# A Missing Link: Between Traditional Aboriginal Education and the Western System of Education

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*This article continues the ongoing discussion of culturally appropriate education for Aboriginal students and focuses on students' spirituality as the missing ingredient that makes traditional Aboriginal education and the Western system of education compatible. Spirituality unites the human part of all of us and permits the differences to exist; through our spirituality we find our connectedness to one another. The counsel of Aboriginal educators must be heeded if Aboriginal education is to become spiritually grounded and thus culturally appropriate. They hold the answers to what more we need to know about the role of spirituality in learning and education. This article examines spirituality in learning and education from three perspectives: (a) Aboriginal epistemology to discover the foundation for spirituality in learning; (b) Aboriginal educators' knowledge to understand the implications for teachers and their pedagogy; and (c) students' comments to see how they experience spirituality operating in a university course for beginning teachers.*

The Western secular system of education appears to be blind to the spirituality that infuses or underlies Aboriginal epistemology and thus culturally appropriate education for Aboriginal students. For the purpose of this article, spirituality refers to the immaterial aspect of one's personhood that connects with *otherness*, including for some a life force or immanence, especially the Creator, or God. Also, "Aboriginal (adjective or noun) refers to the conditions, rights, and way of life that existed before contact with Europeans, and to any aspects of these which still exist today" (Leavitt, 1995, p. ix).

Many Aboriginal authors who are concerned with culturally appropriate education address the relatedness of spirituality to learning. Because they assert that spirituality is a necessary component of culturally appropriate education, teachers need to listen and understand how to provide an empowering education for all students through appropriate attitudes toward others, learning, and the resultant teaching philosophy and pedagogy.

This article examines the necessity of spirituality in learning and education as linked to Aboriginal philosophies and world views. First, an overview of Aboriginal epistemology lays the foundation for the necessity of spirituality in the classroom. Second, pivotal to this examination is what Aboriginal educators have to say about their ways of knowing and the principles vital to the learning process that have important implications for teachers and their pedagogy. Third, because the importance of spirituality in learning and education becomes evident through this examination, students' journals support this claim and reveal how they experience spirituality in an actual university course. Such frontline experience is indispensable to an understanding of this missing link between traditional

Aboriginal and Western ways of knowing as reflected in a Western system of education that seeks a secular, definitive truth. Foundational to this three-pronged methodology is an understanding of my location in culturally appropriate education.

### *Background*

This article is a natural next step in my journey as a non-Aboriginal public school teacher, now university professor, who wishes to provide meaningful classroom learning for all students. I want students, and myself as a learner, to connect with information such that perceptions are challenged and changed so that we can better understand ourselves, others, our world, and how we can live meaningful lives. My passion is understanding the process of appropriate education for all students, or culturally appropriate education.

I discuss such appropriateness in other articles from the perspective of valuing Aboriginal students and their literacy (Curwen Doige, 1999, 2001). My classroom experience with Aboriginal students keeps me searching for ways to articulate the complex struggles that result from diversity in culture, thinking, experience, and learning. A significant aspect of this complex struggle is the fact that Aboriginal students are still marginalized in the public school and university systems through Westernized curricula and pedagogy. Being disenfranchised through education based on a non-Aboriginal way of thinking and learning has existed for hundreds of years (compare Curwen Doige 2001; Brooks 1991) with little change even though Aboriginal educators have been calling overtly for a holistic education for their children since the Blue Quills school occupation in 1970 (Battiste & Barman, 1995). I seek an empowering education for all students and Aboriginal students in particular.

The challenge, adventure, and romance of teaching for me is enabling meaningful connections to be made between content and life. I must be the vigilant, critical observer of the learning while also being a learner. Having authentic respect and acceptance for Aboriginal students means that I must endeavor to understand why they think as they do and how they manage their learning. So I ask questions of them and of myself; in the classroom these questions often lead to unfamiliar thoughts and feelings that can be unsettling at times.

