

Education for Liberation: One Indigenous Classroom at a Time?

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Abstract

This article describes one adult education class in which First Nations educational philosophies and practices were employed. It is a facilitator's personal account of a 200-level, web-delivered Indigenous Studies course that examined methods and theory in recording Oral Traditions. First Nations worldviews and ways of teaching and learning are fundamentally different from Western education theories and pedagogies. Rather than viewing Aboriginal learners as deficient (as Western educational institutions often do), this course was developed under the premise that all students will learn and grow, given that an open, safe, supportive and challenging learning environment is provided. It is the Atisokanak, the Elders, and the First Nations protocols and ceremonies explored and employed in this class that made it the unique and rewarding experience it was for its facilitators and learners alike.

Keywords: adult education, education for transformation, cognitive imperialism, indigenous studies, First Nations educational philosophy, First Nations oral traditions

Background

First Nations and non-aboriginal peoples come from cognitive worlds that are radically different. In mainstream society, and particularly Western adult educational institutions, First Nations learners are forced to live in conflict and confusion between two incongruent philosophical systems. First Nations worldviews, personality traits, social, behavioural and learning patterns are fundamentally different than Western epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies, and First Nations peoples, therefore, often are uncomfortable participants in "the competitive struggle in a society structured around social and economic manipulation" (Spindler, 1971, pp. 29-30). Western educational institutions deliver adult education to Aboriginal students under the premise that they are "lacking" in these areas, and that they will be "more useful to civil society if they are educated [to Western standards] and [hence] economically secure" (Schick & McNinch, 2009, p. xi). This is because Western adult education systems perceive

deficits as lying within Indigenous students and their home environments rather than examining the deficiencies in their own educational theories and teaching practices.

Meanwhile, non-aboriginal learners are raised in educational systems that reinforce the status quo unquestioningly. At best, students receive some level of cultural awareness training in which First Nations ways of seeing and being in the world are constructed as “inferior, and not reasonable or modern” (Schick & McNinch, 2009, p. xii). The underlying orientation is that white people are “fine the way they are, that contagion and difference, indeed otherness itself, must be managed, confined, and regulated if it cannot be entirely eliminated” (Schick & McNinch, 2009, p. xiv).

The basic assumptions that these institutions of learning are delivering a “public good,” and that integration and hegemony are desirable end goals for both First Nations and non-aboriginal learners, go largely unquestioned. In so doing, these educational institutions fail to deliver a critical social analysis, fail to address unequal power relations, and fail to educate non-aboriginal professionals about their own complicity in reproducing systems that marginalize worldviews dissimilar from the Eurocentric paradigm.

Much has been written by scholars such as Rauna Kuokkanen (2007) about “cultural diversity” nowadays being taught by corporate-oriented universities not as a source of dissimilar yet equal knowledges – a “gift,” but as a “commodity” to be exchanged, and from which an institution can gain access to new markets and, hence, economic benefits.

In particular, Kuokkanen argues that Indigenous discourses are allowed to exist in the university, but only in marginal spaces or within clearly defined parameters established by the dominant discourse, which is grounded in certain assumptions, values, conceptions of knowledge, and views of the world (2007, p. xviii).

This approach toward adult education in general, and education for transformation in particular, minimizes the ability of First Nations peoples to act upon educational institutions; it makes fostering and facilitating critical thought for social change almost impossible, as it leaves systemic inequities and power imbalances that enable and perpetuate “cognitive imperialism” (Battiste, 2009, p. xvii) intact and unaddressed.

While there seems to be a growing awareness among adult educators that ideological foundations, pedagogic implementations, curriculum development and assessment strategies need to change to better reflect First Nations ways of sharing and receiving information / knowledge, these individuals, unsupported by the Western educational infrastructure as they are, are often left with the frustrating questions of “Where do we go from here? How do we move beyond awareness to action in counter-narrating the Western educational indoctrination of what is privileged and what is excluded? What might the effecting of social change or Education for Liberation (of both Aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples) look like in practical and not just theoretical terms? As we feel powerless to change the institutional structure and policies we work within, can we, at least, change our classroom?” [1]

This article endeavours to provide at least a partial answer to the above

questions by examining one adult education course which this author believes was conducted utilizing pedagogies that enabled and empowered students of various ages, educational fields and ethnic backgrounds to learn and grow as a cooperative and supportive group. In the academic endeavour that will be described in this paper, learners developed not just as critical thinkers and broadminded scholars, but also as receptive and perceptive human beings.

