

Toward An Understanding of the Ecology of Indigenous Education

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This article discusses the challenges of implementing Indigenous education from an Indigenous epistemological and ontological standpoint. It is intended as a contributing work toward an understanding of the use of Indigenous spiritual ecology, environmental perspectives, and metamorphic thinking in Indigenous education. A self-study inquiry approach is utilized to present possibilities for transformative Indigenous pedagogy and curriculum.

WHO I AM

I have chosen to begin with the traditional practice of naming myself, acknowledging my family and my community, and all who have shaped and guided my knowing and being. When sharing Indigenous knowledge it is understood that we are to acknowledge that what we know has been given to us by all those who came before us. The words shared by Ermine (personal communication, 2008), a renowned Cree educator and researcher, reminded me that, "I am not standing alone. All of my relations are here with me and guiding me."

When I was growing up, I always thought that the word *Nehiyawak* included all Indian people. *Nehiyawak* is the term for Cree people. The ever-changing landscape of Canadian Aboriginal policy has produced various terms for Aboriginal identity. I am, first and foremost, an Indigenous person of this land. I use the term Indigenous to express that I was born here. I am native to this land. By virtue of the *Indian Act of 1867*, I am an Indian. My ancestors negotiated treaties; therefore, I am also a treaty Indian. I have a treaty number and I am a member of a reserve. "Aboriginal" refers to those who are Metis, First Nations, and Inuit, as defined by the *Constitution Act of 1982*. Based on these designations, I am First Nations, Indian, and *Nehiyaw* (Plains Cree). I still refer to myself as an Indian because that is how we were identified historically.

I will use my Cree language to relate other significant aspects of self that mark the epistemological terrain of my work. From early life, as *Nehiyawak* (Cree people) we were taught the importance of knowing ourselves in relation to family, and community (Anderson, 2000; Graveline, 1996). *Nehiyaw iskwew oma niya* (I am a Cree woman). *Nakawacihk ohci niya* (I am from the Sweetgrass First Nation). I am the daughter of Joseph Weenie, *Nakawacihk ohci* (Sweetgrass First Nation), and Georgianna Favel, *Kisihkomanahk ohci* (Poundmaker First Nation). I am from Treaty Six territory in present day Saskatchewan, Canada. I have written extensively about who I am and where I come from to convey “We are born and have our being in a place of memory” (hooks, 2009, p.5).

Writing about and remembering the early influences in my life serve to sustain me and provide direction in my teaching and research. I look at my grandparents and parents as the leaders, teachers, and mentors who have shaped my views on education. They believed strongly in the work ethic and education as the way to autonomy and self-determination. Their vision and philosophy has guided me in my work.

I have lived away from my home community since early childhood and by writing about my foundation of knowing I am able to heal from this brokenness. My journey, the living, thinking, writing and being, has been about “walking a known terrain, leaving, always coming back to the known reality, walking with one clear intent – the will to remain rooted to familiar ground and the certainty of knowing one’s place” (hooks, 2009, p. 2).

INTRODUCTION

The actualization of Indian Control of Indian Education has been a slow process. There has been an increase in the number of Aboriginal teachers in school systems but this has not necessarily translated into educational programs that are based on Aboriginal knowledge and processes. A pressing issue for Aboriginal educators is the ability to articulate and redefine what Aboriginal curriculum entails. Indigenous educators must be able to reconceptualize what Indigeneity is and its relevance in a contemporary society. The challenge in implementing Indigenous education is how to incorporate traditional teachings effectively and appropriately in a contemporary world. I am proposing that the concept of spiritual ecology, a term that can be characterized as “ the application of special intellectual, ritual, psychological, and

spiritual teaching tools that facilitated deep levels of learning and understanding" (Cajete, 1994, p. 223), constitutes the essence of meaningful and constructive Indigenous curriculum.

