

# RECOGNISING THE IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUALITY IN INDIGENOUS LEARNING

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In this presentation I hope to first explain why we can use the experience of Canadian Indigenous peoples here with Australian Indigenous peoples. I am going to talk about a common Indigenous way of thinking and of viewing spirituality. The presentation will proceed to discuss the importance of spirituality in Indigenous education, and finally, will finish with some ideas of how to incorporate these ideas into practice. The objective of the presentation is to give voice to personal thoughts derived from experience, and to generate discussion rather than to generate an academic paper. Though I will be using some academic language, I will not be providing many references as most of the ideas presented derive from my own experiences, research and Indigenous heritage.

## **From Canadian Experience to Australian Application - How Similar Are International Indigenous Peoples?**

It is necessary to provide you with a background of myself as the storyteller, and why I am interested in the fields of Indigenous Spirituality, education and psychology. I am an Opaskwayak Cree from Manitoba, Canada. My mother is of Scottish ancestry and my father is Opaskwayak Cree. My Cree cultural heritage has been more influential in my life because I was raised on an Indian reserve that is part of Opaskwayak Cree Nation traditional lands. My upbringing and culture as a Cree person have been very important in the formation of my values, ideals and outlook on life. The importance of respect, equality and personal growth has been stressed to me since I was born. While completing my Bachelors degree in Science, I decided that the 'scientific' approach learning was not meeting my needs as an Indigenous scholar. I switched fields and did my Masters degree in Community Psychology, which I found to be much more holistic. My work experiences since finishing my studies have included such things as child and family therapy, conducting psychological assessments for the Canadian parole board, and teaching Human Services, Indigenous Studies and Psychology in Canadian and Australian universities. It is from my experiences as an Indigenous educator that I bring details to this presentation.

Travelling and meeting new people from different cultures have always held a fascination for me. My upbringing has taught me to view differences between cultures as something to be treasured; though in meeting Indigenous people in Canada, United States, South-east Asia, Norway, New Zealand and Australia, I have noticed that we all share very similar beliefs and spirituality. I have often wondered how Indigenous peoples from opposite sides of the earth could have values that are so alike. Consequently, my interest in this topic has grown, as I contend that Indigenous people share a unique way of thinking.

There is a common recognition by workers in corrections, human services, education, health, criminology, and psychology that Indigenous peoples, whether in Canada or in Australia, present a different set of needs and necessitate a different way of doing business in the service industries. In an attempt to meet these different needs many industries have set up special commissions, programs, and specialised staff training.

Most of these programs look at social, historical and economic factors to explain the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and attempt in some way to overcome them. Many of these programs proceed with the assumption that if economic and environmental conditions were the same for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, then Indigenous people could 'pull themselves up' to the standard of the non-Indigenous lifestyle. This same assumption and

mentality promoted the forced assimilation of Indigenous people through such social tragedies as the stolen generation and forced residential schooling. I will discuss how this is possible further on in the presentation.

What has seldom been done to date, is to recognise that Indigenous people think and behave in a manner that is substantially different from non-Indigenous people (Wilson, 1996; Sioui, 1992; Brant 1990). We need to examine how an understanding and appreciation of Indigenous ways of thinking and spirituality can lead to a better understanding of, and provision for, the specialised needs of Indigenous people. Once armed with an understanding and appreciation of the differences, programs can grow from the colonialist or paternalistic approach and more fully integrate an Indigenous world-view into their philosophies.

Colonialism has taken the same form in both our countries: stolen generation / residential schools, over-policing and sentencing, physical genocide, cultural genocide and attempts at assimilation. As a result, it is easy to spot the similarities in the conditions among Indigenous people that are a result of colonialism: family breakdown, violence, suicide, poor health, addictions, homelessness and over-representation in prisons. In the end, having more Indigenous men and women in prison results in further family breakdown and the perpetuation of violence. After all, prisons are not the best place in the world to learn positive skills. Ex-cons usually come out as better and more hardened criminals. This cycle is the same in Canada as it is in Australia.

More than facing similar problems and issues, there is something else that makes us inter-connected. Certainly our traditional lifestyles and cultures are vastly different, as are our religious practices. I believe that it is our way of looking at the world that makes us the same.

## **Ways of Thinking**

*Indigenous epistemology* includes any way of thinking or style of cognitive functioning that may be common and distinct among Indigenous people. An Indigenous epistemology would include not only a set of knowledge that is the intellectual property of the people, but also the manner in which that knowledge is understood. My understanding of the similarity between Indigenous peoples way of thinking can be best stated as being circular and egalitarian. This circular thought is in contrast with the dominant society's hierarchical way of thinking.

