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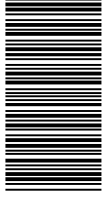
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## **Coyote Goes To School: The Paradox of Indigenous Higher Education**

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*This article explores the contradictions involved in teaching Native studies or First Nations studies in Western educational institutions that require us to teach in decidedly non-Aboriginal ways. If we use the kind of experiential, holistic learning techniques that are typically used in Indigenous communities, our courses and programs are labeled unscholarly and frivolous by the more "academic" programs. The article outlines how as an Indigenous educator I try to negotiate a space in the academy and concludes with one of our most effective teaching tools: a Coyote story.*

### *Introduction*

I am a Metis woman who, according to college and university calendars, has been teaching Native studies or First Nations studies for over 20 years. At no time have I felt I came close to attaining that objective. I have been teaching students about Aboriginal culture and issues in a Western educational setting by Western methods. This was true even when I taught in an Aboriginal educational institution. Although I have striven to teach from an Indigenous perspective, to break out of the White Studies system (Churchill, 1995), I realize that teaching about Indigenous culture from an Indigenous perspective in a Western education system involves unresolvable contradictions. In this article I discuss some of those contradictions and what I do to try to reduce them.

### *The Contradictions*

There are so many contradictions involved in trying to teach from an Indigenous perspective in the academy that I did not find it a difficult task to devise a list of contradictions generated by teaching First Nations studies in the academy. It is not an exhaustive list, but it can provide a basis for thought and discussion.

### *The Western World View is Unquestioned*

Universities are the primary institutions that train Western scholars to reproduce themselves in the Western cultural image. In these institutions members of Western society are educated to be the sages of Western knowledge. Some would say that in such institutions students receive indoctrination rather than education. Creek-Cherokee scholar Churchill (1995) contends that the Western education system is "locked firmly into an paradigm of ethnocentricism" that he calls White Studies (p. 245). Churchill continues: "this sort of monolithic pedagogical reliance upon a single cultural tradition constitutes a rather transparent form of intellectual domination" (p. 246).

Although alternative pedagogical perspectives exist in the West such as those of Friere (1970, 1985, 1997), Giroux (1983, 1997), and Aronowitz and Giroux (1990, 1993), they are not the prevailing perspectives used in Western educational institu-

tions. In addition, although they may be radical to the West and might result in improved education methods for Indigenous people, they still fail Indigenous people for a number of reasons. Possibly the most significant contributor to radical, postmodern pedagogy, Friere (1970) contends that the education system is a "tool of submersion" (p. 12) that reinforces existing power relationships and that liberation of the oppressed can only come with a self-directed education that allows them to become aware of their oppression. Although this would seem to be a position that might benefit Indigenous education, Friere and other radical education theorists speak as members of colonizing nations. They speak of the liberation of the working class (Giroux, 1983) and of African Americans and Latinos in the United States (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1990) but I could not find any indication of awareness of the political and ideological oppression of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Radical pedagogists and Indigenous theorists agree that the education that all of us, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, receive in schools and universities presumes the dominant Western world view based on positivistic scientific principles. Philosopher of science, Bell (1994) contends that science serves as a model of intellectual endeavors in the West with influence "far beyond its own domain" (p. 39). The belief in the Western scientific way of knowing is such a deeply held conviction that other ways of knowing are generally disparaged as superstitious, irrational, false, deluded, and naive. The Western education system is so effective in perpetuating the belief that Western ways of knowing are universal that even many non-Western people come to believe that learning the most intimate secrets of Western society through the medium of the West's ultimate knowledge-producing institution will allow them to participate as equal members of Western society.

The Western model of knowledge production that we have all been taught throughout much of our education is based on principles of objectivity (that the observer must divorce himself or herself from the observed), empiricism (if it is real it can be measured), and reductionism (the whole can be known from an examination of its parts). The claim that these principles must be employed in the creation of knowledge is soundly rejected by most Aboriginal people. In the view of many Indigenous people the notion of objectivity is preposterous because every aspect of Creation is continually interacting; the observer is interacting with the observed and, therefore, logically cannot be divorced from it. The principle of empiricism is obviously erroneous because some of the most important aspects of Creation cannot be weighed and measured: the Great Spirit, the knowledge obtained from dreams, love of family and community, and so on. Reductionism is another fallacious concept because in separately examining the pieces that make up an object or phenomenon one neglects the synergy between them.

Indigenous learners in the Western education system find dissonance between what they have been taught at home in their families and communities about the way the world functions, and what they are taught in their classrooms. In our classrooms we are generally taught that objective scientific methods of creating data are the only true sources of knowledge, whereas at home we are taught to consider spirit, emotion and intuition as important sources of understanding.

