

6 Roundtable Discussion #1

Carl Urion, Ruth Norton, and Tom Porter



Ruth Norton is Ojibway from Sagkeeng First Nation in Manitoba. She is a Native language curriculum writer and a teacher/principal.



Carl Urion is a professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Alberta. He is Métis.

Carl Urion

This is the first time that I have been in a situation where I can call on so many people to witness a debt of gratitude that I owe to a senior scholar. I have talked to this woman only four or five times in my life, but she is a leader in my discipline and she has meant a lot to me. I want to thank Dr. Medicine.

Walter Lightning planned to be here, but was unable to come. We have had a relationship that started when he came to a class where I was lecturing. He came to see me afterward and said he was trying to figure out who I was and where I was coming from. For some reason, he asked me if I had ever read *The Teachings of Don Juan*. I said, "No, I can't make any sense out of that. Somebody tried to read it to me once, but I kept going to sleep." Then he got a little closer to what he thought was one of my traditions, and said, "Have you ever read *Black Elk Speaks*?" I said, "No I haven't. I can't make sense of it. I respect the people who appreciate it, but I can't make sense of it." Walter and I had a long talk in the 1980s about

how you can never write down tradition. About 17 years later, a respected Elder from the Sunchild-O'Chiese Reserve wrote out in syllabics some important teaching and told Walter to write his thesis about it. And told me to help him. I'm still learning.

I talk from the perspective of someone who has been involved in graduate education since 1974, that is, 20 years. I recognize that it can be an oppressive business, and there can be lots of hoops to jump through. But I think more about the exhilaration of working with these students—people, not students—in the intimacy of the mind, in the discovery of new knowledge, and how exciting that can be. This makes me think of what Terry Tafoya talked about earlier, the separation of *information* and *knowledge*. When Walter and I talked yesterday about what to say here, we talked about knowledge and how to use a university's resources and technologies in a Cree way to look for knowledge. We came up with what we thought would be an honest statement of the perspective we brought to our witnessing of the people who have talked here. Walter put a lot of thought into this, I wrote it down, and this is the result.

Studying in a formal way in a program leading to a degree cannot be an end in itself. It is not something that reflects in particular or special credit or enhances a person's status. It is the pursuit of a set of tools or composite of knowledge. And while we would honor those who take this avenue of acquiring knowledge, it is only one of many, many ways—equally honored—for growth and for pursuing knowledge. The second thing he and I came up with was that the place of those things our Elders teach us is central to this process. We have to recognize that each individual comes to terms with these things in his or her own way. So we can't write or talk about what you ought to do to honor your tradition. We look to our own systems of *protocol*—a very important word—and to the recognition of authoritative teaching. Our perspectives say that the protocols have to be honored though; they must be individually honored. When you look to tradition for your strength, know your protocols. (I was going to try to talk without using the word *tradition*, as I am not comfortable with it.) If you know your protocols, a place like the university doesn't mess you up. That is commonsense talk.

The next thing we came to—and I was pleased I didn't hear anybody defining this today—was doing research in an "Indigenous" way. We think that the best observation about the Indigenous way, the Autochthonous way, is the danger in defining what an Indigenous way is. People want to know how we will define the Indigenous perspective in scholarship, and the danger is clear if we do start to define it. The first problem is that it will be defined in comparison with western or European models for the acquisition of knowledge rather than on its own terms. It follows, then, that Indigenous perspectives will be defined in terms of the exotic, and in the larger context this will marginalize Indigenous perspectives in the

world of research. Furthermore, it gives people the idea that new techniques are exotic to our cultures. The fourth comment—and this is where I believe all our speakers were talking from—is that a definition of Indigenous knowledge would allow some people to think we are making that definition in essentialist terms. In other words, here is a statement written and talked about over the last couple of weeks. And let me honor the late Elder Louis Sunchild for this insight that I believe he gave us. We believe that the knowledge that is created or discovered in Indigenous terms by people doing research here in First Nations programs is for the benefit of everybody. That receptivity to it, enjoyment of its benefits, has everything to do with our frame of mind and very little to do with political, genetic, or legislative definitions of who has authority to represent any way of thinking as Indigenous. This leads us back to the idea of *authority* or *frame of mind* as we understand it, which must be described in terms that are part of the Indigenous perspective. These terms are *compassion*, *respect*, *truth*, and thus *excellence*. I think that all our speakers here point to these terms. I am glad I hear these terms over and over in this meeting: *compassion*, *respect*, *truth*, and *excellence*.

Ruth Norton

Today I say Thank You to our Creator for allowing me to come here to speak to you. I am honored to speak to all of you. I would also ask the Creator to help us to have an understanding when we speak, to have listening skills that we may listen with our hearts, minds, and emotions, and listen on behalf of our relatives who are at home. My Indian name means Rocky Mountain Woman. I received this name from the Crees; a Cree man gave me that name. I also have received many teachings from many Elders from across the country. I have been fortunate to learn from Elders from just about every tribe across the country on the special teachings that we have in our language, the importance of our language, and how we must use it. I have also learned from Elders how to use the many things that the Creator has given us like the eagle feather, sweetgrass, the sage, and tobacco. All these things assist us so that we may speak to each other with trust, respect, and love, because whatever we do as educators reflects on those who are coming after us.