As I was intimately involved in the development and delivery of this course, I will utilize personal narrative style to discuss this class, and to examine the theoretical underpinnings that informed the ways in which it was envisioned, designed and conducted.

This paper is by no means meant to be self-congratulatory; rather, I humbly offer it as a beginning discourse, a way of critically analysing one small effort in anti-oppressive adult education.

The Beginning

The class was titled *Methods and Theory in Documenting Oral Traditions*, a 200-level, web-delivered Indigenous Studies course offered by the First Nations University of Canada / University of Regina.

Oral Traditions are multidimensional narratives comparable to the philosophical, historical, political, social and spiritual education materials of Western society. Oral Traditions, however, have an added dimension that is absent outside First Nations epistemologies, in that some Oral Traditions (called the *Atisokanak* in Anishinaabemowin [2]) are sacred, spirited beings (both the stories themselves and the characters in them); these are the teaching stories. Other narratives (called *Tii-baadje-maa-wiin: Telling in story form what is happening now*) would be comparable to family or community news archives.

In First Nations ways, the librarians, the holders of this knowledge in and for the communities are the Elders. These individuals are trained from early childhood to remember the Oral Traditions. More importantly, these Elders are fully immersed in the philosophical worldview out of which the Oral Traditions arise, and which is given expression through them. Elders live and share the teaching that the spoken word is sacred; they place the utmost emphasis on speaking the truth.

My involvement in the class began in the spring of 2011, when my mentor asked me if I would like to help design and teach this class. I wasn't sure why he would invite me, as I had just graduated the previous year myself. I felt I had no teaching capabilities or subject matter knowledge to offer the students. However, I agreed to the joint venture, for one, to lend a hand because he wasn't in good health at the time, for another, because throughout my studies, I had always wondered how fellow students were dealing with the many difficult issues raised during classes and in assignments. This, then, was going to be my chance to experience, first hand, how other learners understand, process, and make meaning of information presented to them. To be able to be an effective helper, I would also need to continuously strengthen and re-evaluate my own learning. As Budd Hall so poignantly states, "nothing is as powerful a stimulus to learning as the necessity to teach and inform others" (2006, p. 230). At the same time, I would be able to learn how to present information from a seasoned adult educator I tremendously respect for his ability to keep the balance between

providing and withholding answers in order to empower students to learn and grow propelled by their internal desire to know. Eventually I did inquire why he had asked. The answer was simple, really; he said, "You have to start somewhere."

To provide the widest spectrum of perspectives possible, we incorporated writings of both Indigenous and non-aboriginal scholars, and materials on Oral Traditions as philosophy and Treaty history. Our main focal points, however, were to invite students, first, to critically examine the Western notion that written texts are more valid and valuable than Oral Traditions, and what Oral Traditions may have to offer that is absent in written manuscripts. Second, we wanted to provide students with the practical tools of how to find and approach knowledge keepers so as to come in direct contact with the Oral Traditions they were learning about. Subsequently, we included materials about First Nations protocols and research methodologies, to enable students to conduct ethical and cooperative rather than exploitative research. Finally, we planned to ask the students to reflect on their research experiences and findings.

We envisioned conducting this class utilizing First Nations educational theories and pedagogies, which hold as their main tenets that learning is holistic (incorporating the mental, spiritual and emotional realms), practical as well as theoretical, communal and, therefore, emerging from many contexts beyond the classroom; that learning and growing can only take place in an atmosphere of safety, equality and interdependence, and, at last, that the autonomy of learners, as holders of experience and knowledge in their own right, must be safeguarded, respected and appreciated by fellow students and teachers alike. This course was not designed and delivered to "mainstream Indigenous students to the [Western] academic culture and environment"; as Kuokkanen says, "what needed to be mainstreamed, if anything," were "Indigenous philosophies and worldviews. Mainstreaming in this context implies inviting Indigenous philosophies and epistememes [into the classroom], so they can be heard" (2007, pp. 2-3).