*The Western Concepts of Teaching, Teacher, and Student*

In our Western education we have all become familiar with the roles of *student* and *teacher*. We learn very young that the teacher is the source of knowledge and authority. The concepts of *teaching*, *teacher*, and *student* only make sense in a society that is highly compartmentalized, a society with formal institutions of education. In Indigenous societies learning is usually an integral part of living. All situations are considered potential learning situations. All people are lifelong teachers and learners. Every competent Indigenous person is expected to be knowledgeable about many things not only for physical survival, but if one is to have an understanding of the universe and his or her place in it. In most Indigenous world views the universe is considered a continually interacting whole. To have deep understanding of only a small part of the universe (as in the Western idea of expertise) would result in a profoundly dysfunctional individual unable to cope in the real world.

*The English Language*

The English language is often a poor vehicle for conveying Indigenous concepts. Although Indigenous cultures vary considerably, many Indigenous thinkers agree that the basic philosophical concepts are similar (Lobo & Talbot, 2001; Trask, 1993a; Cajete, 1994; Little Bear, 2000). The same can be said for European-derived cultures (Ryser, 1998). Because of the profound differences in these two fundamental ways of perceiving the world, it can be difficult to translate concepts from a language that is the product of one world view to a language that is the product of the other world view. For example, in an Indigenous society where time is not considered to be only linear, it makes sense to say, "I remember that event which occurred 500 years ago." In the Western way of apprehending time, the statement is ridiculous. Other examples of statements that might be made by an Indigenous person but that would not make sense from a Western perspective could include: "Everything is alive—there is no such thing as an inanimate object," or "The bears are our relatives," or "The animals we hunt give themselves to us willingly," and so forth. The result of this difficulty in translating concepts between the languages produced by different world views is that Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are forced to speak to each other in what I call nonconcepts. I present a few that frequently arise in my Traditional Environmental Knowledge class. In this class we often talk about *nature*, *supernatural*, and *luck*. The Western concept of nature implies a qualitative difference between humans and nature. It also implies a distinction between nature and the supernatural. In most Indigenous systems of thought, humans, other animals, plants, powerful entities, rivers, mountains, and everything else are part of the same system, whereas in Western thinking there is a dichotomy between "man" and nature, between the natural and supernatural worlds. Similarly, when we speak in class about a hunter's luck, the concept of luck implies something accidental or fortuitous, whereas the Indigenous understanding of what we refer to as luck in English, is more akin to *power*. Power is something that is earned by hunters who live a clean life, respect the animals, offer prayers and gifts, and so on. In each course I teach we begin by talking about these nonconcepts, then agree to spend the rest of the semester speaking in nonconcepts but assuming we all know what it is we really mean. At times we use words from

Indigenous languages that really mean what they mean, but that does not always work when we are talking about a concept that is held in many cultures.

*The Structuring of the Western Academy by Disciplines*

The Western academy is structured into disciplines that delineate their own areas of expertise, cultivate experts, and defend their turf. This structuring of the academy is based on the Cartesian view of the universe in which knowledge of the whole is believed to derive from infinitesimal knowledge of the parts (Ryser, 1998). This is in direct opposition to the belief (probably held universally by Indigenous peoples) that the universe is an integral whole in which an effect on one part has consequences for all other parts (Kawagley, 1995). In this world view, the well-educated person is one who has greater understanding of the whole rather than intensive knowledge of a small part of the universe. A person who obtained a doctorate by studying a microorganism that lives on the roots of a particular species of tree may be considered an expert in Western society, but if the same individual was unable to survive in that forest he would be considered obtuse by the Indigenous people of the area.

Although Native studies or First Nations studies has been said to be interdisciplinary, to me, *interdisciplinarity* still implies Western-defined disciplines based on a Western (usually scientific) world view. I consider First Nations studies to be more than a discipline, but an approach to learning that is so inclusive as to defy disciplinary bounds and even to defy the bounds of world view. One of the values of First Nations studies, in my opinion, lies in its more open approach to areas of study and more inclusive research methods. Some of the approaches and methods I use to try to accomplish this are outlined below.

*University Faculty Members Must Have Doctorates*

It is a given in many universities that faculty members are not hired without completed doctorates. The expectation that faculty have completed doctorates nearly precludes the possibility of hiring Aboriginal faculty in Canada because so few Aboriginal people have doctorates now. In those schools that are a little more flexible, new faculty may be hired ABD (all but dissertation) but it is expected that they will complete shortly. Some universities have recognized that there is a certain logic in hiring First Nations people to teach First Nations studies or other First Nations-oriented programs and courses and have, therefore, attempted to be more flexible. Others are adamant in their refusal to hire people without completed doctorates.

