

Transformative Autoethnography: An Examination of Cultural Identity and its Implications for Learners

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Abstract: The cultural experiences of minority learners are often omitted from the formal curriculum leading to exclusion and a sense of cultural loss. In this study, the researcher's lived experience serves as the basis to develop a novel research strategy: transformative autoethnography. The researcher uses the method of autoethnography to more deeply understand his roles as Chickasaw and adult educator, amplified by his unique role as the developer of a tribal learning community situated at a research university. This immersive experience serves as the context for self-reflection, which includes an educational history marred by my perceptions of Whiteness and lack of cultural connectedness. Transformative learning theory serves as the theoretical framework by which the author comes to appreciate the intersection of culture, identity, and meaning. The research context is triangulated with the experiences of other Chickasaws, including learning community participants, providing an autoethnography steeped in phenomenological thought. This credible

qualitative account serves as a roadmap for the educational journeys of Native Americans and other minority adult learners and the educators, advisors, and program developers who strive to support them.

Keywords: autoethnography, transformative learning, Native American, cultural identity, Chickasaw

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Prologue: That Day
I vividly recall traveling with my parents to Ada, Oklahoma, during my senior year of high school. As a member of the Chickasaw Nation, the 13th largest federally recognized Native American tribe, I was attending a reception dinner for Chickasaw high school scholarship recipients. The apprehension I felt was palpable—quivering voice and body shaking. See, you must understand I don't look Indian. Would I be expected to make a speech? Ultimately, would I be too White? As I continued to imagine what too White might look like, I began to reflect on issues larger than just myself. Did other

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Indian teenagers who did not grow-up as real Indians feel disconnected from their ancestry like me?

With this pressure looming, I unexpectedly became angry with my parents. They should have incorporated more Native American heritage in my upbringing! Throughout my childhood, I felt like a White kid who was told he was Chickasaw. I had to wrestle with what that meant. For instance, do I tell others I am Indian or do I keep it to myself? This typically resulted in me consciously weighing the range of possible responses that such a proclamation could illicit: "You're White, you don't look Chickasaw; did Chickasaws live in teepees?" or "Everyone in Oklahoma says they are Indian." And, here I was trapped in a car on a collision course to confront years of identity avoidance.

Although I could not articulate the cultural constructs of marginalization and identity at the time, I know now that I was enduring an educational moment in the backseat: having to confront the significance in my own life of my Native American ancestry. Years later, I still find it difficult to sort through the host of emotions that flowed through me: guilt, shame, and, finally, a surprising sense of acceptance granted by Chickasaw elders at the reception. To this day, I still fluctuate between these emotions, and several others, when grappling with my identity as a Chickasaw who does not look phenotypically Native American.

When experiences resonate within us, we often yearn to understand their significance. Mezirow and Associates (2000) maintain transformative learning is a process of continual growth. Accordingly, the detailed account of *That Day* serves to illustrate cultural miseducation and my life-long experience to come to terms with my identity as a Chickasaw. According to Martin (2002), cultural miseducation occurs "when cultural liabilities overburden future generations; or, alternatively, valuable portions of a culture's wealth are not passed down" (p. 5). Stereotyped views of Native Americans and faulty internalization of my own Whiteness impeded my ability to connect with my tribal culture. In this article, I use the method of autoethnography, which entails reflexivity, to examine the transformative experience of becoming Chickasaw.

Researchers have extensively explored the nature of oneself in relation to others, particularly academic settings (Brookfield, 1995; Evans, Forney, & Guido, 2010). Goffman (1959) maintained the perceived

perceptions of others alter the social presentation of the self, similar to an individual envisioning himself or herself in a theatrical play. In this view, the prologue provides insight into how I continually weigh the consequences of socially representing myself as Chickasaw. As society continues to grow more pluralistic, issues of ethnic identity may become increasingly more complicated, especially in academic settings.

Autoethnography is recognized as a vehicle to promote transformational learning (Boyd, 2008; Glowacki-Dudka, Tref, & Usman, 2005) and cultural identity (Boyd, 2008). Previous research examined the effects of cultural loss as a result of education (Kingston, 1989; Martin, 2002; Rodriguez, 2004), but not within the autoethnographical research context. This research proposes the concept of *transformative autoethnography* (autoethnography steeped in culture to engage in transformational learning) by extending the existing research on transformational learning by considering the significance of cultural identity. This introspective account uniquely focuses on the restoration of Native American tribal identity and subsequent transformative outcomes.

