

Tips for Trainers

Tom asked me to write this article based on the years I have done training and how I prepare and what I think is important.

In the days before the training it is important to properly prepare yourself, my practice, and the practice of those with whom I train is that we abstain from alcohol, any kind of illicit drugs (medicines prescribed by doctors for particular diseases are exempt), sexual activity, allowing oneself to think “bad” thoughts or get caught up in negativity, we abstain from these things and situations for three full days before the training. It is important that we—our bodies, minds and spirits be clean and clear so that the message that the Creator wants to impart is delivered in a good way. During that time we pray for those who will be at the training, those who wanted to be there but couldn't be for whatever reason, we pray for one another on the training team and we pray for all the children and families who will be touched by those for whom we are providing the training. We always remember that there is room and time for prayer.

As for preparation, especially when training on the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), you need to know the Act really well. I like to say that you need to know it forward and backward and right side out and inside out and every kind of sideways. You should be able to recite it in your sleep with little or no prompting. You need to know not only the Act and its provisions, but you need to know what was happening prior to when the Act was written in 1978 and why there was even a need for it.

In further preparation, if you are not familiar with the climate of child welfare services at the time just preceding the passage of the ICWA and the disproportionate removal of Indian children that was happening then it would serve you well to read some of the testimony that was given in those years leading to the writing of the Act. There are many stories related and they are all heart-breaking. If you are Native you probably have some of these stories in your own family. Think about whether you would want to share any of your history. This is important because it is what brings the passion and compassion to the training. You also need to realize that it could be hard on you because you are having to re-live the trauma.

For example, one of our trainers, who is a young woman of this contemporary generation, attended boarding school herself and can talk about the impact it had on her when she was a child and how it has carried forward into her adult life. She was one generation in a string of generations that was sent away to boarding school. Another of our trainers tells of her grandfather and how his family would hide him when the Boarding School Police would come looking for children to take away. His hiding place was revealed one day and he was taken away. He regularly ran away but he was always picked up and returned to the school. Although these stories may seem simple as I have written them here, when the people who lived them tell the stories they bring to light the trauma that was suffered then and that continues to this day and why the ICWA was so important so that these practices that broke up families and stripped culture from generations of children would cease--forever.

As you can see, this is, after all, sensitive material you are dealing with. You are talking about historical trauma and its effects on Native people today. People get tense and uncomfortable. It is important to keep a sense of humor about you. I don't mean telling jokes or making fun, I mean, take the subject seriously, but not yourself. Be ready and able to poke a little fun at you. Nothing releases the stress in the room like a laugh.

Because the training addresses sensitive topics it is important that the trainers know the process of conflict resolution so that issues that may arise in the room can be handled in a manner that is respectful and that has a positive conclusion.

Furthermore, as a trainer you need to know the curriculum really well and you need to know how much time each of the sections takes to complete. It is important that you or someone on the team is time-aware so that you stay on time so that the entire curriculum gets delivered. If you go over in some sections and you need to make up time, be familiar enough with the curriculum that you know where you can deliver material in a more condensed manner. Someone on the team should be responsible for helping to keep the training moving and on time.

It is the practice of the team with whom I train, we are always aware that the ICWA talks about culture and insuring that cultural ties are maintained between Native children and their families and their tribes. If we are going to talk about culture then we need to model it. We deliver our training in a respectful and ceremonial way. We make sure that we have an elder in the room who can offer prayers during the day. We try to insure that the elders are from communities near where we are training. The morning starts with a prayer or blessing and we move into a talking circle where we all introduce ourselves and state briefly why we are at the training. We close the day with a talking circle where people can speak their truth from the heart regarding their experience in the training. We send them off with a farewell prayer asking for their safe return home and we thank them for their participation during the day.

When the training is over, we, the training team, debrief the day to see what went well, where we got off the tracks and how we can improve the training the next time. This helps us to keep focused and to insure that the training does improve with each delivery.

It is my sincere hope that these few tips will help as you prepare to train the ICWA curriculum. Good luck and may the Creator and the Ancestors accompany you.