

Editorial: First Nations Education in Mainstream Systems

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To get to your destination, you need to know where you are coming from.

An increasing number of Indigenous scholars and educators are attempting to fit their studies into the mainstream university and educational setting, some with a great deal of success, others with sad comments of disenfranchisement and disappointment. It seems that the more clearly we articulate just what an Indigenous perspective is, and the more clearly our world view is expressed, the more difficult it is to be understood and accepted in a hierarchical setting.

We are frequently asked by school boards to assist, for example, teachers in infusing Aboriginal cultural content into the curriculum. This request is made with good intentions, but with little thought about how the context affects either the process or the product. On the surface the concept sounds good. But it is like someone claiming that she or he is going to make a buffalo and rabbit stew with one buffalo and one rabbit: it would be difficult to find the rabbit in that pot of stew. The point is that the power differential remains as it has since formal education began.

Current provincial curricula were developed out of mainstream Canadian society with its own agenda for transmitting its own culture: colonizing its younger generation, as it were, to its own attitudes, values, and customs in order to perpetuate itself. By simply infusing something into an already powerful and harmful system, we may be contributing only that—an infusion—and may in fact be perpetuating the problem. As Noley (1981) says, “What we ultimately need may not be a grafting of Indian content and personnel onto European structures, but a redefinition of education” (p. 198)—and a restructuring, we might add. The need is for the the curriculum to emerge from the traditional Aboriginal culture, not the other way around. Then the Aboriginal culture would provide the framework to legitimize the curriculum.

Is it possible to decolonize the existing educational system, or could we be falling into a trap by assuming that there is an underlying truth or canon (yes, there are fundamentalist academics) that is uncoverable and that once discovered will form the basis of a value-free education? In our opinion, all knowledge is affectively loaded: there is no such thing as objective truth. Truth is always interpreted from a personal as well as a sociohistorical perspective. Even those who claim to be engaged in hard science do not escape subjectivity because of their curiosity and interest in the topic. Curiosity and interest are subjective states.

When we undertook the initiative of implementing a First Nations Graduate Education Program at the University of Alberta, it seemed that the time was right for change and innovation. In power positions at that time were a group of people open to new and innovative ideas. Although they openly expressed their ignorance of an Aboriginal world view, they obviously felt confident and secure

enough in their power to “let” us proceed. Now that 13 master’s and three doctoral students have graduated, those in administrative positions are openly proud of “their university’s” success. But people in power positions change, and with these changes come changes in perception and acceptance of Indigenous ability and thought. Without continual vigilance, we fear that—bit by small bit—erosion will take place: erosion of Indigenous values, of spiritual practices, and of the accomplishments that have been made. As administrative changes are made, courses are dropped, core course requirements change, and with these changes comes a shift in power differential. Once Elders were allowed to sit as contributing and voting members on doctoral committees. Now these Elders are required to hold doctoral degrees. Once students could begin their oral exams with an Elder’s prayer and smudging. Now they must retreat to a designated room for the smudging and then return for the exam. Although these examples may seem trivial, they represent a significant and detrimental shift. For a few short, meaningful years Indigenous students and faculty felt in control: in control of their education and their academic lives. This is why the success and completion rate was so high.

In her doctoral candidacy proposal, Noella Steinhauer (2003) writes of the Papaschase Claim,¹ stating that the newspaper of the day (*The Edmonton Bulletin*) called for the members of the Papaschase Band to “be sent back to the country they originally came from.” Ignorance of our history and of our place on this land is not uncommon.

The sentiment that Aboriginal people should not be included in society continues. The ongoing reeducation of people who carry these attitudes is time-consuming, tiring, and seemingly endless.

Unless universities (and indeed the entire educational system) employs Indigenous faculty and educators who know who they are, what they stand for, and why Indigenous programming is needed, no amount of decolonizing of the mainstream system and no amount of cultural infusion into the existing educational system will make any significant difference. The continual power shifts and uncertain acceptance (by the system that we choose to be a part of) calls for strong-willed, steadfast Aboriginal students and faculty who operate from an Indigenous perspective and who cannot be manipulated. And even then, it seems, all the equity policies and all the inclusion rhetoric become redundant if the power brokers do not wish to include Aboriginal thought. The good news is: *we are not going away; this is where we originally come from.*

Note

¹It is interesting to note that the University of Alberta now sits on land that was once known as Papaschase territory. Chief Papaschase was Noella Steinhauer’s great-great grandfather. It was when Noella proposed to complete her candidacy exam for her doctoral degree that a memo was sent out stating that Indigenous students would not be allowed to smudge and pray in the same room as their examination.

References

- Noley, G. (1981). Review of the schooling of Native America. *Harvard Education Review*, 51, 197-199.
- Steinhauer, N. (2003). *Natwahtaw: Looking for a Cree model of education*. Unpublished doctoral candidacy proposal, University of Alberta.