Traditional Arts Knowledge, Traditional Ecological Lore: The Intersection of Art Education and Environmental Education

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Teaching about Native artworks as part of school arts curriculum can serve to pass on traditional ecological knowledge while also contextualizing colonialism’s influence on traditional and contemporary Native arts practices. This article explores how schools can actively engage in community arts partnerships with American Indians who have traditional cultural knowledge and can construct standards-based multidisciplinary curricula true to both art and science disciplines. An example from my recent study of a culturally relevant arts program highlights the work in classrooms of a Native basketmaker who did just that.

Tobacco Basket
Michelle L. Stevens (2003)

Gathering gray willow
Along flooded Putah Creek,
Swallows dart and turn
As we women softly
Talk, bend, cut willow.
Voices sing through willow
Into my hands,
Teaching me to weave
A tobacco basket.
This basket
Focusing my vision
And my Way, with every
Weave a prayer.
This basket a nest
Holding my blessings.
My blood tipped breast
Feathers, cradling sweet
Eggs, sweet dreams.

Restoration ecologist Michelle L. Stevens (2003) describes in verse the complex relationship Indigenous gatherers’ have with a creek-side ecosystem near Davis, California. Her poem “Tobacco Basket” alludes to an annual rainy-season ritual in which raw materials are harvested in preparation for weaving vessels to hold ceremonial tobacco. A conduit of sorts for making public the traditional cultural knowledge of a band...

1Traditional cultural knowledge is “a cumulative body of knowledge, practices, and belief, evolving by adaptive process and handed down through generations by cultural transmission” (Berkes, 1998, p. 1).
of California Indians, Stevens’ contribution to the journal *Ethnobotany Research and Application* (ERA) (2003) uses literary form to convey meaning. In doing so, the researcher metaphorically explores the “Way” of Native basketmaking. More specifically, she considers the qualities of lived experience in the company of Indian women cutting willow, the spiritual notions of these plants viscerally guiding the basketmaker’s hands throughout the weaving process, and the developing basket embodying a way in which to focus on creation itself.²

As a former art teacher in P-12 schools with large Native populations, I have long aligned myself with others in our field who are interested in countering “a vicious cycle, whereby, what is taught in art education classrooms perpetuates constructed images of Native Americans and constructed images of Native peoples” (Eldridge, 2006, p. 2). Exploring why Native peoples still gather raw materials for basketmaking is one way to question the accuracy of popular notions of environments being inextricably connected to American Indian societies. Oversimplified and clichéd conceptions about American Indians, their art, and their aesthetic and ecological cultures can be reframed in a more accurate manner for our students by asking them to critically examine contemporary Native North American cultures. This is to say young people can answer for themselves whether these assumptions are romanticized stereotypes, wherein “constructions of Indians have superseded Indian peoples’ realities” (Eldridge, 2006, p. 2). Making available student-friendly research that recognizes mutually beneficial associations between Indigenous societies and local ecosystems, the Stevens (2003) poem for example, can bridge deeper understanding of both Native peoples’ use of natural resources for art making and help contextualize their complex artistic histories. This obvious intersection of science learning and arts learning presents teaching opportunities in P-12 classrooms, where questions about the interactive nature of a society’s ecological surroundings and its art and visual culture await investigation.

Recognizing the social reconstructivist potential and broad scope of art and visual culture education, I argue for encouraging art teachers to develop classroom scenarios in which students learn how to access the traditional cultural knowledge of those who live in their community, state, and/or region. As young people study the artistic heritage of a particular American Indian tribe—including “the social worlds of visual imagery as they are constitutive of attitudes, beliefs and values,” (Duncum, 2001, p. 107) they should be encouraged to “[s]eek out voices of Indian people: in print, video, or in person … and treat them as experts” (Eldridge, 2006, p. 2). In doing so, children and adolescents can begin to conceptualize why, for millennia, Indigenous North American cultures and the habitats in which they live have been closely associated. Opportunities thus arise for art students to think scientifi-
cally about ecological stewardship—green issues such as sustainable land use, conservation, recycling, slowing global climate change, and others that may in turn lead to greater civic engagement on their part. In short, I propose moving toward an inquiry-based type of multidisciplinary art and visual culture education.

