that up for the next ten, twenty, thirty years, we're going to really have a nation unto itself." I want to be a part of the next ten, twenty, thirty years as I continue to teach my Dine/Navajo children how to sustain their own self-identity through the use of their clans and increasing their knowledge of the Navajo language as used through poetry.

## Strategies

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The strategies I would implement in the classroom would include students' daily use of the oral language, peer to peer dialogue, analyzing Navajo and English terms during the lessons included in the unit.

Translation and Interpretation of the selected poems connected with autumn, winter, spring, and summer. Work with the poems "Breakfast," "Herding Sheep," "Snow," "Hauling Water," "The Sheep," "Parents," "New Life with Spring." Then tie in the history of the Navajo culture by including in October the Long Walk and in December the Navajo Code Talkers.

At the end of my unit, I would want my students to feel a sense of connectedness to their Navajo self-identity. I want my students to be able to participate in their Navajo language class by reading a few words and short sentences with a peer or to their Navajo language teacher.

## Classroom Activities

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### Lesson 1 - Season: Autumn

Objectives:

1. I will read the English version of the poem entitled "Breakfast" with my student partner.
2. I will translate the English words to Navajo.
3. I will read the poem "Breakfast" in English and Navajo with my partner and 2 other classmates.
4. I will write a paragraph about how traditional Navajo people used to eat breakfast.
5. I will draw and write a paragraph about how Navajo people eat breakfast today.

Procedures:

1. I will *read* the English version of the first stanza of the poem entitled "Breakfast" with my partner.
2. I will *work with my partner to translate the meaning* of the English words to Navajo *by asking my partner a question* about what he/she "thinks" the word will translate to; then write down our answers.
3. Partner 1 line: "Do you know the Navajo translation of this word, *student name*?"

*[Wait for your partner to respond]*

Partner 2 line: "Student Name, What do you think this word will translate to in Navajo?"

*[Wait for your partner to respond]*

\*Student Activity – Students interact with each other and utilize the question format. Students will have their sheet with the given words in English. Complete the activity.

\*Teacher Activity – Teacher facilitates and encourages students to speak to one another. Teacher refers student to the English interpretation of the poem if students are struggling.

1. I will say key words and phrases in English and translate to Navajo.
2. I will read the poem "Breakfast" in English and Navajo to my partner.
3. I will write a paragraph in my booklet to explain how traditional Navajo people ate breakfast.
4. I will write a paragraph in my booklet to explain how Navajo people eat breakfast today using the poem and the picture.
5. This will lend to discussion amongst students about the differences in our Navajo culture from traditional to modern.

Brief Explanation: The teacher should plan for three lessons during the course of the school year because the lessons are organized by the seasons of autumn, winter, and spring. Summer is optional for the teacher. The main purpose for the lessons is to have students increase the use of their native language, Navajo, through the use of poetry written in both English and Navajo. In addition, the focus for each lesson will be for students to understand the activities of the Navajo people that occur during the given season. The identified poems are short in length and written in English and Navajo. The English and Navajo words are organized side by side, which will assist the students with translation of the poems in both languages.

### **Season 1 : Autumn Poems**

Duration: 3 to 4 days

Objectives:

1. The students will review how poetry is organized.
  - a. This would include knowing poetry in terms of lines, stanzas, free verse and rhyme, as well as short and long poems.
2. The students will read the following poetry titles in English and Navajo: "The Hogan," "The Cornfield," "My Mother, My Father," "The Lambs," "The Trading Post," "Autumn," and poems on weaving.
3. The students will read in English and Navajo the identified poems individually and with a partner.
4. The students will create a booklet for their knowledge of key words in Navajo that translate to English for Navajo vocabulary development.
5. The students will write a paragraph about each poem to understand the activities that traditionally occurred among Navajo people during the autumn season.

Pre - Assessments:

1. Prior to each poem, students will be given a list of Navajo words to translate to English. This will help the teacher to identify students who are developing a command of the Navajo language through the identified vocabulary words.
2. Teacher will prepare questions about the activities that occur during autumn season. Sample question: "What was the purpose of a Trading Post for Navajo people?"
3. Teacher will have students individually read the poem in English and Navajo to ensure their grasp of the fluency of the text.

#### Post-Assessments:

1. Teacher will assess the students' knowledge of Navajo vocabulary words.
2. Teacher will provide students with a written assessment to explain the purpose of the Trading Post in order to gauge the students' understanding.
3. Teacher will assess reading fluency in English and Navajo by individually listening to students reading to their partners and students reading to the teacher.

#### Classroom Procedures for Teacher:

1. Teacher will begin with the introduction of how poetry is formatted. The focus would be on the following: poetry vs. a story, lines, stanzas, free verse, rhyming, and other types of poetry, poems can tell a story, and poems can be written in different languages.
2. Teacher will teach in the following order: "Autumn," "My Mother, My Father," "The Hogan," "The Cornfield," "The Lambs," "The Trading Post" and "Weaving."
3. Teacher will prepare a list of key Navajo words and target questions prior to the introduction of each poem.
4. Teacher will implement both pre and post assessments for each poem.

#### Poem 1, entitled "Autumn," pp. 61-63 from book entitled *Little Herder in Autumn* by Ann Clark:

1. Key Navajo words from poems: 'aak'eed, ch'il, naayizi, lahgoo, nizhoni, ya'at'eeh, shima, dzil deeya, ch'iiyaan, azee, 'aghaa', shizhe'e, neeshch'ii, nayiilaah, t'aa sahi, chiditsoh,
2. Teacher would have the words written in Navajo using the Navajo font so that students will see and read the correct annotation for each letter.
3. Teacher will read the Navajo words to the students and they will write the correct English translation for each word.
4. Teacher will provide a copy of "Autumn" and ask the following questions:
  - a. Prior Knowledge questions: "What do you know about the season autumn, which is sometimes called fall? What happens during this season?" Student will create a list of activities or changes that happen during autumn.