Many university departments seeking faculty positions place advertisements that specifically solicit applications from Aboriginal people. Many of the same departments will not consider applications from those without completed doctorates. Considering that the number of Aboriginal people in Canada with doctorates in each discipline is so small, I wonder what the point of the invitation is. In such a situation it is exceedingly rare for an Aboriginal person to be hired, but the false impression is left that there is some kind of affirmative action going on at the university. When an Aboriginal person with all the qualifications is hired, he or she is often considered (disparaged as) the product of affirmative action by colleagues. Many Indigenous faculty members have experienced this in subtle and not so

subtle ways. Subtle ways may include being called to sit as the token Indigenous member on every committee in the university or being asked for input on any topic related to Indigenous people even when it is an area about which one knows little. The not so subtle indications of the perception of Indigenous faculty members as products of affirmative action can include being told outright, "You were hired because you're an Indian" as I was, or being introduced to visiting professors as "our little Hawaiian," as Trask was (1993b, p. 214).

Many Indigenous people have huge bodies of valuable knowledge that could greatly benefit students, but it is difficult to place those people in the classroom because of the structure of the institution, what counts as knowledge in the West, and how the West credits knowledge.

#### *Learning Divorced From Context*

In the Western education system, most teaching and learning takes place in a classroom. The teacher has gained expertise from others who have learned in a similar situation. The students learn about things they may never see, people they may never meet, and places they may never go from people who may not have experienced the objects of study either. This decontextualized learning is unlike the usual traditional Indigenous learning experience that takes place in context. A particularly ironic example of the decontextualized teaching I do is the Traditional Environmental Knowledge course mentioned above. I teach a course on Traditional Environmental Knowledge but we spend at most a few days outside.

#### *Teacher and Student Roles*

Typically, in the Western education system, the roles of teachers and students are rigidly defined. Teachers are in a position of authority, students in one of deference. Teachers are older, students are younger. Teachers are knowledgeable, students are ignorant. And neither teachers nor students bring their personal life or emotions into the classroom. Indigenous people, whether students or teachers, have a really hard time with these rules. Aboriginal students are commonly mature students, sometimes older, more knowledgeable, and much more experienced than their teachers.

For many Aboriginal students with complex personal lives, it can be challenging to live up to the expected role of a student. Any teacher who refuses to accommodate to that reality makes it much more difficult for Aboriginal (and other students with families, jobs, issues) to succeed. Many non-Aboriginal teachers in traditional disciplines have no idea of the burdens that some students carry, have no sympathy for them, and expect them to fulfill their presumed role without question.

#### *The Educational Hierarchy*

The Western education system is hierarchical. Everyone and everything is ranked. Schools, disciplines, departments, teachers, and students are all ranked. Those individuals and institutions that are most successful at reproducing Western ideology are rewarded with grades, grants, scholarships, jobs, contracts, raises, tenure, promotions, awards, and so forth. Hierarchy goes hand-in-hand with authority and exclusiveness, and success in the system is correlated with wealth, and power.

Many Aboriginal people in the Western education system, whether teachers or students, are excluded from the institution's standards of success, wealth and power because they are unable or unwilling to reproduce the ideology. For many Aboriginal people, even if we were able to learn all the rules, we would not be willing to play the game because egalitarianism and inclusivity are held as higher values by us than exclusivity and competition. Whereas the Western education system encourages competition (positively cutthroat in some disciplines such as medicine and law) and individual success, Indigenous societies place a high value on cooperation and success of the entire group.

#### *Western Teaching Methods*

The teaching methods traditionally used in Western educational institutions are foreign to Indigenous peoples. Pontification by the professor or expert in a one-way stream to the unquestioning student receptacles is foreign. Library research rather than actual experience is foreign. High-stress exams that test how well you write exams rather than what you really know are foreign. Writing to the neglect of orality, artistry, and other forms of expression is foreign. Reliance on documents written almost exclusively by Western experts even on Aboriginal subjects seems peculiar to Aboriginal students. The belief that conflict, punishment, penalties, and humiliation encourage learning is hard for Indigenous students to understand.

So many aspects of the Western education system are foreign to Indigenous ways of learning—as well as to Indigenous ideas of polite or ethical behavior—that it is a wonder that there are any Aboriginal people in academia at all. But the fact remains that many Indigenous students, myself included, believe that valuable learning is possible in the academy. This does require considerable accommodation at times.