My overarching goal for this article is to lay out new conceptualizations and research directions for understanding the relation of culture and learning in art and science education. I offer a theoretical model and rationale why urban, suburban, and rural students in U.S. schools—including but not limited to American Indians—may benefit from studying traditional Indigenous cultural knowledge. This entails multidisciplinary exploration of the ways of Native artmaking, the socioscientific literature of environmental stewardship, and scenarios of the two being intrinsically linked in Native societies. These include activities that engage local cultural practitioners, American Indian artist/elders for instance, inviting them to visit schools and explain the workings of contemporary Indigenous cultures. Visible representations of a living culture can move students beyond stereotypes of what Bird (1988) terms the “constructed Indian” (cited in Eldridge, 2006, p. 1), oversimplifications perpetuated by mass media and popular culture that “can lend substance to a misconception that children often bring to art classrooms, that ‘real Indians’ are all dead” (Eldrige, 2006, p. 2).

Cultural practitioners are tribal experts. These are gatekeepers whose insights into plants, people, and maintaining ecological balance guide a society's use of natural resources for a variety of purposes, including traditional artistic practices. The breadth of information tribal experts have at their disposal can be described as local knowledge. Teaching elementary-, middle-, and high school students rudimentary research methods over time will fill their intellectual toolkits, equipping these young people to pose significant questions about a local culture's traditional knowledge base and choose the type of inquiry best suited to finding answers. For example, asking whether there is a symbiotic relationship between Indigenous peoples and their local ecosystems, and if ecologically-responsible resource management is part of traditional arts practices, affords students a chance to explore information sources like books, video, and the Internet, but also opportunities to interview Native artists, elders, and other tribal experts.

Teacher practices that thoughtfully scaffold student inquiry and meaning making in science, social science, and the arts, therefore, can provide pathways to better understanding what Goodman (1978) describes as different “ways of Worldmaking.” This is to say in classroom contexts where traditional knowledge of local ecology and traditional knowledge of artistic production are taught, Geahigan recognizes “[t]he symbol systems of art, like those of science, are used in constructing
different versions of the world, and none of these systems can be reduced to another” (Efland, 2002, p. 170). By connecting and not conflating the two disciplines, they remain equally valid sources of knowledge that potentially yield opportunities for students to better understand the role of science in societies and the role of the arts in societies.

Finally, this article addresses an actual classroom scenario in which a Native artist makes connections between the natural world in which she lives and the raw materials harvested for the traditional baskets she was teaching children to make. To do so I draw from recent research in a California school district with a large Native population and from my investigation of an arts initiative that invited American Indian artists into the classrooms of two schools in this rural community.

**Conceptualizations of Traditional Cultural Knowledge**

**Why tap Indigenous cultural knowledge?**

According to one Native scholar, public schools that serve American Indians and Alaska Natives “teach almost nothing about the Native cultures, languages, values, religions, music, and art that continue to survive in this country in spite of the American education system” (Charleston, 1994, p. 22). Reform efforts afoot in Indian education therefore call for inclusion of traditional cultural learning in all schools that serve Native students (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997). Arguing that Eurocentric curriculum ignores the complexity of the education worlds of American Indian children who continue to struggle for success in Western-model schools (Charleston, 1994; Demmert, 2001; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997), Native-initiated research suggests Indians want a voice in curriculum construction.

Recent studies posit Native parents and local educators jointly identified a need for traditional arts and crafts learning when constructing bicultural curriculum for schools in Arizona and upstate New York (Agbo, 2001; McCarty, 2002). Roughly 15 years earlier, Stuhr’s (1987) research on acculturation’s influence on the arts practices of Wisconsin Natives found that these Indian artists believed “that their cultural position could be strengthened in the communities, if they were allowed to introduce the study of their art/craft forms into the public schools…. [The] artists are not asking for the exclusion of the American Anglo and Western European perspectives, but for the inclusion and consideration of [American Indian] values and traditions in the art curriculums” (Stuhr, 1987, p. 33).

**What can be included in traditional cultural knowledge?**

For millennia, Indigenous peoples have passed on traditional cultural knowledge about their respective worlds. Those worlds included complex interactions with natural environments and a resultant “cumulative body of knowledge, practices, and belief, evolving by adaptive
process and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings [including humans] with one another and with their environment” (Berkes, 1998, p. 1). Local traditional ecological knowledge, although often neglected in representations of Western academic knowledge, may be “key to successful biodiversity conservation as well as appropriate development programs.” This approach thus assumes local people need not be regarded “as a menace to biodiversity” but instead as collaborators in efforts to protect wild resources (Quansah, 2004, p. 89). Traditional ecological knowledge can be seen as one facet of traditional cultural knowledge, one this article suggests is important to attend to.