In a hierarchical way of thinking, as the name implies, ideas, theories and facts are based upon a hierarchy or pyramid. It may be best to explain this with an example. In the recent past of European based cultures, a king was the ruler of a country. Below the king were various nobles, and below them were the serfs. Each level in this hierarchy was known to be better than those below it. The king had absolute authority over everyone else. This structure could be seen to have extended to today, as reflected in a prime minister down to prisoners, and is reflected in a family structure with the father as head of the household, followed by the mother, and with the children having no rights or voice in decisions. It is no accident that these structures have evolved, as they reflect a way of thinking. It is the scientific method of logic.

Each fact or theory that is put forward in the hierarchical model excludes other theories. If one way of explaining a phenomenon is true, then all other ways of explaining it must be false. One way to prove your theory is to discount or discredit all other possible explanations. I think it was Sherlock Holmes that said, "if you rule out all the possible explanations, then what remains, no matter how improbable, must be true." Inherent in this belief system is a value judgement of one idea, fact or theory being better than other possibilities. A hierarchy of facts is built up, with successively better theories rising to the top. Modern science can be seen as the search for the ultimate truth (or king of ideas) that will explain everything else.

It is this way of looking at what is fact or true, and judging other ideas as being either superior or inferior that has allowed for the domination of colonialism. Other cultures are also judged as being inferior or superior (always inferior of course), as are religious practices, ways of education, and relationships. Two plus two will always equal four, and if anyone says different, they must by definition of fact be wrong. This way of viewing the world not only allowed assimilation and colonisation of Indigenous peoples and their land, but encouraged it as a form of raising 'primitive' cultures to the more superior British way of life.

In contrast, a circular way of looking at knowledge creates a much different view of the world. In this worldview, no one theory or idea is better or more right than another. Cultures that are based upon this view of knowledge are much more likely to evolve into egalitarian societies. Since facts or ideas (and people) are held to be equally important, it is not possible or necessary to prove your point of view by devaluing other views. With this view comes the recognition that any idea is possible, depending upon your standpoint. Because I am an unique individual, the way that I view an idea is going to be different from the way that anyone else views it. That won't make me any more right or wrong than anyone else, and means that I also have to respect that their view will be different than mine. This leads to the possibility or reality of multiple truths existing at the same time (rather than one theory ruling over all others).

What becomes important then in this circular worldview is your relationship with an idea, or how you view it. Thus, in many Indigenous languages, an object ceases to be a concrete thing, like a chair for example, but becomes what its relationship to me is, like a place to sit. Inherent in this notion of this being a place for me to sit is the idea that other people may have a different relationship with this object. Someone else may put down a book on it, and thus it becomes a place to put my book. This idea is not any more right or wrong than a place to sit. It is just coming from a different point of view.

So, what the heck does this have to do with Indigenous spirituality and penal education? First I will try to define spirituality from an Indigenous perspective.

## **Indigenous Spirituality**

*Spirituality* is a term that requires special care in its definition. It is important to recognise the difference between spirituality and religion. Spirituality can be seen as an internal connection to the universe that includes a sense of meaning or purpose in life, a cosmology or way of explaining our personal universe and a personal moral code. Religion, on the other hand, could be defined as the specific practice and ritual that is an external expression of some people's spirituality.

What is important here is that spirituality is your relationship to the universe around you. It is the relationship again that is important, rather than the objective form that this relationship chooses to manifest itself (that is what religion is). My relationship to the universe is unique to myself, and it would be unrealistic to expect anyone else to share exactly the same relationship. Thus Indigenous spirituality could be defined as Indigenous peoples unique relationship with their universe.

It is important that this paper addresses spirituality as a distinct issue only because dominant epistemology and the fields of human services and psychology are so void of this aspect of humanity. In reality, spirituality is not separated but is an integral, infused part of the whole in the Indigenous worldview. For many Indigenous people having a healthy sense of spirituality is just as important as other aspects of mental, emotional and physical health. Until very recently, mainstream Australian and Canadian society tended to compartmentalise spirituality as being separate and distinct from other forms of health and learning (Coleman, 1998). There is however a growing recognition of the importance of spirituality in health care in the dominant society (Stoter, 1995). The human services field has also begun to realise that the spirituality of service users

can be a powerful asset in growth and empowerment and one area that needs to be recognised and built upon in service delivery (Cascio, 1998). The notion of the importance of spirituality is not new to Indigenous education and is an area that may be built upon and examined so that dominant society can better understand spirituality as being integral to healthy living for all people, as well as being an important Indigenous issue.