#### *Possible Mitigative Measures*

So what can we Indigenous educators do about this situation? With such divergence between the Western and Indigenous world views, I do not believe solutions are possible by taking only accommodating or mitigative measures. We could be absolutely principled and give up academia, but most of us are not willing to do that. We see value in what we are attempting to do in the academy. As Maori scholar Smith (1999) says, "To acquiesce is to lose ourselves entirely and implicitly agree with all that has been said about us" (p. 4). I, and I am sure many other Indigenous educators, position ourselves in academia so that our voices can be heard—so it can be widely known that we do not acquiesce in colonial representations of us. Although it is difficult, I think it is possible for Indigenous scholars to work in the university, eroding and reforming or replacing traditional academic practices. There are a number of small ways I have done this and more I would like to try in the future. I am always interested in learning what others have done toward this end as well.

Some of what I have done to change traditional academic practice includes normalizing the atmosphere. Presenting myself as a human being who has a life outside the classroom and who expects the students do so as well. I interact with students outside the classroom in the First Nations students' center, in my home, in their homes, and other locations in the community. The positive atmosphere this

normalization creates is obviously beneficial for me as a teacher and for the students as the stress level declines and the comfort level rises.

Another mechanism that I would like to use more often is taking students out of the classroom. The most successful class I ever taught was the Traditional Land Management course in the Forestry program at Northwest Community College in Hazelton. In that course, we spent more time out of the classroom than in. As a community member I had many contacts and opportunities to offer the students experiential learning. We went to fish camp, went trapping, picked plants, made traditional medicines, and so on. I take my Traditional Environmental Knowledge class from UNBC to the village of Kispiox every year to stay at my house, eat traditional foods, and experience the land and people. In Prince George, my students sometimes visit Aboriginal organizations and participate in Aboriginal events. I find the bigger the city, school and class, the more difficult it is to take students out.

I like to bring the outside into the classroom. I bring in community members with various kinds of expertise and experiences. I bring in objects that students can see, touch, and smell: furs, hides, traditional clothing, tools, weapons, and other things. I feed my students traditional foods: moose, caribou, salmon, huckleberries, and so forth. I encourage my students to bring things in, especially when they are presenting information to us. Students in my classes have used a wide variety of illustrations for presentations. They use the usual maps, photographs, overheads, videorecordings and Power Point presentations, but they have also been known to sing, dance, and create works of art.

I like learning to be participatory and experiential. I encourage orality, visual expression, and creativity. I tell stories in all kinds of courses and encourage students to do the same: traditional stories, contemporary stories, stories we have written ourselves, stories in poetry, song, and dance, stories in visual art forms.

I place a high value on humor. Humor is an essential part of Aboriginal life. I want the students to have fun. I want to have fun. If we are not having fun we should all do something else. I teach a course entirely devoted to Indigenous humor.

I try to provide students with the opportunity to study what they consider important. The courses I teach usually have limited required readings; instead I encourage individual exploration of subject matter. I emphasize research, writing, and presentations rather than offer a highly structured course with grades based on detailed exams. I encourage students to write in the first person, to abandon the absurdity of objectivity. I especially encourage students to add what they learn from academic sources to their traditional and experiential knowledge.

I teach hand-on classes. I developed a First Nations Clothing and Adornment course that has been successful. In this course students undertake research and writing, but they also create pieces. Students put remarkable effort into their projects and produce amazing results. I teach First Nations Art and Material Culture as a hands-on course. The students design and create an art installation as part of the course and hold an art show at the end of the year. The titles students have chosen for their art shows include *Coyote Makes a Mess*, *Things Left Unsaid*, and *A Warrior's Home Is His Castle*. Enthusiasm for these courses is so high with the



students and in our department that we are now developing of a First Nations fine arts program.

Although this may all sound like a lot of fun (and many students say it is), I also expect dedication and hard work. I expect students to be responsible for their own learning. I expect students to do research in the library and in the community; I expect them to read, think, and write. Students who are committed are rewarded in my classes, not for perfect grammar and punctuation, but for effort, originality, and thoughtfulness. Those who think my classes are three easy credits are swiftly disavowed of that notion.

I see teaching things Aboriginal in the academy as involving a process of pushing the envelope, of finding new and better ways to become new and better learners. I see education as a process of students and teachers learning together. I continually try to make education make more sense and to make formal education a better experience for all my students.