Self-study inquiry is a methodology that teachers and researchers can draw on to critically review their teaching and research practice (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Loughran, 2004). It stems from Schon's (1995) view of inquiry as "reflection in and on action" (p. 9). The self-study approach has been used to study "the situated, embodied nature of teacher knowledge" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004, p. 582). It is held that by restorying our experiences we can reflect on and examine theory in action (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). It has been also theorized that "it was in the self that Aboriginal people discovered great resources for coming to grips with life's mysteries" (Ermine, 1995, p.108). Given these perspectives it can be perceived that self-study and self-knowledge present possibilities for transformational change in Indigenous education. The assumption is that by bringing forth my knowing in a particular time and space, new knowledge into Aboriginal curriculum and instruction can be created. I am using my story and experiences as a teacher and learner to make explicit an Indigenous orientation to teaching and learning.

SELF-STUDY OF PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Underlying my story and my experience is the notion of assimilation and disconnection from family and community. The first two years of my schooling were on reserve. I did not speak English when I started school. When my parents brought me to school I recall that the only thing I could say were my numbers from one to twelve. This was the extent of my English speaking ability but I was able to learn quickly. At the end of the first year, I was promoted to grade three.

My parents sent me to school in town when I was in grade four so that I would have a good education. Life was hard on the reserve and they had wanted a better life for me. This was their vision for me. I know that they had good intentions for me. They would not have sent me to a place where I would not do well. I believe they had faith in me that I would survive and succeed.

I experienced many challenges in my schooling but I did complete my high school and university education. Throughout that whole process of be-

coming educated in a Euro-western system there was something missing. I learned everything that was external to me. When I was fifteen years old, I wrote an essay called, "The Views of an Indian" – an essay about racism. I believe that it was my attempt at making sense of my experiences and expressing my woundedness. Cajete (1994) stated that, "true learning and gaining significant knowledge does not come without sacrifice and at times a deep wound" (p. 228). When I became a teacher I perpetuated the same system that had negated my language and culture. In later years those early school experiences were the impetus for making me strive to create change and to make a difference for others.

One of the turning points in my professional development was when I started graduate studies in 1991. As part of my studies I was required to take a course on Aboriginal pedagogy and Aboriginal epistemology. I recall the deep sense of inadequacy that I felt when I had to write about Aboriginal ways of knowing. However, when I started to acknowledge my own history and background I came to realize that the knowledge was embedded within me. Being a witness to ceremonies and traditional activities when I was growing up had provided "a spiritual sustenance" (hooks, 2009, p. 58). I remembered the words and the stories of the Elders when I was a child. They had shared basic truths of life and now their teachings began to have significance for me. Cajete (1994) stated, "When a story finds that special circumstance in which its message is fully received, it induces a direct and powerful understanding: this becomes a teaching" (p. 170). I believe that the learning process that I have experienced has implications for transformative pedagogy and curricula.

After years of being schooled in a Euro-western system, I found that the knowledge that I had been exposed to from my parents, grandparents, and Elders in my community had prepared me for the academy. I have not always understood my purpose and have at times not been willing to deal with the challenges. However, my life path has been to be in an administrative position in a First Nations university and I have been given opportunities for making way or "clearing a path" (Robertson & Farrell-Racette, 2009) for Indigenous Knowledge perspectives.

After I started teaching at First Nations University of Canada, I learned more about Indigeneity. The Indigenous Education program in which I was teaching focussed on First Nations worldview and philosophy. In my search

for higher levels of meaning I started to incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing in my research. I researched the Sacred Circle concept and learned how to incorporate circle teachings in my research and practice. I used Cajete's (1994) model of Connected Rings of Indigenous Visioning, which "symbolizes a structure, a process, and a field for learning about the creative stages and the inherent nature of visioning" (p. 70) as the framework for developing the proposal for my Master of Education thesis. My purpose in adapting it to my research was to create an Indigenous research methodology and frame of reference. My study was on resilience processes and I was seeking a greater understanding of how individuals are able to overcome adversity and succeed.