I do not wish to be stuck asking the usual questions I hear about Aboriginal students like Can we find a tutor to assist the Aboriginal student to understand the material? as if the material were the focus of the lesson or learning. Rather, I need to ask such questions as What is it about this material that the Aboriginal student does not understand? What does the Aboriginal student say about the material and the presentation of it? Am I missing what is being understood about the material because I am listening to the lesson content rather than the learner's interpretation? How can I present the material in a context that is meaningful to the Aboriginal student? I need to ask such questions in relation to all students. In this case, however, this process brings me to an examination of spirituality in learning and education. Often Aboriginal students answer my questions with references to the Creator and links to nature and life involving values and beliefs.

Therefore, as an educator I must ask some new questions if education is to be culturally appropriate for Aboriginal students. For example, I must ask How can

21st-century education be empowering for Aboriginal students? What is it about "Aboriginal knowing" that educators need to understand? How do Aboriginal educators view spirituality? How can spirituality be a dynamic element in the curriculum? How do teachers become challenging, visionary educators who believe that learning is transformative? Thus the search continues.

### *An Overview of Aboriginal Epistemology*

Aboriginal students in particular help me to keep focused on what I consider to be the real business of an empowering education, that is, internalizing information by making connections to life experiences and the harmonies in relationships and nature. When given time, appropriate assignments, and discussions, most Aboriginal students naturally attempt to make such connections as if they were essential to an understanding of life and living. Of course, some non-Aboriginal students do this as well, but as a whole, my experience is that Aboriginal students have a natural affinity to such learning. A measure of understanding about Aboriginal epistemology helps to answer this apparent affinity.

Forbes (1979), a Native American educator, says, "knowledge without the spiritual core is a very dangerous thing" (p. 11), because learning remains at the superficial level of skills and facts, where ideas can be formed without the influence of morals and values. He gives the creation of the atomic bomb as an example of such a formation without morals and values. Meaningful education, according to Forbes, is "learning ... how to live a life of the utmost spiritual quality" (p. 11), which is more than merely acquiring skills and knowledge. These connections between morals, values, and learning are fundamental to Aboriginal identity. Consequently, Aboriginal students must understand how they are connected to other human beings and to nature. They must also understand that their intentions and motivations are crucial to the maintenance of the quality of such connections and their identity.

Couture (1991a) concurs that even "elders themselves of all Tribes stress Native identity as being a state of mind, as it were, centered in the heart" (p. 202). He elaborates on this idea of "being" Aboriginal when he says,

> Traditional Native holism and personalism as a culturally shaped human process of being/becoming, is rooted in a relationship with Father Sky, the cosmos, and with Mother Earth, the land ... This relationship ... [is] marked by a trust and a respect which stems from a direct and sustained experience of the oneness of all reality, of the livingness of the land. (p. 207)

That is, the identity of an Aboriginal student is based in his or her spirituality. Cajete (1994) adds to this notion of interconnectedness and says that for "Indian people, this primary context of relationship and meaning are found in the natural environment. In a sense, all traditional Indian Education can be called environmental education because it touches on the spiritual ecology of a place" (p. 193). The spiritual ecology is understood in the deeply personal connections that are present in an individual's spirituality. Ermine (1995) explains this spirituality as "the inner space [that] is that universe of being within each person that is synonymous with the soul, the spirit, the self, or the being. The priceless core within each of us" (p. 103). One's spirituality is the inner resource that facilitates

knowing oneself, one's surroundings, and finding meaning for oneself in connection or relation to those surroundings. Thus "a life of the utmost spiritual quality" (Forbes, 1979, p. 11) is a life that experiences to a high degree the connections in the relationship of the self to all reality.

These connections are made through the cognitive and affective perceptions and actions of the human mind, body, and spirit. Living in the relationships between these connections is the "manifest spiritual ground of Native being," according to Couture (1991b, p. 59). He further explains that the Native mind is therefore a mind-in-relational-activity, a "mind-in-community" (p. 59). Relationships are foundational to being and becoming. Couture (2000) adds that "the 'stuff' of relationships is revealed as the 'ground' to aboriginal being and becoming, and provides a sure footing, a step at a time, for the necessary walk into and through contemporary dilemmas" (p. 158). Although contemporary society is vastly different from the traditional Aboriginal world prior to contact with Europeans, the Aboriginal way of knowing remains the product of inner space or spirituality in connection to life and to the environment.