In short, harnessing the environmental knowledge systems of local communities’ plant/animal interactions and awareness of and reliance on biological diversity and conservation has relevance in undertaking ecological restoration as a means for conserving cultural diversity while improving community well being (Quansah, 2004). Viewing ecosystems as biocultural systems, in which Native peoples and the environment are linked together in complex relationships, suggests the identity and survival of Indigenous societies is rooted in local ecology. But traditional ecological knowledge, like the languages and cultural practices of Indigenous societies, has been continually eroded since first contact with non-Native colonizers and centuries of ensuing loss of cultural diversity.

These Indigenous “cultures of habitat” (Nabhan, 1997) or societies of “ecosystem peoples” (Dasmann, 1964) still identify with and tap the resources of their local ecology, albeit to a lesser degree postcontact. Twenty-first century California Indian fishers understand what loss of habitat has meant for salmon reproduction and the subsequent effect this ecological change has had on the shrinking yields of their annual fishing efforts: fewer and fewer fish are now traveling downstream after spawning. Or in Minnesota, when making neotraditional art forms from raw material such as birch bark, Anishinabe artisans still know that early summer, when the sap is rising, is the best time to harvest unblemished bark and also the safest way to harvest this natural resource without leaving the tree susceptible to disease (Krogstad, 2006).

My research related to the artistic practices of Indigenous North Americans (Bequette, 2005; 2006) leads me to posit that the Native women who cut gray oak for basketmaking purposes (Stevens, 2003) represent a culture of habitat in that they possess two types of traditional cultural knowledge. The first, a form of traditional ecological knowledge, can be described as highly nuanced information about the ecosystem in which the requisite raw materials for basketmaking grow, including the best time of year to collect willow branches and the perils involved in gathering resources in the 21st century; e.g., issues of pollution.
and access. The second type of knowledge includes a body of cultural information of a more artistic and aesthetic nature that would help the women contextualize why, how, and for what purpose a tobacco basket should be made. In short, this is knowledge of the complex ways of life of Indigenous societies both precontact and as a result of European conquest—languages, values, religions, music, art, and more. McFee (1986, 1995) writes about how art education programs that embrace a multicultural stance can aid in the transmission of this multifaceted body of traditional cultural information and help insure ongoing identity development and cultural continuance for children from non-Western populations.

Cultures of habitat differ significantly from “cosmopolitan societies” (Dasmann, 1964) whose limited interaction with natural worlds and understanding of local environments often invite disproportionate use of resources that in turn force living outside the limits of sustainability. Cosmopolitan societies perhaps could learn much from studying the traditional ecological knowledge of cultures of habitat.

These examples help inform one focus of my current inquiry in Native communities: gauging the ways in which cultural practitioners, specifically artist elders, understand their local ecosystem; how access to plants and other raw materials needed for neo-traditional or pan-Indian artistic practices has changed since contact; and how art forms once made the “old way” have evolved. In arguing that humans and environments are connected, and specifically that the cultural identity and survival of American Indian societies are often still embedded in local ecology, ideas of teaching about Native artworks as part of school arts curriculum take on added significance. Art education becomes a means of passing on traditional ecological knowledge while also contextualizing acculturation’s influence on traditional and contemporary Native arts practices.

Data from a study of two schools in which California Indian artists taught mostly about traditional artistic knowledge and, to a lesser degree, about local ecological knowledge (Bequette, 2006) support my premise that the primary work of effective schools should be to respect and form partnerships with local communities to frame the goals of education and roles and responsibilities of those involved in supporting students in reaching these goals (Villegas, 2006). In short, I articulate the need for a culture of school-community relations that has as its purpose developing meaningful educational experiences in order to build students’ confidence, sense of belonging, and potential to contribute to their community and society (Bates, 1997; Jacobs, 2003; NWREL, 2002). One way to respect and collaborate with Native communities is to tap their traditional knowledge systems.
I envision P-12 art teachers using the environment as a context for nurturing student conversations with and about contemporary American Indian artists. Questions about traditional cultural knowledge and its role in shaping a particular tribe’s precontact ecological awareness and arts practices could be asked, as could questions about changes in these Native epistemologies, postcontact. Opportunities thus arise for students—Native and non-Native—to critically examine how acculturation, both through contact with White European colonizers and with other Indigenous North American cultures, affects contemporary American Indian responses to both the environment and art making.

