

The Six Directions

A
Pattern for Understanding
Native American Educational Values,
Diversity
and
the Need for Cognitive Pluralism

Rose von Thater-Braan, (Tuscarora-Cherokee)

SECME Summer Institute
Plenary Session - July 10, 2001
University of Arizona
Tucson, Arizona

Rose von Thater-Braan
Silverbuffalo@earthlink.net

What I want to talk about this afternoon and explore with you are my thoughts and the thoughts of other Native and non-Native scholars regarding the need for cognitive pluralism, the acceptance and respect for different ways of knowing.

I thought it would be helpful for those of you who may never have been exposed to the Native American worldview for me to speak a bit about it and how it is different from the western or Eurocentric worldview. Using the medicine wheel as our model, we enter at the East.

East

The Place of Illumination and of Clarity

Identity

It is simplest to say that we are not **from** this continent, we are **of** it.

We use many different terms to describe the original people of North America. The First People, First Nations, Aboriginal People, Native Americans, Indians. "Indigenous" and "Aboriginal" communicate well for me. Let me define "Indigenous" in this way. It is simplest to say that we are not **from** this continent, we are **of** it. These lands on which we stand contain and are made of the bones of our ancestors and reach back beyond pre-history, thousands upon thousands of years. These lands and the wisdom and knowledge carried within them are what inform our way of thinking, living and learning.

In our worldview time and space are perceived and experienced, that is a key word, 'experienced', differently. Time is not a linear progression extending into infinity and divided into fragments that appear, pass and then disappear never to be seen again. In the Indigenous worldview time is

cyclical and patterned, appearing and disappearing into a constantly shifting and changing flux. Space is perceived as the flux. A chaotic wholeness existing within and around us, of which we are a part and within which, we have duties and responsibilities for maintaining, renewing and restoring balance and harmony. Ours is a relational universe and our relationship with that universe, with the interconnected web of life is the heart of our way of living, of what we see and of how we know. The Creation and that which created it lives as part of us and we understand that we belong to it. This is why our

spiritual life is integral and present, never outside of us and can never be set apart. Spirit resides within all that is and therefore commands the respect and all of the kindnesses that follow respect.

Our languages reflect and express these relationships. They are the core of our sovereignty and they describe our way of relating to the Creation. They are verb and process based which allows us to speak of a world that is constantly transforming. We do not attempt to hold a "something" in rigid form (as a noun) because we understand its inherent ability to appear and disappear into and out of the flux. Linguist, Dan Moonhawk Alford writes about Algonquian languages in his paper "God Is Not a Noun In Native America."

Aboriginal languages permit the creation of language for a particular expression of an event, a time, a place. The concept of a person riding a horse can be expressed in the movement involved, in the relationship between the rider and the horse. It can be spoken of in terms of the season in which the event occurred, described by the sound made or the direction taken of a leaf which fell to the ground as the rider passed. Our languages are contextual, rich, multi-layered. They contain complexities of understanding and describe overlapping levels

of consciousness. They have a sophistication and refinement that has developed over centuries of evolution.

This subject of worldview and language are important when we consider that all teaching is conducted in English. It is overlooked that English is a second language for the First People of this continent. And that this remains true whether the Indian person speaks their tribal language or not because their understanding of the world and their internal connections and communications are formed in their original perceptions of relationship.

South

The Place of New Beginnings,
Growth and Innocence

Eurocentrism

"Eurocentrism is a label for all beliefs covert or expressed that assume a past or present superiority over all others."

Marie Battiste, Mi'kmaq woman, wife, mother and author received her doctoral degree from Harvard University. She is a professor in the Department of Educational Foundations at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada. She writes that "Eurocentrism is a label for all beliefs covert or expressed that assume a past or present superiority over all others." In the academic professoriate it is the dominant intellectual and educational movement and it postulates the superiority of Europeans over non-Europeans.

All of us educated in mainstream educational institutions in the United States have been educated in the Eurocentric tradition.