A Chickasaw Worldview

The United States practiced intentional and systematic methods, such as removal from Indian lands and other genocidal practices, to strip American Indians of their culture and heritage. At present, there are 565 federally recognized Native American tribes in the United States, each of which has a distinct worldview and lived experience. A brief appreciation of what constitutes a uniquely Chickasaw worldview helps illuminate the role of blood quantum as it relates to perceptions of Native American identity.

I contend the superordinate factor of Chickasaw worldview is early contact with European settlers, resulting in numerous *mixed blood* tribal members. The homelands of the Chickasaw and other Muskogean tribes, in the Mississippi Valley and Alabama regions, led to earlier mixing of Indian and White bloodlines as compared with many other tribes, such as those in the Northwest.

Previous research examined the complicated role of blood quantum and tribal identity (Fletcher, 2008; Pratt, 2005). Research suggests, despite outward appearance,

cultural competence may be a stronger indicator of cultural connectedness (Strong & Van Winkle, 1996). Today, the *Chikasha* (Chickasaw) way of life is rooted in service, improving our tribal community, and knowledge and practice of our ways, specifically the inclusion of Chickasaw language. The Chickasaw Nation and a portion of other tribes only require citizens to be a direct descendant of an original enrollee of the Dawes Commission, thereby not requiring a minimum degree of Indian blood.

I am distinctly aware, as a nonphenotypical (light-skinned) Native American, I have the capacity to pass for White and not be visibly identified as Native American. As such, I have not had to bear the injustices of racism and structural inequality to the severity of my phenotypically Native American counterparts. In fact, because of my outward appearance, perceived as White and middle class, I benefit from White privilege. It is noteworthy to mention that individuals in other minority groups may similarly *pass for White*, but are influenced by constructs of race, ethnicity, and Whiteness. Accordingly, future transformative autoethnography research should consider such challenges.

Theoretical Lens and Perspective

For this study, I used transformative learning as the theoretical lens. Transformative learning seeks to understand the qualitative change a person undergoes in learning (Mezirow & Associates, 2000; Taylor, 2008). It requires critical reflection and the maturity to recognize the concept of self is being altered. Such frames of reference, or meaning perspectives, are the lenses by which we filter our experiences of the world. A frame is composed of two dimensions, a habit of mind (a filter for interpreting meaning and experience) and its resulting point of view (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Habits of mind can be disrupted, and eventually altered, by experiences that change the self, thereby constituting transformation. Whereas Mezirow and Associates focus on the role of individual reflections and rational choices, other transformational learning theorists emphasize the role of social interaction, including culture (Brooks, 2000), emotions (Dirkx, 2006), and social representation of the self (Taylor, 2008). Through reflexivity, I came to appreciate the numerous effects of cultural

miseducation that led to my inability to connect to my Chickasaw ancestry.

Martin (2007) contends education, culture, and identity are inextricably linked, thereby providing fertile ground for transformations to occur, which may magnify transformations. For her, transformations are not necessarily for the better; they may be either educative or miseducative. She calls for “new theoretical frameworks that include education metamorphoses in their mapping of the educational terrain” (p. 152). This transformative autoethnography, focusing on experiences, interpretation, and subsequent qualitative changes, serves to provide the contours to apply her theoretical position.

Phenomenology was the theoretical perspective that guided my inquiry. Crotty (1998) differentiates between theoretical perspective and methodology, while emphasizing the two must be epistemologically compatible. The former is the philosophical underpinning that provides a context for the research process to occur, whereas the latter is a plan of action. It is rooted in the symbolic-interactionism sociological perspective in which the researcher makes an interpretation of an object—in this case my lived experience as Chickasaw—and seeks meaning (Laverty, 2003). Husserl (1859-1938) developed phenomenology as a philosophy and social science perspective (Patton, 2001). He maintained consciousness and the lived experience of life should be of primary importance within inquiry into human issues. The philosophical tenets of phenomenology have been translated into qualitative inquiry paradigms, retaining interpretation as the focal point toward lived experience (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