Recently, researchers in Canada and the United States have shown the importance of spirituality in the rehabilitation of Indigenous prison inmates (Waldram, 1994; Atlee, 1997), and the need to include Indigenous spirituality and notions of reality in the legal and justice system (Ross, 1992). It is important to realise that a healthy spirit is essential for Indigenous people to live a healthy life. Spirituality is important in education as a means of rebuilding people's connections to their environment. It is the spiritual death of many Indigenous people that has led them to be imprisoned in the first place.

It has long been recognised that education does more than just increase the student's knowledge base. That is why we are all here at this conference. Education is a way of empowering students, building their confidence, and helps to open up new options in life. Education can also help to re-build connections and healthy relationships within people, as well as with their environment. This is what spiritual growth is all about for many Indigenous people: re-building these relationships.

### **Implementing Holistic Education Practices**

I hope that I have successfully argued for the reintegration of spirituality into Indigenous education. The next step is to figure out how this can be done. Again drawing from my experiences as an Indigenous educator, and using information drawn from a study conducted at Southern Cross University by Helen Coleman in 1997, I have come up with some techniques that have worked for me in the past. Of course, given that I will be coming from a circular worldview, I leave open the probability that each of you will have to adapt these techniques to fit your own point of view and your relationships with your students.

The beginning point in this process of re-introducing spirituality into education is working on the relationship between the instructor and student. Remember that spirituality for many Indigenous people comes down to a set of healthy relationships. Research has shown that this instructor/student relationship has a direct impact on student achievement. Learning for many Indigenous students occurs as a side product of the personal and human contact with the bearer of the message (Wilson, 1994). In practice, this involves spending time away from 'academic' teaching or lecturing, and spending time talking about personal issues, opinions, and feelings. This is an important way of letting the students know that you respect them on a personal level, trust them with your personal information, and respect their point of view.

It is important to build a learning environment that is safe for the students to build this relationship in. Is it possible to maintain confidentiality in your classroom when students talk about personal issues? Are passers-by likely to overhear? Do your students know the institutional rules and regulations that you as an educator are forced to follow regarding confidentiality and obligations to report? Often a clear discussion of these issues will result in an increase in levels of trust among students, even if they know that you may need to report them for certain behaviours or disclosures. Is it safe for students to express emotions in the classroom? After all, every healthy relationship also has an emotional component. Even the physical layout of the classroom affects your relationship with the students. Are students arranged in rows facing the instructor (this assumes that the instructor is top of the hierarchy), or placed in a circle where everyone has equal importance?

Another technique that I have found very effective for building relationships and spirituality in the classroom is the use of talking circles. The talking circle is a ritual that is used among many different Indigenous people. In a talking circle, one person starts by holding a stone, feather, talking stick or other object. The person holding this 'sacred' object has the floor

as long as he or she holds it, and has an opportunity to speak (or to choose not to, as the case may be). When he or she is finished, the object is passed along to the next person in the circle, who then has the floor. This continues until everyone in the circle has been given the opportunity to hold the object and to speak if they choose to. Remember that you are building spirituality, so don't be afraid to introduce the sacredness of your talking stick or rock. As in many spiritual rituals, it may be important to introduce and reinforce rules. No one is allowed to speak while not holding the object, and everyone is expected to give their undivided attention to the speaker. Other rituals may be added to your group to reinforce the sacred nature of the circle: perhaps a moment of meditation before and after the circle, or a moment of silence after each person speaks. It may be a good idea to check with local elders to see if there is a local custom that you can follow as an outsider.

This may seem like a fairly simple technique, but its effect is very powerful. Not many people have had the experience of really being heard before. This may be especially true of inmates who may feel like they have not been listened to by anyone involved in the legal system. To have a group of people all listening to you, and giving you all their attention, can be very moving. You as the instructor can set the scene for the talking circle by giving a topic that could be discussed or explored. You can also regulate the depth of feeling involved by being selective in your level of self-disclosure. I have often used talking circles as a way of opening class - students get a chance to talk about their day and anything that may effect their ability to learn this week. As well as building spirituality and relationships, this information can also be useful to you as the instructor in planning your work for the day.

Finally, another way of encouraging relationships to develop is to encourage expression of feelings in the classroom. How do your students feel about the information that you are giving them? Does it make them angry learning about Indigenous history? Do they feel frustrated by maths? Are they feeling empowered by learning to read? By attaching cognitive lessons with the emotions that these lessons invoke, a much deeper level of internalisation of knowledge takes place. Once again, it is this relationship or coming together in a balance, in this case between the cognitive and the emotional, that deepens a sense of spirituality.

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