I want to reassure you at the outset that this is not a venting session in which I intend to "bash" Americans of European descent or their system of thought. But in order to explain the barriers to education and participation by Indian people it is necessary to point out that the current educational system is built on a specific and limited knowledge base which has become dominant not through its inherent value but through acts of conquest. And to recall to those who are unaware, that education has been used as a weapon against Indigenous people to force us off our lands and to assimilate into the mainstream culture. It has been used consciously and unconsciously to attempt to break our connections to our families, tribes and culture.

These are not gentle words, but I am speaking to you openly in order to build a bridge of understanding between our worldviews and our educational perspectives and values. And to create among us a discourse that will address the importance of cognitive pluralism and the protection and preservation of Indigenous cultures. I understand cognitive pluralism and the protection and preservation of Indigenous cultures as the cornerstone of our shared aspirations to fulfill the deepest meanings of diversity.

Given what I have just told you, the question arises: Do Indian people value education? Do Indian families wish their children to participate and contribute?

The answers are yes, and no. The "yes" part of the answer is that we respect learning and recognize the value in what your education system offers. We recognize the need for your forms of education and we value those who go on to higher education and earn degrees. We understand education as a life long process. The profile for Indian students in Tribal and Community colleges is a person in their mid-30's, most

often a single mother with two children. I know a woman, a grandmother, now in her 60's who will enter graduate school at U.C. Berkeley in the fall.

The "no" part of the answer comes from seeing our people enter the educational system with a love of learning and return from their schooling having earned their degrees but having had to suppress or sacrifice their cultural identity to gain them. They cannot speak about their own knowledge because there is no place of respect made for it.

The system as it now exists, does not recognize other ways of knowing as valid. It focuses on separating and fragmenting. A person may enter school with the wideness of mind that a child brings and by the time they have completed college or gone to graduate school their knowledge of a fragment of a specific subject will have grown and deepened but their perspective of knowledge itself has become narrow. There is little or no esteem for the understandings of interconnectedness and relationship inherent in our view of the world or for the inclusion of consciousness and experience.

The answer is "no" because:

- ∞ the existing system does not recognize Indian communication styles and values, -that the capacities for deep listening, silence, observation and reflection are considered the highest forms of respect for a teacher by a student.
- ∞ that for a student to demand attention, or to be assertive or interrupt a teacher with a question, is considered rude and disturbs the harmony in a group and the open flow of information.

- ∞ that our competitiveness is internal, not focused against others. In a relational universe winning does not infer superiority over others but demonstrates a personal triumph over one's own fears and limitations.
- ∞ collaborative and inter-generational learning are normal accepted methods of transmitting knowledge.

Because of these differences our students are often judged as disinterested, slow, difficult. But you know from first hand experience in your classrooms that it is not only Indian children whose culture calls for a different code of behavior. There are many students, students of color and white, whose learning styles are different. Because of these differences, combined with other factors of poverty, ill health, broken homes and violence, factors which are the direct result of years of relocation policies. In the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Area where the Indian population numbers over 50,000 people and includes more than 35 tribes, the drop out rate for Indian students in high school reached 88% and catalyzed the formation of the American Indian Public Charter School.

We value and respect teachers and we value education, however the forms, the processes by which it is gained, its uses and evolution are for us, connected to a sense of place, relationship. The sense of place equals family, community, land and traditions. Education is not bounded by a physical structure or confined to a defined set of people, it is not restricted to interactions with humans or to a linear definition of time. The transmission of knowledge comes through our relationships. Our knowledge is catalogued in holistic symbols that embody principles and experiences rather than words. They contain the information on how the tribal people, the animals, the plants and the Earth form a unity. They describe

the ecology of relationship and the principles, ceremonies and ways of living in a sustainable community. Our science, mathematics, engineering, law, art, religion and history are integrated and the relationships between and that govern all are studied as a whole.

We are taught that all knowledge, including that of the European tradition, the gaining of it, its growth into skills and wisdom are gifts to be shared and used for the good of all. The gathering of knowledge is not meant for the furtherance of one or to claim power over another.