A Fledgling Indian: Context of the Study

From childhood to young adulthood, I always felt like I was not a *real* Chickasaw Indian, but an imposter. Appreciating how I came to view myself as an inadequate Indian provides context to my transformative experience. Erikson (1959) describes identity as subject to the influence of external factors. However, his views are regarded as Eurocentric, particularly in the construction of identity in parents with mixed-parentage (Katz, 1996). Jones and McKewen (2000) theorize multiple dimensions of identity, envisioning identity as intersecting circles

surround one's core self. In this view, identity is fluid and influenced by context. Markstrom (2011) takes into account the personal and social influences on Native American identity development in adolescence. Her triumvirate model views ethnic identification, connection, culture, and spirituality as interrelated and influenced by context. Similarly, Taylor (2008) notes the importance of identity and epistemology in adults and subsequent transformative learning experiences.

Many of the educational touchstone experiences throughout my youth formed a false, unrealistic perception of a *real* Indian. My mother was the Title VII Indian Education school district director in the rural town where I grew up. Early educational experiences often turned miseducative, propagating Native American stereotypes leaving me more disconnected from a Native American identity. It never occurred to me that a Chickasaw worldview differed from a pan-Indian one leading to increased confusion of what it meant to be Chickasaw.

In high school, I was class president and received several scholarships to attend college. As a first-generation student, however, the admission process and requisite skills to succeed in college were foreign to me. I transferred institutions three times over the course of three years before finally settling at a regional university. My identity had become contextualized by my surroundings. I tested my Native American identity on only a few occasions, leading to a lack of attachment and emotional significance.

After graduating with a four-year degree, as a young adult on a new career path, I wanted to give back to the Chickasaw Nation. In my mind, however, I did not believe I had anything of value to offer the tribe. I was on track to permanently eschew my Native American identity or at most it would be a footnote in my conception of self. However, the birth of my daughter and other significant life events rekindled the emotions of identity and belonging, revitalizing an interest in connecting with my Chickasaw heritage.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a reflexive, individualized method that extracts meaning following an immersive experience (Chang, 2008). As a method, it is used across several disciplines: anthropology, sociology, and education. Its central factor is self-understanding within the context of a culture or self-culture (Patton, 2001). I

approached my research as an individual with a distinct vantage point for telling a unique story, grounded in Chickasaw culture. As a methodology, autoethnography has numerous variations. For the purposes of this research, I will focus on the two perspectives that most influenced my research praxis.

First, Ellis and Bochner (2000) view autoethnography as an autobiography that consciously explores the role of the person in relation to culture, represented across three axes: research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto). Researchers position themselves along these three continuums reaching a distinct sense of voice. Second, Chang (2008) promotes autoethnography in which the ethnographer combines cultural analysis accomplishing interpretation through narrative details. In doing so, the self surfaces and the researcher becomes situated within the research, as I utilize the prologue, for example, as a literary device. For Chang, autoethnographers use their personal experience as primary data.

I maintained a research journal and memorandums throughout the research process, which serve as a record of the underlying meanings and turning points throughout the research process. My journal and memorandums were triangulated with emails and the experiences of students in the learning community. I also used the practice of free writing, regarded within ethnography as means of data collection (Chang, 2008). I created a modified form of Moustakas's (2002) transcendental phenomenological method involving chunking data into clusters of meaning.

My Transformation

Autoethnographical methodology suggests the inclusion of a clearly delineated time period, a beginning and end of the research process, may serve to extract meaning (Chang, 2008). Similarly, Mezirow and Associates (2000) and Martin (2002) view prior experiences as context that may serve to prime an individual for substantive changes, which is to say we have the capacity to transform. The events in this section represent the research process, spanning approximately 18 months.

Feeling Valued: Chickasaw Listening Conference

"Are you here for the conference?" Her simple question elicited a cascade of self-doubt. Shortly after

beginning my master's degree, I received an invitation to attend a tribal listening conference. This democratic meeting proved to be a three-day forum at which approximately 400 at-large Chickasaw citizens dialogued and expressed their views of services and the future direction of the Chickasaw Nation. What was beyond the door in front me? Was it too late to turn around? Ultimately, the choice to cross this threshold proved formative.