Counter-narrating what students may have had learned previously, "that indigenous epistememes are inferior, and not worthy of serious intellectual consideration," and that "there only is one episteme, one ontology, one intellectual tradition on which to rely and from which to draw" (Kuokkanen, 2007, pp. 2-3), was going to be an interesting and challenging undertaking for us, especially since our class was split almost evenly between Aboriginal and non-aboriginal students, most of them registered under the University of Regina in a variety of fields and at various stages of study.

Throughout the process of assembling the course materials my mentor necessarily took the lead, but was always open to include texts I thought were important to share. While he drew up the course outline and schedule of readings, I created the web page, endeavouring to make it as user-friendly as possible to eliminate this stressor in distance education. The design of the course home page was admittedly personal and intended to help learners feel that they were *coming home* when they entered.

I remember many fun, animated, long-distance philosophical discussions about course content and learning objectives over the ensuing months, and about marking criteria for assignments which could not be justly considered by staying

within the normal parameters of simply assessing content, grammar, and proper source citation.

Over the course of the semester, we continuously reflected upon and discussed students' growth, and refined and adjusted our strategies on how to maintain the momentum of gently moving them forward accordingly. This was a truly collaborative, inclusive effort, in which we challenged each other to not only draw on educational theories and pedagogical expertise (or, in my case, a lack thereof) for guidance, but also to utilize our own past educational experiences, our intuition and emotional intelligence as adult educators, life-long learners and human beings.

Relationships & Languages

From the onset, we made it clear that we envisioned our relationship with those who participated in the course as one of reciprocity, care, and mutual empowerment. We introduced ourselves not as teachers, the sole possessors of knowledge, but as facilitators in the creation of knowledge. We also shared with the students that we believed we would be helped along on our own learning journey by everyone's contributions to the class. We did not explicitly state our teaching philosophies as "expectations for the class," rather we expressed them subtly through the gentle language we employed in all situations and on all issues.

Over the time my mentor and I have known each other, we have had to negotiate a language of understanding all of our own. Since we come from different linguistic backgrounds, with the use of English not always creating common ground for us, we have often struggled for ways to communicate effectively. When English was not capable of expressing our worldviews adequately, we introduced concepts imbedded in our first languages, making the word part of *our language* dictionary, and the concept part of *our shared awareness*. This made understanding possible where meaning would otherwise have remained inaccessible to us. Because of our personal experiences that shared understanding cannot be assumed but must be negotiated, and that "English language varieties" are not "deviant forms of English" (Sterzuck, 2009, p. 3) but can be enablers in this process, we welcomed students to the class in *our* language, and, hence, created a safe space for them to express themselves in ways that felt comfortable for them [3].

The Virtual Setting

The paradox of conducting a class on Oral Traditions via distance education, a teaching/learning environment wholly dependent on the written word, where the immediacy of person to person communication is infinitely harder to create, did not escape us. To encourage dialogue among the learners, and replicate the classroom setting, albeit virtually, we incorporated weekly class times into the course. Each Sunday evening we met in a chat room for about 90 minutes to speak about the weekly readings and discussion questions as well as any concerns, thoughts or events we or the students felt were related to the course. We connected both the weekly discussion boards, and our classroom visits to First Nations Talking Stick Ceremonies, in which each participant is given the space/time needed to relate her/his insights, and the respect and attention

required to feel heard, understood, and appreciated for his/her contribution to the matter under discussion and everyone's learning. None of the students had ever had online courses that included class time; within minutes of our first meeting, they recognized its value, and commented that they felt more at ease to participate here than in face-to-face classes.

While the weekly discussion boards provided excellent opportunities for students to reflect and share, some of the major breakthroughs came during our class times. My mentor and I raised topics and asked questions, but the students took our discussions into directions we could not have anticipated or even imagined. To observe this student-lead stretching of horizons and accompanying positive change away from Eurocentric indoctrination was simply incredible.