The purpose of knowledge, in our view, is to serve the people. The honor that is attached to a doctoral degree grows in value by being shared and experienced by other members of the community. It is held that the proper use of that knowledge, that degree is to serve the needs of the poorest and weakest.

Am I now promoting the myth of the noble savage? "Noble Savage"! Those are fightin' words. But before I address that stereotype, let me point out the obvious. There are jealous, weak willed, selfish, greedy individuals seduced by desire, ambition and the material world in the Indian community. What I speak of are the traditional values that Aboriginal people aspire to. And that in urban and rural settings across this country and around the world, these values are shared by millions of Indigenous people. These are the values we choose to live by to struggle to integrate into a modern society that at it's core may share aspects of them, but in its expressions, interactions and through its many forms of communication, does not.

West

The Place of Transformation
The Void
The Place Where Answers Live

History

In 1896, the head of the Board of Indian Commissioners said, "To bring the Indian out of savagery and into citizenship we must make him more intelligently selfish. A desire for property is needed to get the Indian out of the blanket and into trousers and trousers with a pocket, and with a pocket that aches to be filled with dollars."

The term "savage."

The perception of the European settlers of the people they met upon landing in the "new world," was that they were meeting people of a primitive, uncivilized culture. That these Europeans were confused about many things is apparent, after all, they thought they were in India!

The colonizers assumed that there was no science, medicine, history, mathematics, law or arts, no culture, as defined by their own social experiences and assumptions.

But why does history *still* speak of those who welcomed the Europeans with hospitality, shared their knowledge and wisdom, food and family and helped them to survive as "savages." Why are they described as murderous savages, driven by fear and superstition?

Many of you know that it was some of these same "savages" who formed a confederacy of the Mohawk, Seneca, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga and later the Tuscarora tribes. That

this confederacy was founded on the Great Law of Peace which ended war between them and established a political and judicial system of equal power between women and men and that this confederacy came into existence about 1000 A.D., some 200 years before the signing of the Magna Carta. The Iroquois Confederacy continues to function to this day.

I was traveling in France a few years ago and visited the great Cathedral at Chartres where the French kings were crowned. As I moved through the huge spaces I was drawn to a room on an upper floor that held regalia from the various ceremonies and coronations. There, mounted in a glass case was a wampum belt, intricately beaded carrying salutations and greetings from the Ojibway people. The beauty of the symbols testified not only to the Indigenous aesthetic but documented our understanding and command of mathematics.

The star quilts of the Lakhota people follow geometric forms considered sacred and which are known to contain knowledge regarding the composition and formation of the universe.

We must question why, after more than 500 years, and the many proofs of the depth and breadth of knowledge of the Indigenous peoples and the demonstrated complexity and sophistication of our systems of medicine, astronomy, biology, etc., the educational system of the United States honors and validates only one way of knowing, one way of understanding, one process of thought. Why does this system require all scholarship to fit the limited knowledge base of the Eurocentric form. In simpler words: at the same time that society wishes to have the advantage of Indigenous knowledge, seeks it out, expropriates it, uses it out of context and for its own, commercial purposes. And does these things without respect for the intellectual property rights of Indigenous peoples and

without recognition or compensation or benefit,- why is this same knowledge held as primitive and invalid because it will not be explained by or fit into a system of understandings that are too narrow to encompass it. Wellesley professor, Peggy McIntosh describes this hegemonic system of education as cognitive imperialism.

Most non-Native people do not know that until 1978 and the passing of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act that Indian people could not observe their religious practices without being subject to arrest and imprisonment. Until that date, we were prevented by law from performing our ceremonies. The only dances that were allowed were public exhibitions for tourists.

I am speaking of these things not because I wish to wound you or to make you uncomfortable but so you may hear these things from the mouth of one who has personal experience. To state clearly that our educational system excludes, distorts or expropriates Indigenous knowledge. That the ways in which education is offered us, at its best requires extensive translation and to survive the learning of it, requires a strong spirit and a well developed sense of self. At its worst it is a destructive force. Eurocentric cultural literacy that positions "them" at the center and all others in the periphery is anathema to diversity. Diversity is not an act of social justice or of political correctness. Diversity's validity exists beyond the artificial constructs of a social system. Diversity is consistent with natural law and its meanings as expressed throughout the creation by that which created it.