There was a host of breakout sessions, the first of which was education. To my surprise, my Chickasaw peers elected me to serve as facilitator. Marker in hand, I quickly contemplated my quandary. Would my distressful experiences and lack of Chickasaw identity, and subsequent frustrations of finding avenues to give back to the tribe, be well received by others, or was I the only Chickasaw who felt lost? At this critical moment, the group affirmed my beliefs. As a group, we articulated a vision of what positive, enriching Chickasaw educational experiences could look like.

A truly emotional experience began to unfold; I began to feel valued and accepted within the Chickasaw community. I began listening to elders, openly sharing my lack of cultural knowledge with community members and interacting with Chickasaw staff. For the first time in my life, I felt Chickasaw. What I felt was difficult to put into words. Kegan (2001) states the two greatest desires of the human experience are to be included and have a sense of agency. The conference provided a venue for me to simultaneously exercise both desires.

After the daily sessions, I wanted to relish and share this moment. On a whim, I picked up my daughter from preschool and returned for an evening of dinner and fellowship. She made Chickasaw friends and danced to Chickasaw music. On the drive home, long past her bedtime, she drifted off to sleep. In the rearview mirror, I stole a glance. Streetlights dimly lit the darkness of the backseat and the occasional flash of passing car lights revealed her pale, innocent face. I was on the path to achieve goals that I had longed for within my Chickasaw community: being accepted, potentially contributing something of value, and taking steps to assure my daughter's connection to her ancestry. I had no idea where my newfound role as a Chickasaw citizen would take me, which was an exhilarating feeling.

As I reflect on this experience, there is no doubt in my mind that over the course of those two days I *became* Chickasaw. I went from speaking in the third person about the Chickasaw Nation to speaking in first person of being a Chickasaw. Martin (2007) refers to such an experience as a cultural crossing, which entails agency and conscious pursuit toward identity attainment. In my case, cumulative past experiences had primed me for this moment of metamorphosis. In the wake of the conference, Chickasaw administrators invited me to develop and implement a tribal learning community for Chickasaw freshmen students at a research university to increase persistence and tribal engagement. Unexpectedly, my two new paths had converged: educator and Chickasaw.

Learning to Be a Chickasaw Educator

My first task as facilitator of the Chickasaw Learning Community (CLC) was to draft an invitation letter to prospective students. Based on my experiences, I knew the content and tone of the letter would be critically important to the students' perception of the learning community and their socially constructed selves. Surprisingly, composing the letter was not difficult—it was cathartic. To strike the right tone, I relied heavily on the challenges of my youth and the sense of inclusiveness I experienced at the listening conference. I came to see my facilitator role as a cultural rite of passage.

Kreb (1999) refers to individuals who thoughtfully cross cultures as *edge walkers*. Indeed, my newfound leadership role required me to be attuned to students' emotional needs. As a requisite, I mined the depths of my miseducative experiences. Frequently, my role as learning community facilitator challenged me to vacillate between my White and Indian self. Over time, I came to appreciate the ethos of service as a central factor to being Chickasaw. The autoethnographical process was the ideal setting to practice mindfulness and gain deep introspection.

Critical Incidents

My educator role of Chickasaw students provided a unique space for me to engage in the autoethnographical process, while examining what being Chickasaw meant to them. Consistent with autoethnography, the examination of self remains the

focal point. However, contextualizing my experience with students' experiences accomplishes two tasks: Methodologically, it triangulates my experiences leading to credibility, and, more importantly, it indicates the phenomenon under study—experience as Chickasaw—is widespread, thereby enlarging this research's implications. Indeed, Patton (2001) notes "there is an essence or essences to shared experience" that may be construed as defining characteristics of phenomenological experiences. From my research, I have chosen three chronological incidents, which serve to highlight the degree in which I engaged in critical reflection and the subsequent transformational learning I experienced.

So how much Chickasaw blood do you guys have?

At the first event, I planned icebreaker games centered on Chickasaw culture. The majority of students were not phenotypically Native American. As students began to come in one by one, it was clear they were visibly nervous. Was this attributable to their unease in claiming a Chickasaw identity or simply the fact that they were freshmen? This question was quickly answered when one of the students openly asked his peers, "So how much Chickasaw blood do you guys have?"