Couture (1991b) also explains that "traditional Indian knowing is an experience in matter and spirit as inseparable realities non-dualistically apprehended" (p. 57). This term *non-dualistic apprehension* explains a way of interpreting the perceived world and simultaneously being part of or one with it. Meaning and learning occur where diverse perceptions come together and are experienced as both matter and spirit. In Couture's (1991b) words,

> The mode of indigenous knowing is a non-dualistic process—it transcends the usual oppositions between rational knowledge and intuition, spiritual insight and physical behavior. It is inclusive of all reality. As a process of thinking and perceiving, it is irreducible. Its scope and focus are on what goes together. (p. 57)

This idea of oneness or non-dualistic thinking simultaneously recognizes parts and comprehends them for what they are. That is, the Aboriginal process of knowing never leaves information as parts, but searches for the connections to meaning and holism as found at the points of togetherness. Furthermore, Couture (1991b) states:

> Non-dualistic thinking develops a physical image of the spiritual. The thoughts of the "world" are as creatures, and processes of growth and becoming, and not as abstract concepts and explanations. Native awareness and perception is of the spiritual as belonging to this world, and not to some beyond. (p. 60)

Therefore, Aboriginal knowing is an expression of an individual's spirituality in relationship, not an expression of an objectified system of beliefs or a religion. Aboriginal knowing, or reality, to an Aboriginal mind is by its very nature subjective and personal and "is the direct result of consciously experienced process" (Couture 1991b, p. 59). Furthermore, according to Ermine (1995), "those who seek to understand the reality of existence and harmony with the environment by turning inward have a different, incorporeal knowledge paradigm that might be termed Aboriginal epistemology" (p. 103).

The Aboriginal approaches to learning are spiritual, holistic, experiential/subjective, and transformative. In contrast, mainstream approaches to learning are secular, fragmented, neutral/objective, and seek to discover definitive truth. Also, as we see, at the heart of Aboriginal epistemology is, according to Couture (1991b),

"the spiritual as belonging to this world" (p. 60). Therefore, an Aboriginal student's spirituality must be encouraged and respected in his or her education if learning is to occur. This fact creates an ethical antithesis in the classroom because the Aboriginal knowledge paradigm is deeply spiritual whereas the Western knowledge paradigm is secular.

How to overcome this antithesis is often the essence of the struggle for educators, although they may not be able to articulate the struggle. For years Aboriginal students were asked to know what the Westerner knows and to come to know in the same way as the Westerner does. This is an obvious imposition of a foreign knowledge paradigm, epistemology, and associated pedagogy. The time has come for educators to understand what Aboriginal students know and understand how they come to know it. This is an enrichment to the Western educator's knowledge paradigm, epistemology, and associated pedagogy. However, overcoming the antithesis does not mean the assimilation of one knowledge paradigm by the other. In other words, making education culturally appropriate for Aboriginal students does not mean that the Western knowledge paradigm has to change. It does mean that the Aboriginal knowledge paradigm and the Western knowledge paradigm must be incorporated into the teacher's pedagogy such that one is not regarded as superior to the other. The antithesis between the paradigms of knowing may persist, but the ethical implications need not if spirituality in the classroom is understood clearly.

In order to grasp the notion of spirituality in the classroom, educators need to understand three ideas used in this article. First, spirituality and learning in education refers to the connections between the intellectual and moral qualities of a student that must not be neglected, but rather accepted, respected, and celebrated by teachers. Second, the celebration of a student's spirituality has nothing to do with the imposition of religious practices in the school. Admittedly a student's spirituality may be influenced directly by affiliation with an organized religious practice or denomination. However, this article seeks to discuss the ideas and values a student, an Aboriginal student in particular, brings to learning and how this important discussion can be facilitated by an informed, sensitive educator. Third, to be effective teachers and communicators in the increasingly culturally diverse classrooms across the nation, educators need to listen to the counsel of Aboriginal educators who from their own experience are in a position to know what makes education culturally appropriate for Aboriginal students. They advocate that spirituality is the essential link needed to wed traditional Aboriginal education and the Western system of education.