Being able to “generalize skills, images, and ideas across situations appropriately represents one form of human intelligence” and indicates transfer of knowledge, according to Eisner (1998, p. 198). In keeping with that thinking, transfer of science and arts learning, therefore, might be a demonstrable student outcome. In practice, it might involve a student learning about a tribe’s local biodiversity after conducting inquiry in her local community and then displaying what she has learned in another situation, for example, an iMovie she produced and screens for her classmates. To do so would be a good indicator of learning in and through art and science. It is also a way to increase the visibility of American Indians (Brayboy, 2003) in the eyes of non-Natives, and suggests a willingness of schools and teachers to collaborate when choosing content for culturally relevant American Indian curriculum.

**Paths to Studying Local Traditional Knowledge of Art and Science**

Ideas that assume all Native peoples and/or only Native peoples have instinctive intuitions about managing natural resources are flawed (Grande, 2004). One way to help correct misconceptions such as this is to challenge students to expand their investigation of the relationship between art and the environment beyond Indigenous practices. Asking young people to look at other, non-Native traditional knowledge about artmaking, and whether it is closely connected to that culture’s environmental lore, will provide comparative data. A quick Google search will inform young researchers of numerous websites which will link them to schools and courses that promote the study of Western folk art forms, the raw materials from which traditional crafts are made, and even efforts afoot to conserve the ecosystems in which those materials are harvested.

Notably, in rural pockets in the U.S. and Canada there is resurgent interest in transmission of traditional craft knowledge of Scandinavian, Russian, and some Indigenous societies. These courses tend to be offered in non-urban tourist settings. Many cater to adult learners rather than being situated in public school classrooms, although environmentally specific arts offerings for children and adolescents are often part of

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summer camp programs. Generally, artisans using master-apprentice pedagogy work with small groups of students to inculcate learning about form and function, while transmitting understanding of cultural inheritance, manual dexterity, expressive skills, and more (Roberts, 1999). For example, one ecologically-leaning school in the Midwest that models itself after “folkeskoles” of mid-19th-century Denmark offers courses that stress learning “life-long skills and traditions.” A 2-day class in which cultural and environmental sustainability was an explicit course goal was recently the site of participant research (Krogstad, 2006). In this setting, four different instructors, including a silviculturist and forester, each taught a different style of working with birch bark. This was a winter class, although it was not uncommon for instructors to bring students into the woods to collect birch bark during similar summer courses. The researcher recalls the cultural contexts for her learning in one of the Midwest folk school’s courses: “Thick, spongy, leathery bark worked well for using it in large sheets as in the Anishinabe tradition—such as for winnowing baskets or canoes. Drier, denser, thinly-layered bark was desirable for weaving in Scandinavian and Russian traditions—such as saltboxes, knife sheaths, and pack baskets” (p. 7).

Sweden’s program of craft education, or “sloyd” studies, and to a lesser degree Britain’s design education, emphasizes the design and construction of practical forms with associations to social, cultural, and natural contexts as a vital curricular component of all children’s public school experience (Baynes, 1999; Krogstad, 2006). There is little connection between European approaches in which cultural transmission and local ecological knowledge influence the making of traditional forms and the coursework commonly called woodshop or industrial arts that is offered in U.S. secondary schools. American courses that do focus on “craft,” narrowly defined, often leave out the cultural contexts that lend additional meaning to the work. Already a suspect descriptor in postmodern art historical theory, the term “craft” also cannot adequately represent the artifacts and traditional cultural practices of Indigenous societies when creating baskets, textiles, and the like. For example, Kathy Wallace, a Yurok/Karuk/Hoopa basketmaker of some renown, says “[b]asketmaking is more to us than just a craft. It’s a tie to our ancestors and to the earth and to the future. We have a lot of responsibility to pass it on” (Peterson, 1996, p. 147).

**School-Community Collaborations Pass on Local Traditional Knowledge**

If schools adapt a vibrant and innovative curricular approach to art and science education, children could be encouraged to develop the awareness, confidence, and leadership necessary to address meaningful problems like loss of traditional Indigenous knowledge and its
ramifications in both depletion of natural environments and “generici-
zing” of culturally transmitted arts practices. To do so effectively, art teachers must be well informed and wary of “teaching [that] focuses on artifacts of the past, and does not present the complexities of contem-
porary Native American life” (Eldridge, 2006, p. 2).