This conversation proved to be the true icebreaker. The students began to discuss approximately how much, or in some cases how little, Chickasaw blood they possessed. Even though blood quantum had no legal implications within Chickasaw culture, it possessed a strong cultural meaning to the students, which echoes my experiences. In the CLC, I deliberately created curriculum to mitigate conceptions of blood quantum. As students began to develop a sense of Chickasaw identity, I helped them become aware of the impact and significance of their own Whiteness.

My gross miscalculation

A significant component of the learning community model was a section of *Introduction to Native American Studies* modified to include Chickasaw-specific culture and history. As facilitator, I frequently attended the course and was asked Chickasaw-specific questions by the instructor and students. The questions were straightforward, and I came to find my correct

answers gave me some measure of credibility with the students.

One day in particular, however, I was preoccupied in class when I suddenly heard the professor call my name. Apologetically, I asked if she could repeat the question. Every student in the class turned and looked at me as the professor asked again, "How many citizens comprise the Chickasaw Nation?" It was as if I was transported back in time to *That Day*. I froze. I could not draw a number out of my head . . . almost reactively I said 4,000. The professor, whom I have yet to mention is phenotypically Native American, gave me that look.

Haphazardly, I just executed my recurrent fear of expressing my Native American ignorance. I had escaped the CLC's entire year, even my entire life, without an error of this magnitude. Here it was, in front of my students! Moreover, the look of disappointment was by someone more *Native* than me. The students turned to look at her as she questioned me, "That cannot be right. It has to be a lot more, like 20,000 or 30,000." I stammered she was correct; it was something in that neighborhood. I was nauseous. This event illustrates the delicate nature of a socially constructed self, grounded in cultural identity. At any given moment, the sense of self may be dramatically altered resulting in fear and shame.

Feelings of self-doubt plagued me for weeks. I literally had a nightmare about the experience. Was I over-reacting? I was experiencing what Brookfield (1995) describes as impostorship and cultural suicide, which may occur in adult learners who critically reflect on classroom experiences. Mark, one of the students on the group's periphery, dropped by my office and casually mentioned this event. "The fact you don't know everything makes it easier to talk about it," he said. I had not considered my lack of cultural knowledge as an asset, but I came to find his views representative of his peers. In their view, our exploration was mutual, subsequently providing a safe place for their self-exploration and reflection.

The rhythm of the stomp dance

Chickasaws do not powwow; we stomp dance. I arranged for the Chickasaw Nation dance troupe to come to campus and perform a stomp dance exhibition for the CLC. A majority of the CLC

students had never attended a stomp dance. I welcomed the dance troupe and escorted them to their dressing quarters. In plain clothes, I shepherded the regalia-outfitted troupe across campus on a sunny spring day. Passersby stopped to view the event. Students, staff, and faculty trickled out of buildings to see the commotion. As the troupe began to dance, to my surprise, they invited the students to join them, who in turn looked to me as if so to say, "Help." Without hesitation, I joined the dance circle, and one-by-one students joined in forming a multigenerational circle.

I circled around in what seemed like slow motion. I felt the rhythm. All the stress about developing the perfect curriculum, telling my students exactly what they needed to hear, and stressing about the CLC were drowned out by the rhythmic of the dancers' shell shakers. I realized the most important thing was that the students know, regardless of skin color, they, too, have the capacity to become Chickasaw.

Conclusion

This research does not seek to be the authoritative account on transformative autoethnography, but rather to appreciate its pedagogical value, specifically for minority learners to investigate the intersection of culture and identity. Educators and institutions should make concerted efforts to provide opportunities for minority learners to engage in culturally relevant learning, thereby allowing learners to extract their own meaning from immersive experiences. Boyd (2008) explores the role of race in transformative learning theory, from non-Westernized perspectives. I deliberately chose varied settings as contexts to demonstrate the roles in which psychodevelopmental (identity, career transitions, and birth of a child), culture (educational experiences, the sociopolitical environment of the listening conference), and higher educational settings (student-programming events, and the classroom) may contribute to transformative learning.

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