- b. The poem will be read in English first so students will have the mind set of what autumn looks like based on the poem. Question for students: Name three main activities that the Navajo people engage in during autumn. Student should list the following: harvesting of plants, gathering of plants for dyes, foods, and medicine, and picking pinions in the mountains.
- c. Both teacher and student will re-read the poem for clarity of the content.
- d. Teacher will have students read the poem three times in English with a partner, independently, and in individual practice with teacher.
- e. Next, teacher will slowly read each stanza from the poem "Autumn" in Navajo—
- f. and assist students with the translation from Navajo to English.
- g. Teacher will spend some time with students practicing the pronunciation of each word.
- h. Students will eventually read the stanza / poem on their own and with a partner in the Navajo language.
- i. Students will compare and contrast the traditional and modern life of Navajo people as the students perceive it for themselves. Teacher will lead discussion for students to engage in and talk openly about the differences and similarities they see among traditional Navajo peoples and within their own families.

Closure:

Students will reflect and write about their progress from the beginning of the lesson to the end. Students can reflect on how they did or did not know the key words, but realize that now they know all the words in Navajo. Students can reflect on their reading practice in English and Navajo. Student will reflect on their knowledge gained about the activities that occur in the Navajo culture. Students will write what they have learned about the activities that occur during the autumn.

## Standards

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For the unit, I will be incorporating both Dine Culture standards and Common Core Standards for English Language Arts. The selections of literature to be utilized for the unit are written in both Dine language and English. For that purpose both Dine language and Common Core standards will be incorporated.

A note for teachers who do not speak or read the Dine language: please know that the Common Core standards will apply to the English version of the assigned books.

On the Navajo Nation reservation, we have a Department of Dine Education located in Window Rock, AZ. The purpose of the Department of Dine Education is to develop Dine language standards for schools on the Navajo reservation. The Dine standards are designed to incorporate Dine Oral Language, Dine Culture, Dine History, Dine Government, and Dine Character Building. The Dine Content Standards are organized from K-3, 4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> grades. The Dine Content Standards are taught by a certified Navajo language teacher who is fluent in both Dine (Navajo) language and English.



The following Dine Standards will be addressed during the teaching of the unit for grades seventh and eighth: Dine Culture, Dine Language, and Dine History. The purpose of the Dine culture standards is to have Dine students develop, implement, and understand the Dine way of Life.

My unit will focus on the three Dine Standards and three concepts for Dine Culture, Language, and History. These standards will be emphasized for the duration of the unit.

#### 7th-8th Diné Culture Standards

Standard - I will develop an understanding of the Dine way of Life.

Concept 3 - I will implement and recognize the Dine Lifestyle.

#### 7th-8th Oral Diné Language Standards

Standard - Utilizing the Navajo language and culture, I will listen, communicate, observe, and understand appropriately.

Concept 1 - I will listen and understand the basic Dine Language.

#### 7th-8th Diné History Standards

Standard - I will understand historical/factual events, people, and symbols that influence my family.

Concept 1 - I will present how Dine people and events have influenced the development of Dine communities and culture to the present day.

In addition, Arizona Common Core will focus on the meaning of words in English and Dine, which is part of the English Language Arts standards. Students will apply the standard of reading a poem and then analyzing the central idea of the text. Below are the standards:

#### English Language Arts - Craft and Structure

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama. **(7.RL.4)**

Analyze how a drama or poem's form or structure (e.g., soliloquy, sonnet) contributes to its meaning. **(7.RL.5)**

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text. **(7.RL.2)**

## Annotated Bibliography

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The book was helpful to cement the importance of youth embracing their culture.

2. MacDonald, Peter, and Ted Schwarz. *The last warrior: Peter MacDonald and the Navajo Nation*. New York: Orion Books, 1993.

The book was helpful to highlight the importance of Navajo culture.

3. McCarty, T. L., and Fred Bia. *A place to be Navajo: Rough Rock and the struggle for self-determination in indigenous schooling*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002. Print.

The book explained the implication of maintaining the Dine language among the Navajo people.

4. Yazzie, Evangeline, and Irving Toddy. *Dza?ni? ya?zhi? naazbaa ?= Little Woman Warrior Who Came Home : a story of the Navajo Long Walk*. Flagstaff, Ariz.: Salina Bookshelf, 2005.

A young Dine girl experiences the Navajo Long Walk.

5. Clark, Ann Nolan, and Hoke Denetsosie. *Little herder in spring*. English ed. Washington: Education Division, U.S. Office of Indian Affairs, 1940.

The book contains poems about spring as the season relates to Dine people and their way of life. The book is written in English and Dine language.

6. Clark, Ann Nolan, and Hoke Denetsosie. *Little herder in winter*. Washington, D.C.?: Division of Education, Bureau of Indian Affairs, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1969.

The book contains poems about winter as the season relates to Dine people and their way of life. The book is written in English and Dine language.

7. Clark, Ann Nolan, and Hoke Denetsosie. *Little herder in autumn*. Washington, D.C.?: Division of Education, Bureau of Indian Affairs, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1970.

The book contains poems about Autumn as the season relates to Dine people and their way of life. The book is written in English and Dine language.

8. Hunter, Sara Hoagland, and Julia Miner. *The unbreakable code*. Flagstaff, AZ: Northland Pub., 1996.

A grandfather tells the story to his grandson about the Navajo Code Talkers.

## Appendices

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