I continue to seek ways to create teaching and research methodologies that are appropriate to an Indigenous knowledge paradigm. I listen carefully to Elders everywhere I go and I work to incorporate their knowledge into my teaching and research practice. The words, "*Ka mihkowisin anima kantoskaman*," (Paskemin, 2008), are a source of strength and inspiration for me. These words mean that when we seek knowledge, truth, and understanding, we will be gifted with whatever it is that we have asked for.

My learning process has always been about, what Cole, (2006), referred to as "coming home to the village... to regenerate shared visions" (p. 6). My relatives back home on the reserve remain as the foundation of my work and purpose. I have long thought of the need to write about what I know and where I have learned it. As time went on, I had come to understand that all that was required was for me to speak to my own place of knowing and to speak to my own lived experiences.

INTEGRATING INDIGENOUS SPIRITUAL ECOLOGY AND TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

The integration of First Nations perspectives into curriculum is fraught with contradictions and conflicts. There are two opposing systems at work, and in many ways, our efforts to make learning relevant to the lived realities of Aboriginal children serves to diminish and further devalue Indigenous thought. What is taught in schools is surface knowledge. My process of learning was influenced and shaped by Indigenous spiritual ecology, and it is this aspect of knowing that is the least understood and practiced in the classroom.

The different cultural ceremonies that I have witnessed as a child remain with me, and reveal how these gatherings were community and spiritual oriented and gave us a sense of well being and belonging in our daily lives. During the ceremonies we had to keep silence while the Elders prayed and by this process it was instilled in me that their words held great power and wisdom. They would tell us to live with compassion, *kisewatisowinihk*, from our hearts. They also told us to take care of our families and children, and to have faith in the Creator, *Kisemanito*. These are valuable life lessons that help us, and they should be shared in curricula. The counselling speeches that I have heard at community events where the Elders shared their life experiences and related the importances of prayer and good relations as a way to conduct their lives are relevant today.

We are faced with addressing the disruption to Aboriginal knowledge systems brought on by our colonial history. Our world is in an environmental crisis with concerns about global warming and the rapid depletion of natural resources. The basic Indigenous principles of living in harmony with nature are not recognized or valued. These are some of the continuing tensions, conflicts, and contradictions that impede the development of a collective vision toward building healthy and viable communities. Indigenous knowledge is still in that marginalized space.

The concept of spiritual ecology bears consideration in terms of creating space for that other way of knowing and being. The Elders tell us that everything has a spirit and this becomes evident in the structures of the Cree language. In the Cree language we have animate and inanimate forms of words. The word for rock, for instance, is animate, and this implies that it is a living entity. From this example it can be seen that spiritual ecological understandings are embedded in language. Language is a life force and it constitutes the spiritual cosmos in traditional knowledge systems (Cajete, 1994). To know things we must have the language. It is for this reason that Indigenous languages need to comprise the main components of Indigenous curriculum design.

The notion that all things have spirit and that we can access knowledge through the spirit world is a part of the psychological and spiritual development of my childhood. When I was a child I learned from my parents and my grandparents that we were always forewarned about a death in our family or community. The animals are closest to the natural and spiritual world and

they would act strangely whenever death was imminent. The eagle is held in high regard in my culture. It is customary to give an eagle feather to honour people for their achievements. Often after we have buried our dead, the eagle can be seen flying above and it is taken as a good sign that our relatives are being taken care of in the spirit world.