### *Conclusion*

I see what I do as involving a process of negotiation, a process that always entails an ethical dilemma. I see my choices about my role in the Western education system on a continuum. If I were truly to support Indigenous education, I would not work in the Western education system, I would not be a "teacher" at all. At the other end of the continuum, I could choose to be completely integrated into the Western education system and the world view it is founded on. I choose neither of these, but something in between. I choose to go into the institution and teach and learn along with the students. I choose to present students with an Indigenous perspective as far as I am able in the setting. I choose to bring new experiences and learning opportunities to the students. I choose to negotiate between the requirements of the university and the learning situation seen as ideal by Indigenous people. I choose to strive to be aware of the contradictions involved in what I do. I choose to do what I can. And I choose to write a Coyote story to entertain and educate.

### *Coyote Goes to School*

Coyote was once again fed up with running around all day in the hot sun for a few scrawny gophers and rabbits. Dirt up his nose, dirt in his eyes, and what for? Barely a mouthful. Coyote had tried getting food at the supermarket one time like the Human People do but he got the shit kicked out of him for that. So, once again, he went to his brother, Raven, to ask him for advice.

Coyote said, "Raven, there's got to be an easier way to get fed. I tried the supermarket—got beaten up. Tried to get money from welfare but came up against the Devil's Spawn in a K-Mart dress. Nothing's worked so far. You got any other ideas?"

"Well," Raven said thoughtfully, "the White Humans seem pretty well fed and they say that the key to success is a good education. Maybe you could go to school."

"Hmmm," Coyote mused, "maybe I'll try it. Couldn't hurt."

Well, Coyote went off to the city to the university because that's where Raven said adults go to school.

In a few days Coyote was back.

"Well my brother," Raven inquired, "did you get your education?"

"Not exactly," Coyote replied, "education is as hard to get as a welfare cheque. To get an education like the teachers at the university takes at least 10 years—that's a Coyote's entire lifetime—and, in the end, you don't get paid much anyways."

"When I got to the university they asked me what program I was in. I didn't know so they sent me to this guy who told me about the programs. I kinda liked the idea of biology—if I learned more about gophers maybe they'd be easier to catch. I liked the idea of engineering—maybe I could invent a great rabbit trap. But in the end I settled on Native Studies. Now that's something I can understand—I've known those guys for thousands of years, even been one when it suited me."

"So I went to my Introduction to Native Studies course and, can you believe it, the teacher was a white guy? Now how much sense does that make? I saw native people around town—any one of 'em has got to know more about native people than some white guy."

"When I asked this guy what Indian told him the stuff he was saying. He said none—he read it in a book. Then I asked who the Indian was who wrote the book. And he said, it wasn't an Indian, it was a white guy. Then I asked him what Indian the guy who wrote the book learned from and the teacher got mad and told me to sit down."

The next day I went to my Indians of North America class. I was really looking forward to meeting all those Indians. And you know what? There was another white guy standing up there and not an Indian in sight. I asked the teacher, "Are we going to visit all the Indians?" He said, No. So I asked him, "How are we going to learn about Indians then?" And he said, just like the other guy, from a book written by a white guy. So I asked him if I could talk to this guy who wrote the book and the teacher said, "No, he's dead."

"By then, I was getting pretty confused about this education stuff but I went to my next class—Indian Religions. And guess what? When I went in, there wasn't another white guy standing up at the front of the room—there was a white woman!"

"I sat down and I asked her, 'Are we going to the sweatlodge?' 'No.' 'Sundance?' 'No.' 'Yuwipi?' 'No.' 'Then how are we going to learn—no wait, I know—from a book written by a dead white guy! I'm starting to get the hang of this education business.'"

"So then I go to my Research Methods class thinking I've got it figured out. In this class the teacher (you've got it—another white guy) said that our research must be ethical, that we must follow the guidelines set out by the university for research on human subjects. The rules are there, my teacher said, to protect the Indians from unscrupulous researchers. Who made these rules I asked—you guessed it—a bunch of white guys. They decided we need protecting and that they were the ones to decide how best to protect us from them. So I told my teacher that I wanted to interview my father. The teacher said, you've got to ask the ethics review committee for permission. What?! I've got to ask a bunch of white guys for permission to talk to my own dad? That can't be right. I was confused all over again."

“So I sat down and thought about all this for a long time. Finally I figured it out. If white guys teach all the courses about Indians and they teach in the way white people think, then to find Indians teaching the way Indians think, all I had to do was give up Native Studies and join the White Studies program!”

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## *Contributors to this Issue*

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**Michelle Pidgeon** is a doctoral student at the University of British Columbia. She has completed a master's in education from Memorial University of Newfoundland and a thesis on national perspectives on Aboriginal student services in Canadian Universities.

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