My work as an art teacher in schools populated primarily by American Indian children taught me many things. Notably, I remember the engaged responses of those students when a particular curricular foray seemed culturally relevant to their identity as members of the larger community of Native North Americans. Muffled remarks such as this is “stuff worth coming to school for” from a teenage boy strutting out of the art room after one of those lessons were telling. But it was only when I came back as a researcher to study this same California school district’s culturally relevant arts initiative that I saw how a school-community collaboration could make schooling more meaningful just by making a concerted effort to invite American Indian artists and their cultures into the teachers’ classrooms. When a small group of mostly Euro-American teachers—trusted longtime community residents who had a sound understanding of the norms of these Native artists and the needs of Indian children—encouraged these artisans to represent their traditional cultural knowledge in K-12 classrooms, culturally relevant art curriculum was implemented. This initiative spawned cross-cultural learning in and through the arts. And in doing so it became a viable strategy for increasing: (1) minoritized peoples’ involvement in these dominant culture schools (Wasson, Stuhr, & Petrovich-Mwaniki, 1990); (2) the voice of American Indians in the arts education process (Stuhr, 1994); and (3) opportunities for expanding the multicultural knowledge of Indian and non-Indian children (Chalmers, 1996).

Renewed interest in the arts practices of local Indigenous cultures can help stabilize these unique American Indian cultures, empowering artists and helping them recognize the efficacy of carrying on the iden-
tities and accomplishments of their tribal ancestors (McFee, 1986, 1995). When schools and their constituents collaborate on identi-
fying what is important student learning, intersecting contexts naturally arise for thoughtful exploration in more than one curriculum area. Such curricula offer a comparative perspective on why the visual and performing arts—often misunderstood and marginalized disciplines in the underperforming schools in which they could do the most good—promote artistic and aesthetic learning outcomes that potentially may be a paradigm for study in other content areas (Eisner, 1985, 1998). My research in California schools thus articulates a broader argument for the inclusion of socially responsible arts curricula attuned to the Native cultures of the local students. I found that local traditional knowledge of cultural practices in the visual arts was tapped by the schools when
“ecosystem peoples” (Dasmann, 1964), in this case elder tribal artists, were invited into P-12 classrooms.

But the traditional cultural teaching that was part of this arts initiative could have been more effective. While there is evidence that connections were occasionally made between the art forms the Indian artists demonstrated in classrooms and their knowledge of changes in local ecosystems that might now constrain availability or access to raw materials needed for making these artifacts, comprehensive teaching like this was not the norm. Native artists seldom contextualized the artwork they demonstrated in district classrooms, omitting any transmission of traditional local knowledge about how art forms made the “old way” had changed or of the origin of materials used to make these mostly neotraditional pan-Indian art forms.

When the arts program was operational, there was evidence that not every Native artist has this information at their disposal. There was one exemplar though, of a well-informed California Indian artist who explained the relationship between making traditional artifacts, in this instance woven baskets, and her use of ecological knowledge when collecting natural materials like grass and pine needles or alternative manufactured products to make her traditional-style baskets. In explaining the process of gathering the requisite raw materials, the elder artist shared with fifth and sixth graders her knowledge of ecological changes in her reservation community. She mentioned problems such as the present scarcity of materials due to loss of wetlands, limited access to specific grasses on what now is private or public land, and the health risks posed by plant-gathering sites along roadways and streams where herbicides or pesticides are used. The elder also talked about craft stores being sources of fibrous materials used in the art forms she and other Indians now make (Bequette, 2006).

In an earlier teaching activity in which the same artist visited another elementary classroom to demonstrate basketweaving techniques, the Euro-American classroom teacher reported this activity was extremely engaging and well received by both Native and non-Native students. A more scientific field experience that delved into local ecological lore was integrated into the lesson jointly planned by the artist and classroom teacher. Using natural materials that the artist and children first gathered from a nearby creekbed, the students soon learned the utilitarian value of baskets in this local Native culture as well as the spiritual significance of such vessels in ceremonies past and present. The elder informed them of the mental disposition one should try to affect when holding the materials in preparation for the actual weaving. She also shared a traditional tribal song she learned to sing before sitting down to begin her work (Bequette, 2006).
Conclusions

Implications for Art Education Programs in Native and Other Schools

To this end, inviting students, whether living in “cosmopolitan societies” or traditional settings, to read “Tobacco Basket,” the verse that begins this article (Stevens, 2003), can be an alternate pathway for entering a culture of habitat, a world that is perhaps very different from the one in which most students live. Poetry or perhaps another primary document like a translation of a tribe’s gathering song or a creation tale that involves local flora and fauna can launch an inquiry-based project in which students actually contact the purveyors of traditional cultural knowledge living in their community. Scenarios that might follow include teachers inviting Native artists to more fully explore the connections of human endeavors in the arts and traditional cultural knowledge about their local environments in a classroom demonstration. Other outreach efforts can similarly redefine a school’s relationship with its Native constituents, the art and science education of children of all cultures, and cultural transmission.