As part of reconciling my place in academia I have come to rely on the intuitive and the spiritual realm to help me. Dreaming is one of those ways that I connect with the metaphysical and spiritual world. I record my dreams and I try to understand them. Whenever I am perplexed by my dreams, I go to the Elders for their advice and counsel. Ermine (1995) maintained, "Blessings and other assorted gifts that permeate Aboriginal thought all stem from dreams" (p. 109). Dreaming as a way of knowing reflects one of those vast differences between the Aboriginal and the western worldview and philosophy. Garfield (1974) wrote, "We in the West are told that dreams are nonsense, or amusing, or psychologically revealing; we do not deliberately engage ourselves in our dreams to help ourselves" (p. 92). As a child, I remember how my parents would talk about their dreams. When they would dream of one who had passed into the spirit world, they would say that they are hungry. Our dreams are perceived as a way for the spirit world to communicate with us. This is why we have feast ceremonies. These are practices and teachings that help me in my daily life and ultimately what is significant and relevant in our daily lives must be recognized and validated in the curriculum.

The source of Indigenous knowledge comes from *atayokewina* (sacred stories), *acimowina* (ordinary stories), songs, ceremonies, and teachings from our communities and our Elders. They provide the content and the context for creating viable curriculum. Stories that represent the ethos of my community include stories about the Little People, or the *memekwesisak* and *Wesaykecak*. The *memekwesisak* live where we call, "down the hill," and there are those who have said that they have seen them. The Little People are special and we are taught to honour them. *Wesaykecak* is a legendary figure who brings lessons and meaning to our experiences. There is a place called Sliding Hill on our reserve, and the story is that this is where *Wesakeycak* was last seen. When *Wesakeycak* was sliding down the hill he left a big hole in the side of the hill. We have Drumming Hill, *Manito Kamatweyiket*, a place where drumming can be heard in the distance. This way of knowing is characterized by an appreciation and understanding of that relationship to the natural and

has “a profound sense of empathy with other forms of life” (Knudston & Suzuki, 1992, p. 15). The sacred stories and sacred places that comprise this epistemological and ontological base reflect the aspects of traditional and spiritual knowledge that still have relevance in my daily life. This aspect of the “sacred ecology” (Knudston & Suzuki, 1992, p. 15) of Aboriginal peoples needs to be included in curriculum making.

The notion that all things have spirit is manifested in the sweatlodge ceremony. The ritual in the sweatlodge ceremony includes a process of giving life to the rocks or to the grandfathers (Goodwill, personal communication, 2005). There is a transformation process that emanates from the rocks. The ceremony promotes a sense of wellness as our prayers are carried to the grandfathers and to the spirit world. The sweatlodge ceremony is a deeply personal experience that brings order and meaning to our lives.

Spiritual ecology contains symbolism and metaphoric thinking (Cajete, 1994) and this is reflected in the sundance ceremony. There is the tree in the center of the lodge, which symbolizes the tree of life and knowledge. We bring offerings of cloth and tobacco so that our children and our families will receive blessings. When I first did the sundance, I was afraid that I would not be able to make it without food or water, but when we are asking for prayers and blessings for those closest to us, we do find the energy to complete what we have set out to do. This is part of the aspect of “setting intention” that Cajete (1994) refers to. The teaching from ceremony is that we keep true to the intention and to our vision as far as we are able (Cajete, personal communication, 2007).

Wilson (2008) has conceptualized that research is ceremony and this view can be applied to teaching. I have been taught that I need to prepare myself physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally, before I participate in ceremony and after the ceremony is completed, I am responsible to carry on this process. What this implies is that, we are always in ceremony and I have come to a realization that I need to extend this to my work as a teacher and researcher. Those same preparations that I make for ceremony, to ensure that I am entering with a good mind and a good spirit, are aspects of what I need to do as a teacher and researcher. From this perspective teaching is ceremony and this spiritual underpinning brings in a new dimension and meaning to teaching. There is a need for more developmental work in making curriculum relevant to an Indigenous epistemological framework thus described.

The medicine wheel is a powerful symbolic representation of the connection between the physical and the metaphysical world that the Cree people believe in. Medicine Wheel teachings were organized and conceptualized by Elders who had gathered to create a curriculum that would facilitate this knowledge (Four Worlds Development, 1984). The medicine wheel, or *Nehiyaw Pimatisowin*, contains teachings that inform Indigenous worldview and philosophy. When we have a feast or a pipe ceremony we sit in a circle, as the circle is inclusive and all encompassing. The sundance lodge and the sweat-lodge utilize that circular framework. The circle informs and epitomizes Indigenous pedagogical and epistemological approaches.