The Power of the Atisokanak

I attribute our (meaning the students' and the facilitators') success in this course to the power of the Atisokanak. In preparation for our very first discussion and class, we posted *YouTube* links to an Anishinaabe Oral Tradition [4]. Without any further direction, the discussion board lit up with comments over the coming days. Some students provided summaries of the story, others various interpretations, others, yet, sought to understand hidden teachings; all were respectful and appreciative of the insights others had offered, and aided their own understanding of the story. When we came together in class for the first time, 26 disoriented individuals beginning a new semester instantly turned into a group of fascinating philosophers at the simple prompt of: "has everyone had a chance to watch the video?" The ensuing discussion was symbiotic and inspiring; layer after layer the students dug away together at underlying meanings from many different angles grounded in their varied experiences. The only thing my mentor and I did was encourage their work-in-progress with short, positive, reassuring comments. An hour flew by, and before anyone noticed we had gone past our proposed class time. Participants commented that they were overwhelmed, exhausted, and at the same time ecstatic at what had transpired, and that they would need the week to absorb and process everything that had been brought to the discussion.

That first night, the Anishinaabe Oral Tradition, the Atisokanak, who never offer up the proverbial "moral of the story" that so limits individual meaning-making, set the tone for our semester together, and in the following weeks and months we heard those same student comments over and over. In reflecting on these, I am reminded of Sue M. Scott's writing on transformation. She says:

A change in perspective constitutes a transformation. It seems that adults who undergo a substantive trigger event [in this case engaging the Atisokanak] and go through dialogue in a safe and supportive social space, also go through a kind of transformative process that, when it is made conscious, is powerful and enduring... It starts with a relationship to the images of the unconscious, then a relationship to the emotions these images evoke; the rational ego changes, but only after true engagement with the emotional upheaval. (2006, pp. 154, 158)

Scott's mental, spiritual, emotional and physical conception of transformation was echoed by an email we received from one of our students when the semester ended. It said the following:

I hope this email reaches you well. I wanted to share my personal experience of the INDG 281 class. Out of all the 5 classes I was enrolled in this fall I found 281 to be the most challenging. It was challenging from a spiritual to mental and verbal aspect. I've never been in a class that I enjoyed and also experienced many levels of emotions. I mean my emotions were up and down, and it was the spiritual essence that lacks with learning in a western institution. So it took me longer to write and think and write and think. I lost myself a few times because I was involving every realm of myself in one assignment. I have to say I was surprised because I never expected to learn or approach a class like this before. (personal communication, December 4, 2011)

Being a part of this class also represented a leap forward in my own learning. My mentor is a master at asking non-leading, open-ended questions in the academic setting. In my unique role as both learner and "teacher" in this course, at first I refrained from providing students with answers to discussion questions during class because I knew this was not my mentor's way. I remember holding short many times, and then being amazed by the insights students arrived at, and the level of learning, searching, and meaning-making they were not only fully capable of on their own, but, more importantly, had committed themselves to, in the absence of authoritative / authoritarian direction. I began to realize that, just as the Atisokanak refuse to provide immediate answers, I, as an (adult) educator, must refrain from the compulsion to do more than present a wide spectrum of information, provide a safe, open, multi-dimensional learning environment, and be supportive in students' learning both inside and outside of the classroom. I realized that any input beyond this is injurious to learners' personal power and their innate potential for transformation and liberation.

Holistic Education

Fully engaging the Atisokanak and Tii-baadge-maa-wiin is only possible if we connect with Indigenous knowledge keepers. To achieve this, we asked the students to complete a four-part assignment for which they needed to leave the safety of the (virtual) academic environment, and reach out into the First Nations community; we asked them to interview an Elder. The assignment comprised the following stages:

1. Assemble a list of questions (this needed to be approved by the instructor to ensure it was appropriate);
2. Seek out an Elder and negotiate and conduct an interview using proper First Nations protocols (we had read about and discussed these protocols at length in class);
3. Transcribe the interview, first in its raw and then in an edited version, ensuring that the voice of the Elder was preserved;
4. Reflect on the experience of preparing for, conducting, and transcribing the interview, meeting the Elder and experiencing First Nations ways of teaching and learning in their original setting, outside the formal classroom.

While this was a challenging and at times overwhelming endeavour for both some First Nations and non-aboriginal students, in their reflection papers, they consistently noted that the encounter was invaluable to their learning. In

essence, we wished for the students to come away with a growing realization that academia and academics are not the only, and certainly not the principal places and persons where Indigenous knowledge is located. We wished for them to catch a glimpse of the rich treasure, validity, and applicability in today's world, inherent in First Nations education theories and pedagogies, and the many gifts the Elders have to share. This learning was further broadened and solidified when we included, at the request of some of the students, a Sweat Lodge Ceremony toward the end of the semester – another way of First Nations teaching and learning.