Freedman (2003) talks about the visual arts connecting students, both locally and globally, with other humans, and of study in and through the arts influencing children’s response to broader social problems, including issues “such as ecology and conceptions of self” (p. 1). Duncum (2001) writes that “[n]ever before in human history has imagery been so central to the creation of identity or the gathering and distribution of knowledge” (p. 102). Using text as an entry point for a teacher-led discussion of how an ethnobotanical researcher metaphorically extracts meaning from the ecological lore and arts knowledge of the Indigenous world in which she immerses herself can engage students to respond visually. It can be the hook that lures minds to ponder the consequences of ignoring traditional cultural knowledge and how elevating the status of local populations and viewing them as agents for change might help solve existing environmental problems. Finally, thinking about the socio-scientific significance of harvesting willow in a creek-side habitat in the twenty-first century, and conceptualizing basketmaking as a visual art form of what Barnard calls “functional, communicative and/or aesthetic intent” (Duncum, 2001, p. 105) can further demystify contemporary Indians and lead to other discoveries about Indian cultures.

Inquiry-based work proposed in this article can help dispel at minimum three misconceptions students may have about Native life. First, generalizations that all Indians are “Plains Indians,” or idyllic notions of Native peoples being “Noble Savages,” “Indian princesses,” and the like often cloud reality, leading to public perceptions that ignore the diversity of living tribal cultures. Pewewardy (1997) suggests over-
simplification such as this perpetuates “negative and self-serving stereotypes of the American Indian held by non-Indians [that] are deeply embedded in American life.” Second, recurrent messages about the social problems of Native societies and the often harsh realities of reservation life dominate media representations of living Native peoples. This constant process of “giving voice to things that are often known intuitively, does not help people to improve their current conditions” (Smith, 1999), nor does it lead to a more thoughtful understanding of the future potential for American Indians, the resilience of Native societies, and the potential for reclaiming, reformulating, and reconstituting Indigenous cultures and languages. And third, imagery from popular visual culture often promulgates romanticized New Age notions that all Indians are one with nature and quintessential stewards of the land. “While white fascination with things Indian never entirely fades, it has fluctuated throughout history, forever linking Indians with the untamed forests, fields, and streams” (Pewewardy, 1997). A corrective example for this stewardship stereotype might be a closer look at how 30 years of strip-mining coal on Northern Arizona’s Black Mesa has changed Indian Country landscape since “the Hopi and Navajo tribal councils—not to be confused with the general tribal population—signed strip-mining leases with a consortium of twenty utilities that had designed a new coal-fired energy grid for the urban Southwest” (Nies, 1998).

The Need for Ongoing Research

Comparative perspectives that consider the affordances of other schools collaborating with cultural practitioners from other cultures—in Minnesota, the Hmong, Somali, or Scandinavian communities, for example—are needed. In other words, we should tap the knowledge base of the cultural experts who represent the communities from which a school’s students come. The goal of harnessing the environmental knowledge systems of an entire community can thus become more global, and the search for contexts in which traditional learning in the arts might intersect with traditional ecological knowledge can deepen our students’ understanding of world cultures and regional environments.

With funding from a U.S. Department of Education Model Development and Dissemination Program grant, I am currently working with two K-8 schools in a Midwest community—one Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) affiliated with the other in a public district. In this planning year a design team that includes interested Native and non-Native teachers, university researchers, and American Indian elders and artists familiar with the language and arts practices of the local tribes meet often to envision what curriculum that taps local cultural arts knowledge and explores environmental connections might look like. In doing so we are finding intersecting points in core disciplines like science, mathematics, and language arts in which culturally relevant arts experiences can be
infused without supplanting the efforts of the existing art teachers or compromising the integrity of either art or the academic subject area. The goal, of course, is to improve student learning. My research partners and I have agreed to begin this process with open minds, an awareness of the challenges, and a willingness to be wrong.

References