The voices of Indigenous peoples have been excluded or when included appear in the words of non-Native anthropologists, historians, writers or scientists who have

"studied" us through their own cultural lens and judged themselves capable of interpreting what they have seen. Alternatively we are presented in what Peggy McIntosh terms the "famous few" curriculum. Acurricula that emphasizes "firsts, wars, winners, talented individuals, fighters and those who nearly matched what is taken to be 'white' and usually male achievements." Not only does singling out of cultural heroes misrepresent our values, it supports and furthers the assumption of privilege. In 1985 when Wilma Mankiller became Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation she was chosen for her consonance **with** not her competition against others.

When the first Europeans came to this continent their assumption of our lack of civilization could be explained in somewhat innocent terms. That explanation soon collapsed to reveal motives of deep self interest. The Eurocentric view supports the assumption of privilege and as such justifies the taking of lands already inhabited and the killing and oppression of people judged to be inferior. We have all had cause to discover that privilege is an equal oppressor. That it supports oppression of women in favor of men, of minorities over other minorities, of the old in favor of the young, of the infirm in favor of the strong, of the poor in favor of the rich.

North

The Place of Truth
The Winds of Change and Manifestation

Legitimacy
Indigenous knowledge does not need
to be put through a western lens
to be legitimate

I quote Marie Battiste: "Historical oppression need not be the source of all our ill health and problems, but the awareness of its source and its effects can enrich our spirit and energize us to proactive change."

So what does all this mean? That only Indian people can teach Indian children or a curriculum about Indian people? Of course not. Prof. Battiste continues, "...we must recognize that what is taught has been drawn from a limited sample, projected as universal and normed on a limited sample of experience and ways of knowing which excluded the majority of women, diverse cultures and Indigenous people. It is this exclusivity which must be transformed, not just corrected or supplemented. Teaching is not a politically neutral undertaking, but mirrors the dominant society's culture [and in doing so] reproduces unequal power relations." It is important to remember that when the mirror is held up, if you don't like what you see, it is not the mirror's fault.

At this point in the 21st century, the colonized and the colonizer share the Eurocentric educational system. The hard work of transforming the Eurocentric consciousness rests in the hands of the teachers. There is no pre-existing, consistent and consistently helpful alternative to the dominant educational tradition. It must be created as an on-going process of active engagement. We can pluralize. We can demystify ways of knowing that go beyond the curriculum boundaries to include an ecological context that validates cultural aspirations and identify and incorporates culturally preferred pedagogy. (Battiste, 1998).

Here are some starting points:

∞ Looking at the fragments and treating the

fragments makes the system itself invisible.

- ∞ I have described the consciousness that is the basis of Indigenous thought. Consider this question: What is the consciousness that has been the basis of Eurocentric education?
- ∞ Do not be afraid to put the past in front of you, not behind you. We are all at different places in our awareness and historical analysis is an important tool for liberating and healing. (Battiste, 2000)

Jean Graveline in her book, "Circle Works: Transforming Eurocentric Consciousness" offers this advice [in the]...reconstruction or transformation of knowledge:

- ∞ Consider what was already known
- ∞ How knowledge was constructed
- ∞ What kind of thinking the dominant tradition has privileged
- ∞ Consider all the ways, forms and techniques of thinking
- ∞ Make use of whatever can help us to think not only within, but ABOUT the dominant tradition

Educator Elizabeth Minnick writes, "old knots and tangles that are in our minds and practices must be located and untied if there are to be threads available with which to weave the new into anything like a whole cloth, a coherent but by no means homogeneous pattern.

Above

The Place of Beauty,
Balance and the Higher Mind,
the Sky

Honor

The strands of knowledge held by each culture, whatever its form
is of value.

It is a part of our understanding of the Creation.

