

Good Governance in Tribes: Moving from Ad-Hoc Knowledge-Building to a Tribal Civics Class

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Summary of Findings

This applied research project focuses on developing strategies for strengthening tribal governance by offering a practical and doable tribally-based civics program. This proposal addresses a long-standing problem in Indian Country of disparity in knowledge levels among tribal members regarding tribal governance, policies and processes. Some tribal members are very well informed regarding their tribal institutions and processes, while others do not fully understand how their tribal governments operate or why decisions are made. This can be frustrating for tribal members because it can lead to setting unreasonable expectations for your leaders or government; or worse, feeling helpless to make positive changes in your community.

This proposal suggests a solution for this problem: creating a tribally-based and focused civics class for tribal members to be conducted within their communities by their own people. The potential benefits include: a better-informed tribal citizenry; better communication between tribal leaders and their constituents; and a more-empowered tribal constituency, which can work toward creating solutions and developing a vision for their tribes.

In the United States and most other developed nations, students are required to take a government civics class because they have proven to be effective mechanisms for creating an informed citizenry. In a democracy, it is vital to have an informed citizenry not only about the issues but also about the processes of governance.

Most tribes do not have a similar program in place. This lack of a formal educating mechanism leads to an ad-hoc procedure for gaining political knowledge. The ad-hoc route includes learning from peers or family, attending meetings to educate yourself, running for tribal office, etc. All of these are proven effective tools for increasing political knowledge, but they vary in access and accuracy. Including a Tribal Civics course/workshop on tribal homelands would offer members another tool to add their knowledge base and help build an empowered citizenry.

Another complicating factor for American Indians is they all must learn American civics in school. Without a tribal civics class, there is no formal education process to balance the information American Indians learn in American schools about their American government. Therefore, sometimes, tribal members can have unrealistic expectations for their tribal governments, in terms of ability to provide resources because they are basing their expectations on a different nation's system and resources.

The academic term for how, what and why people learn about their government is called political socialization. Of the most common tools for political socialization: school, family, friends, shared events, religion, organized groups; the most glaring absentee for tribal political socialization is education.

Practical Implications

I will offer a template to begin the curriculum development discussion, but I strongly encourage participants to adapt the course to fit the unique needs of their tribal community.

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About Me:

- Bad River Chippewa Tribal Member; raised on reservation.
- Education: Ph.D. University of Michigan
B.A. University of Wisconsin-Madison
- Work Experience: college recruiter, Bad River Special Projects Coordinator, college professor at UWSP, NAU.
- Served on: BR Police Commission, BR Health Board, MACA Board
- Area of Expertise: Native American Politics and Tribal Governance




Tribal Government Woes & Criticisms

- Crisis management decision-making
- Lack of trust among tribal members
- Too bureaucratic
- Nepotism
- External forces have too much power

Positive Starting Points

- Tribes are sovereign entities.
- Tribes need engaged, knowledgeable and committed tribal members in order to operate.
- Tribal Members care about their tribes and want to be effective tribal citizens.
- Tribal Leaders want to be effective, responsive, and make good decisions for their tribes.



What Does Good Tribal Governance Mean?

- Maintain Sovereignty
- Govern
 - Effective Leadership
 - Set policy
 - Make decisions and implement them
 - Local relevance, tribal pick up
 - National/international going, contracts
- Preserve Land
 - Boundaries
 - Environment
- Fiscally Responsible
- Culturally Relevant
- Engaged Membership

Engaged Tribal Member

- Have Political Knowledge
- Participate in Political Processes
- Embrace Tribal Ideology and Value System



What is Political Knowledge?

- Knowing what you have:
 - Tribal Council, President, Constitution
- Knowing how your government works:
 - Can it make laws regarding “x”?
 - How does it relate with other governments?
- Knowing your rights.
- Knowing your responsibilities
- Understanding what you care about as a people.

Political Socialization

- It is how we learn about politics and our government
 - Knowledge-building
 - Framing our knowledge – giving it context
- Happens over a lifetime, but childhood and young adulthood is usually the most significant time
- Beliefs can change over time



Agents of Political Socialization

- Family
 - Most influential on child
 - Teaches you most of your values
 - Families tend to have similar political views
- But:
 - What if parents are uneducated or not interested?
 - Or if parents had a negative opinion?

Agents of Political Socialization

- Friends
- Mass Media
- Religion
- Organized Groups
- Shared events




Schools as Agents


- Extremely Effective
- Nationalism
- Knowledge building
 - Institutions: What is the Supreme Court?
 - Process: How does a bill become a law?
 - Policy: How best manage our nation's health care?
 - Current events: What should our government do about the gas price?

American Civics Class

- Required in American schools
- Democracies need educated citizens
 - Creates stability and social order
- Students learn one version of history & way of governance
- U.S. Government in schools ties us nationwide




- Teaches American political values and skills
 - Respect for rules & procedures
 - Bring law-abiding
 - Fairness
 - Legitimacy
 - Equality
 - Deliberation
 - Debate
 - Patriotism



- United States Symbols

Theoretical Question:

How can American civics classes be a problem for tribal people?