There are numerous ways we can work with others to reaffirm Indigenous Knowledge and how we can play a pivotal role in restoring that epistemological and ecological consciousness. As part of my own vision of how things should be I work closely with Elders as they "have experienced a profound and compassionate reconciliation of outer-and inner-directed knowledge" (Knudston & Suzuki, 1992, p. 15). Elders play a vital role in helping to (re) create curriculum that reflects a spiritual connection and holistic approach to life and learning, and it is important that their perspectives be heard and utilized.

The methods for creating curriculum arise from the vision and purpose that we have set for ourselves, individually and collectively. Within the Indigenous Education program, the guiding principle is the integration of Indigenous Knowledge. To this end the Indigenous Education program has developed a graduate level course on Foundations of Indigenous Knowledge to make space for approaches that are grounded on Indigenous epistemology and ontology.

The Food Bank Lecture Series were developed to connect the university with the wider community. Faculty from the University of Regina, and First Nations University of Canada are invited to share their research at the Food Bank. The committee members include representatives from both institutions. To date we have completed four years in this series. The series begin every fall and we invite Elders to help us start in a good way.

Elder Velma Goodfeather is from the Standing Buffalo First Nations and she is Dakota Sioux. In September 2006 she was asked to open the lecture series and she decided that she would speak on the topic of traditional and processed food. I did not immediately comprehend the full implications of

her talk. Her presentation, however, was thought provoking, as it focussed on the connection to the animal and the plant world and represented the essence of the spiritual ecological paradigm that should inform curriculum. It became clear to me how her topic was very timely in addressing ecological and environmental awareness.

Based on my work with Elder Velma Goodfeather, I made a presentation at the 2007 Canadian Aboriginal Science and Technology Conference. This presentation focussed on learning about the sacred in traditional food gathering and preparation in order to pass on the teachings and the knowledge that have helped Aboriginal people to survive. It was intended to give insight and knowledge about traditional food, processed food, and to discuss implications for health and wholeness. The main idea was to relate how traditional knowledge is premised on the holistic view that all things are connected and all things are sacred, and it is this notion that is integral to an Aboriginal science paradigm.

The lecture series that I refer to is one example of how we can establish relationships and utilize community resources to help us to create a curriculum, which integrates spiritual ecology and environmental perspectives. My intent is to extend the central theme of traditional food to a curriculum project and address important issues in ecological and environmental awareness.

Developing and increasing treaty knowledge is another critical component of Indigenous Education. Treaties defined our special relationship to the land and these ideas are still legitimate. Land claims comprise one of the pressing issues in our contemporary world. Our connection to the land defines who we are and our special relationship to that geo-physical and geo-political space. Indigenous education needs to focus on these types of issues that affect the future of our nations.

It is important to provide opportunities for affective education for our students. Developing an emotive connection and response to our work helps us to define purpose and vision for ourselves, and connects our mind and our heart. The use of Talking Circles is one way of achieving this but I have found that sharing circles are often superficial conversations. We need to engage our students in deep dialogue, an instructional strategy modelled by Cajete (personal communication, 2007). This approach includes the use of inner and outer circles and is one that will be conducive to engaging and involving students in the learning process at a deeper level. This learning circle

has been an effective way to build a learning community and as part of our work as Indigenous educators we need to continue to explore more strategies that support the educative process and community building.

Effective teaching practice includes the responsibility to teach to the learning styles of our students. I learned from the traditional mode of teaching, of rote learning and memorization, with little room for creativity or critical thinking, and yet, my greatest learning and what I am able to internalize comes from my lived experiences. It becomes apparent that there is a need to reconcile the western and the Indigenous approaches in all areas of the educational endeavour.