Above all, we wished for our group of learners to experience, first hand, as Irving A. Hallowell once said, that “the Atisokanak were alive when the earth was new and assisted the Anishinaabeg then. They are still alive today and continue to aid human kind” (1992, p. 97). I humbly trust that we - as a group - accomplished this goal together.

Theoretical Connections

I could draw limited parallels to First Nations ways of sharing knowledge from humanist, liberal, progressive, critical, and social constructivist education theory, and cite theorists such as Martin Heidegger, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Rudolf Steiner, but, as Tony Ward points out, “it is important to realise that any authority in the teaching/learning environment cannot find its legitimacy by reference to totalising categories based on science or any other form of legitimating discourse” (2007, para. 12).

I make the argument here that First Nations educational theories and pedagogies exist *sui generis*, and need not be translated into Western terms; and while little has been written on how First Nations educational theories can be put into practice, they are, nevertheless, being practiced widely and successfully in many Aboriginal families and communities outside formal classrooms. At the same time, there are Indigenous scholars who feel it is important to create intellectual space to articulate conceptual and analytical frameworks for theories and methods of First Nations ways of knowledge transmission (see Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Cajete, 2000, 1995). They do so in the hope, that through an interest in Indigenous educational theories a reconsideration of the universal value of Eurocentric knowledge may eventually take place. As Dr. Marie Battiste notes,

such rethinking of education from the perspective of Indigenous knowledge and learning styles is of crucial value to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators who seek to understand the failures, dilemmas, and contradictions inherent in past and current educational policy and practice for First Nations students. (2005, p. 3)

I would argue that, as evidenced in our class, First Nations education theories and pedagogies can be a vehicle to empower not only Aboriginal but also non-aboriginal learners in moving toward transformation, liberation and self-determination.

Conclusion

Holding to the teaching that education takes place through experiential action and reflection, and is grounded within specific places (be those physical or virtual), I

have attempted to share some aspects of First Nations education theories and their underlying philosophies through critically reflecting on one specific course in which I was involved as a learner/facilitator. In doing so, I have attempted to show that First Nations learners are not “lacking,” and that First Nations ways of seeing and being in the world are not “inferior,” but that Western education theories and pedagogies may be lacking critical elements that could engender liberation and self-actualization in Aboriginal and non-aboriginal students alike. In describing one course which utilized First Nations ways of learning and teaching, I have attempted to show that Indigenous knowledge and educational theories are

far more than the binary opposite of western knowledge. As a concept, Indigenous knowledge benchmarks the limitations of Eurocentric theory—its methodology, evidence, and conclusions—reconceptualizes the resilience and self-reliance of Indigenous peoples, and underscores the importance of their own philosophies, heritages, and educational processes. Indigenous knowledge fills the ethical and knowledge gaps in Eurocentric education, research, and scholarship. By animating the voices and experiences of the cognitive “other” and integrating them into the educational process, it creates a new, balanced centre and a fresh vantage point from which to analyze Eurocentric education and its pedagogies. (Battiste, 2005, pp. 2-3)

About the time the fall semester began, I had the honour of meeting the narrator of the Anishinaabe Oral Tradition we presented to our students. Basil H. Johnston has written much on Anishinaabe ways of knowing, and I have long admired him for his ability to teach through story. As if to prepare me for my role in the INDG 281 class, he said to me that “all learning, in essence, is about discovering who we really are” (personal communication, September 10, 2011). First Nations philosophies, education theories, and pedagogies, the Atisokanak, are here to assist all of us in this life-long journey.

Footnotes

- [1] I put these words into quotation marks as I feel many adult educators are asking these questions.
- [2] Anishinaabemowiiin: Ojibway, Potawatomi and Odawa; while they are considered different dialects today - after 4-5 generations of separation - they originally were one language. Odawa was a trade language; Potawatomi was a political language, and Ojibway was a medicine language; so all three needed to be used for Anishinaabemowiiin.
- [3] Andrea Sterzuck provides a good explanation of a variety of English called “Indigenous English,” a spectrum of English varieties that reflects community influences of indigenous languages among many other factors.
- [4] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-20ZobInUg&NR=1> & <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBS0iDCT4Jo>

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