Need to Balance Information Learned in American Civics Classes

- Having only American civics knowledge can lead to confusion
 - You mean, our tribe doesn't have a separation of branches?
- And lead to having unrealistic expectations
 - Base exp. on other tribes' resources or system
 - Frustrating for members and leaders
 - "Why can't the tribe give us any money?"


But isn't one civics class enough?

- No, because differences can exist b/w tribes and US in:
 - Values
 - Resources
 - Responsibilities
 - Goals
 - Procedures, processes, and institutions
 - Deliberation and communication techniques
 - Histories



Reflection

- Where did you learn about tribal politics and government?
- Who taught you?
- What did you learn?



Common Tribal Government Knowledge Sources

- ✓ Family
- ✓ Self-taught
- ✓ Town Crier
- ✓ Moccasin Grapevine




Why is this a problem?

- Knowledge varies by individual and experiences
- Information may not be valid
- Power of knowledge tends to be concentrated among those who are “in the know”

Applied Research Question


- How can tribes create a tribal civics class to educate tribal members and strengthen tribal sovereignty?



Goals for this project:

- Build Tribal Member Knowledge
- Formulate a Tribal-Specific Curriculum
- Increase Political Participation
- Strengthen Tribal Sovereignty
- Increase Feelings of Belonging
- Improve Relations w/ outside political actors

Developing your Tribal Civics Curriculum



Step 1: Get the Right People Involved

- Tribal leaders
- Elders
- Teachers
- Tribal Administrators
- Community Members
- Instructor



Step 2: Put together Curriculum

- Suggested Topics:
 - Sovereignty
 - Tribal foundation
 - Tribal political history
 - Treaties, Executive Order
 - Constitution, By-Laws
 - Describe and explain what your government is and what it does
 - Council, Legislature, Chaperon
 - How elected or chosen? How long do they serve?



- Tribal Court
 - How organized?
 - What kinds of cases does it hear?
- Membership requirements
 - How do you determine who is a member?
- Powers of Tribal Government
 - Pass ordinances
 - Taxation
 - Run tribal business
- Tribal Administration
 - How are you organized? Departments?
 - Who does what? And answers to whom?
 - Who makes what kind of decisions?



- Tribal – Federal Relations
 - History of policies over the years
 - How have the Feds recognized tribal sovereignty? How have they limited it?
 - Relevant Federal laws
 - Current status of relations
- Tribal – State Relations
 - History of relations
 - Current status of relations
- Tribal-International
 - United Nations



- Tribal Lands and Boundaries
 - Jurisdiction
 - Environmental concerns
 - Water Rights
- Rights and Responsibilities of Tribal Members
 - Serving on Committees
 - Voting
- May want to include neighboring tribes for context
 - Treaty signed together, related
 - Or because have very different system

- Economic Development
 - Gaming and/or other businesses
 - Natural Resource – mining, timber
- National & Regional Indian Organizations
 - NCAI
 - NARF
 - GLIIC
- National/Tribal Policy Concerns
 - NAGPRA
 - Freedom of Religion
 - IHS Funding and Administration




Tribal Policy Concerns

- Youth and Elderly Programs
- Social Services
- Schools and language programs
- Tribal specific like preserving your waterfront, protecting treaty rights, preserving your native plant species



Step 3: Assemble Class Materials

- Organize your materials, copy them for distribution to your class, and put in a binder.
 - Constitution
 - Maps
 - Relevant ordinances and documents
 - Compacts
 - Treaties, Executive Orders
 - Tribal history summary
 - Current federal legislation bills or relevant laws
 - Anything that will help your tribal members better understand their tribe and how it works.



Include your own symbols, flags, and national heroes




Photos of Tribal Landmarks & Homeland




Step 4: Incorporate Tribal Values and Skills into Course

- Who are we as a people?
- Where have we been?
- Where would we like to go?
- Discuss roles and responsibilities as tribal members.
- Discuss what good leadership means.
- Deliberation/building activities
 - How can we best talk with each other?
 - How can we disagree with each and still move forward?



- Discuss your tribal values and how those could be reflected in decision making?
 - And in tribal administration
- Discuss better ways you can work with or educate people outside the tribe
 - Other government leaders
 - Neighboring communities
 - School systems, if off-reservation



Step 5: Format Suggestions

- Target adult members
 - Weekend series (Successive Saturdays)
 - Night and/or Day meetings to accommodate work schedules
 - Seminar (Three-four days in a row)
- Hold an “elders only session”
- Youth
 - Incorporate in tribal schools if not already being done
 - Coordinate it through youth programs
- Reward employees for taking the course
 - Certificate or time off to attend



Step 6: Teach it

- Hire, appoint, or ask someone to be the primary teacher, if not done already
- Get guest speakers when appropriate to address their particular areas
 - Tribal leaders, administrators, elders
 - Adds real-world examples
 - Builds relationships between leaders and participants



Step 7: Review

- Class evaluation
 - Ask participants to fill out evaluations to see how class went.
 - Re-work your class if you need to.
- Conduct your own assessment of program
 - Are classes well attended?
 - Are people more involved with politics and government?
 - Are your meetings better attended? Are people asking good questions?
 - Do tribal members think these classes have been useful?



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