From previous research on curricular theorizing I have noted the shift toward generating artistic and alternate forms of representation in curriculum development (Weenie, 2008). This approach has been largely attributed to the poststructuralist theorists but it needs to be made known that tribal education was founded on "visionary and artistic foundations" (Cajete, 1994, p. 142). These types of approaches have long been understood and utilized by tribal peoples.

My effectiveness as an educator is related to the ability to connect my inner spirit to the greater vision of Indigenous education. Cajete (1994) conceptualized that community is the medium and the message for implementing Indigenous education. It is also a consideration that language is the heart of the decolonization process and the deconstruction of dominant knowledge production. I have been told that every time I speak my language I am breaking free from the structures of dominant knowledge. English is the oppressor's language and to truly Indigenize and transform our education system we must also include Indigenous languages as the medium and the message.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Peat (2002) stated, "Energy is experienced as a feeling of internal power and an underlying movement and transformation" (p. 134). I have described the sources of energy from a personal and communal level that motivate me to work toward greater change in Aboriginal curriculum and it is this type of commitment and motivation that is required to build sustainable communities. This view implies that we must allow creative processing and problem solving to unfold in order to build sustainable communities. Further, it is the spiritual ecology and traditional knowledge of our communities that ground

our work and provide the epistemological focus.

Creating networks and building alliances is a component of building sustainable communities. As part of this greater vision it is important for Indigenous institutions to achieve a greater level of autonomy and independence. To facilitate this process educators who work in Indigenous communities are compelled to make alliances and network with others. Indian people understood the reason for alliance making. It was for survival and we are in the midst of the same kind of circumstance. In order to survive, we must be able to direct our energies to building community and to be able to negotiate, what Bhabha (1994) has termed the "inter," or the "*in between space*" (p. 56), in order to ensure our existence. The vision needs to be extended to include Indigenous institutions in a more global context, to strengthen our positions.

The other aspect to building sustainable communities in relation to Indigenous pedagogy and epistemology is the concept of "mining" and "border crossing," (Cajete, personal communication, 2007). There is unity in diversity and there is the spiritual understanding that we are all related that we could use to transcend differences. One example of the concept of border crossing at work is the collaboration between Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program, a Métis institution, the University of Regina, Faculty of Education, and First Nations University of Canada, Indigenous Education, in program development. The perceived need for teachers to increase their knowledge of how to teach Aboriginal children was the motivation to creating the Certificate of Extended Studies in Aboriginal Education.

The Indigenous Education Department has also developed and implemented community based programming specifically in the area of First Nations language development. This requires us to work with linguistically and culturally diverse communities. Currently we have an elementary and secondary program but our ultimate vision is to develop a Master of Education degree program. These are the areas that we have worked on for our educative community to be more sustainable.

Curriculum development within the context of community and culture is part of sustainability (Cajete, personal communication, 2007). We build a community of learners and establish alliances and partnerships to facilitate this process. The content emanates from that visioning process and using that imaginative realm of being to come up with solutions, much like our ancestors did. They were able to attain the answers to life from that inner space

(Ermine, 1995). Curriculum design has been conceptualized as concentric circles of relationships and concepts and this is a model that is still relevant in building community (Cajete, 1999).

FINAL WORDS

O-kiskinawmakew oma niya. In the Plains Cree language, this means, I am a teacher. In Cree, *o-kiskinawmakew*, literally means, “one who points the way, or directs others.” It is hoped that what I write and what I share will help to point the way in Indigenous education. I have related personal and direct experience with an Indigenous philosophical view of education. To truly understand Indigenous epistemology and ontology requires “years of detailed, rigorous, disciplined training of the mind and body” (Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000, p. 28). The profound significance of Indigenous knowledge can be conveyed in part only. What I am sharing is partial knowledge and it is intended to be a contributing work to the ongoing development and expression of Indigenous pedagogy and curriculum development.

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