There are myths and stereotypes about all people, but perhaps the most destructive is the myth of race. It is correct that we have distinct and different cultures traditions and worldviews. It is true that we are indigenous to different lands, but the concept of race itself is an intellectually conceived construct used to describe and differentiate and to support notions of superiority. We are, each of us, members of one race. We are all human beings. So of what purpose is such a construct except to allow for the idea of "others." And it follows then that those "others" are described as less than those who invented the construct in the first place.

The strands of knowledge held by each culture, whatever its form is of value. It is a part of our understanding of the Creation. By bringing these strands together, by honoring, protecting and preserving the cultures and traditions and the people who bring them, by including rather than excluding, we weave into life the possibility of a future than honors one another as relatives and sustains this magnificent planet, this Mother Earth and all of life.

Honored Native philosopher, James (Sa'ke'j) Youngblood Henderson has written, "in Indigenous thought, civilization is like the ocean compared to the stream of culture. Indigenous civilizations are transcultural because of the history behind

bringing cultures together; they are a continuous flow of cultures down through the ages. There is a need to remove the burdens of the past from the historical heritage and to move forward with open hearts." All people were, at one time, tribal, the Celts, Saxons, Jutes, Teutons, Basques. At our deepest place we are connected to the vast bodies of cultural knowledge that lies outside the lens of the Eurocentric view. Please remember: Indigenous knowledge does not need to be put through a western lens to be legitimate. And most importantly: Indigenous knowledge cannot be taken separately. Indigenous knowledge belongs to the people, the people belong to the land and the land belongs to that which created it.

In the Indigenous perception of time there is the rhythm of being, patterns and cycles. In Indian time there is a place for the healing of history.

Below

Our Beloved Mother, the Earth

Gratitude

The sharing of knowledge for the good of all
is greatly valued by Indigenous people.

I am grateful to all of my teachers whose words you have heard spoken with my voice. I have cited them but much of what I have said has come directly from the writings and teachings of Marie BattistTw -17 In foach haf my teaches. There armanyof

generation of global Indigenous scholars. Much of this thinking is brought together in two books, "Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision," and "Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage." They are listed in the bibliography.

I am grateful for the quality and depth of your listening and I wish to tell you that I speak for many when I say that we value your good works and that we recognize the good that is in your hearts. Thank you

Bibliography

Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision

Marie Battiste, University of British Columbia Press, ISBN 0-7748-0746-6

First Nations Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds,

Marie Battiste & J. Barman, University of British Columbia Press, ISBN 0-7748-0517-X

Protecting Indigenous Knowledge & Heritage

Marie Battiste, James (S'ake'j) Youngblood Henderson
Purich Publishing, Ltd. ISBN 1-895830-15-X

Look to the Mountain, an Ecology of Indigenous Education

Gregory Cajete, Ph.D., Kivaki Press ISBN 1-882308-65-4

A People's History of the United States 1492 - Present

Howard Zinn, Harper Perennial, ISBN 0-06-092543-0

Interactive Phases of Curricular & Personal Re-Vision with Regard to Race

Peggy McIntosh, Wellesley Center for Research on Women

Working Paper Series 1990 - Number 219

The People of Terra Nullius

Royce Richardson,
Douglas & McIntyre ISBN 1 - 55054-161-7

Killing Custer, The Battle of the Little Bighorn

and the Fate of the Plains Indians James Welch, Paul Stekler,
W.W. Norton & Co. ISBN 0 393 03657-X

Indian Killer,

Sherman Alexie,
Warner Books, 1998, ISBN 0-446-67370-6

Wisdom Keepers, Meetings with Native American Spiritual Elders

Steve Wall & Harvey Arden, Beyond Words Publishing, ISBN 0-941831-55-8

Fool's Crow

James Welch, Penguin Books, USA, ISBN 0 14 00 8937 3

Dwellings, A Spiritual History of the Living World

Linda Hogan, Ivy Books, published by Ballantine Books ISBN 0-393-03784-3

Prison Writings, My Life Is My Sun Dance

Leonard Peltier & Harvey Arden, St, Martin's Press, NY

In the Spirit of Crazy Horse

Peter Matthieson, Penguin Books