My education has taught me that these are the most important things that we must live by. When Peggy and Stan asked me to come and be part of a panel and talk about what the Indian scholars have said, I was taken aback because I always see myself as one of the workers, that is, as someone who is always behind the scenes. All the work I have done throughout my life has been in support of learning. I try to help so things will go right for our people, particularly in education. When I was asked to come and summarize the scholars' talks, I thought about it for a long time, and then I prayed. I thought, well, I will do it because it is important that we begin to understand as Indian educators what the high scholars are

saying. We need to understand these scholars, to learn about the kinds of issues they tell us about and the messages they give us. In this way I will be able to relay the message to my own children, grandchildren, and my brother's children, and so on.

One thing that one of the Elders told me again and again was that when you are given a gift or the opportunity to be part of any teaching or learning situation, you must take advantage of it. It is not for you to glorify yourself. It is for the people who come after you, that is, your children, grandchildren, and relatives. When you go out, speak, and try to convey a message, you are not alone. Those who brought you up, your parents and grandparents, are standing behind you, and whatever you say must be said with respect for those who are listening. This is because our ancestors are standing behind us when we speak. Right now, my father and all the spirits that have gone before me are standing behind me. They are guarding me and what I am going to say.

With that, I will tell some of my own thoughts about what I thought and felt when I was listening to the scholars. Listening to Tom Porter, I felt a real sense of well-being, because what he said about our languages made me really feel good. I worked in promoting our language for 30 years, and as a language activist at the community level many times people asked me, "Why are you promoting the language? Why is it so important that our kids learn the language? Why is it so important that we teach it in the schools, and why is it so important that we have to keep it for the generations?" When Tom Porter articulated the importance of language, it made me feel so well.

All that we had been saying to the little ones and the young people about the importance of language was summed up in what he talked about. All our stories, like our creation stories of who we are and our history, sum up our place in creation: our place as *Anishnabe*, as Cree people, as Mohawk people, and so on. When we speak in our languages as Tom Porter articulated, it gives us a sense of great well-being.

Listening to Terry Tafoya I felt that the stories I heard as a child from my father, mother, grandparents, and others were what carried me through my own life. Hearing what he said also made me feel good. As I listened, I was struck by the importance of our languages and cultures. An Elder from northern Manitoba once told us that there will be a time in the future when different parts of our society will come together and start speaking of language. They will start speaking of the role of Elders as important in who we are as Aboriginal people. As Terry was speaking I heard again the words that Elder Adam Dick from northern Manitoba spoke in 1985. Often when I hear a speaker I hear again some of the Elders that I worked with from my own home community, home province, and throughout Canada and am reminded of their many teachings.

When Eber spoke about memory first, then knowledge, I realized that I have the same experiences and memories when I hear Indian educators and distinguished scholars like Bea Medicine.

In the many important points brought up, I believe there were two major areas. One is the importance of language, because it carries our culture, heritage, the histories of who we are, our connection to the past. The second is the role of Elders, because they are the most important aspect of Indian education; and all the speakers spoke about this. All articulated their importance in their own way. I could not sum up what they said, but these two points were made clear. As I listened, it ran through my mind that when we talk about developing a graduate program for Native people in the area of Indian education, we must look at it in terms of these two areas: language and Elders. It is most important that the Elders, community, and people have a strong role in the development of any program that is going to be in any university. It is so important for us to begin to retrain our own people so that they teach in the traditional ways and that they teach our histories, so that your identity as a Native person is included. And the community must be involved in this process. Those who are developing this program must go out to the communities surrounding the University of Alberta and talk to the Elders. They must go out to the regional areas, talk to the community people, ask them what they think, and ask what their role should be. People outside the university must be involved. For the last 30 years we have had teacher training and other programs in universities that the universities say have involved our communities but have involved our communities in only a small way. They have not totally involved the community people. The people in the communities are the stakeholders in any program to be developed at a university level. They must be consulted.

For example, in 1970 when the Brandon Teacher Training Program was started, the developer of that program went to the communities. I know this because he came to our community, explained the program, talked to the chief and council, and talked to the community people. The community said that they would decide who would go into the teacher training program. At that time the chief, council, and the community interviewed the people who were to go into the teacher training program. It was they who decided who would train as a teacher, because at that time the Elders said that we had to decide who we would want to teach our children. As it happened throughout the past 30 years, bits and pieces of local community involvement fell by the wayside because our people became institutionalized. They began to think like the people who were training them. In my mind the most important thing that the University of Alberta should consider so this does not happen again is complete involvement of the Elders and the community people themselves in the PhD program.

Tom Porter

The text of this presentation is not available, although the concluding remark is printed here.

I thank you and salute you who are from the Indian world with diplomas and degrees; you who have made it. I say to the young people, Don't let happen to you what happened to me. Jump over the hurdles. Bea will help you and if I'm not too far away, I'll help you as well. Go for it. Make us proud.