## *What Aboriginal Leaders Know and Teachers Need to Know About Spirituality in Education*

Ermine (1995) states that the task for contemporary Aboriginal education is "The accumulation and synthesis of insights and tribal understanding acquired through inwardness [individual spirituality], and the juxtaposition of knowledge on the physical plane as culture and Community" (p. 105).

As a contemporary non-Aboriginal educator, I would not presume that I could accumulate insights resulting from tribal understandings and inwardness. This is sacred territory for individuals and not mine to enter. However, as a non-

Aboriginal educator of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, I am obligated to provide a learning environment that promotes and celebrates how students come to understand information as basic to their learning. Anything less or different makes the education culturally inappropriate for Aboriginal students, indeed for all students. The task for me is to make this understanding of Aboriginal epistemology practical in the classroom dynamic. In this endeavor I draw on Aboriginal educators for assistance.

Akan (1999), Battiste (1998), Cajete (1994), Couture (1985, 1991a, 1991b, 2000), Ermine (1995), Forbes (1979), Marker (1998), and Pewewardy (1999) are particularly helpful in fostering understanding of the link between spirituality and learning in education. In general these authors say that Aboriginal spirituality is a way of thinking that pervades a way of life. Spirituality is the heart of values and morals and at the heart of education for Aboriginal students.

Akan (1999) records an idea of Aboriginal education from a Saulteaux Elder's point of view, which inherently commands respect. Akan reports that the Elder's "whole talk is a prayer reflecting the sacredness of learning and teaching" (p. 17). Akan goes on to say that the Elder, Alfred Manitopeyes, says that "to be wholly human means to have a good sense of right and wrong and to be able to act on that knowledge ... In the modern education system we are responsible to provide you with a good spiritual foundation" (p. 19). Manitopeyes echoes Forbes' (1979) idea that the purpose of education is "learning to be a human being or how to live a life of the utmost spiritual quality" (p. 11). Akan also says that "education as the Elders understand it, contains a spiritual message. It is about giving and taking the good, without apology or expectation. Essentially, it is about knowing the Creator's will for us; this is a necessary part of living" (p. 19). Thus Aboriginal spirituality is a way of life and a way of thinking that must be acknowledged and utilized in the classroom. How can this be accomplished?

A synthesis of what these educators have to say is condensed in three principles that need to influence curriculum and pedagogy: (a) to accept and thus validate Aboriginal epistemology as a basis for learning; (b) to create a relational, safe learning environment that values students; and (c) to promote authentic dialogue.

To accept and validate the Aboriginal knowledge paradigm as a basis for learning calls for an understanding by a teacher that Aboriginal students conceptualize differently than non-Aboriginal students, as revealed in the overview of Aboriginal epistemology. Cajete (1994) says "inherent in Indigenous education is the recognition that there is a Knowing Center in all human beings that reflects the Knowing Center of the Earth and other living things" (p. 210). This notion of a Knowing Center, or one's spirituality, that connects to all life is perpetuated by many parents no doubt, but especially by Aboriginal parents as they raise their children. The child's spirituality is engaged in all learning from the outset of life. Thus Aboriginal students perceive the connotation and denotation of words and ideas from the framework of a knowledge base that has been, and still is, passed down through generations. Whether parents are or are not speakers of their tribal language and participate in traditional activities, this way of seeing and under-

standing the world transmitted from one generation to the next remains as the Aboriginal knowledge paradigm.

Pewewardy (1999) calls this Aboriginal world view an eighth intelligence that is added to Gardner's (1993) seven intelligences. Gardner's idea of intelligence accommodates Pewewardy's addition because "intelligence is not a single, overarching faculty" (p. 29). Although the Aboriginal world view is affected by and affects the humanities and social science intelligence and, as Pewewardy (1999) says, "interacts directly with both intrapersonal awareness and verbal linguistics," it remains distinct from the others and is not dependent on them for definition. Aboriginal students often reveal this distinct world view as they are permitted to think and to discuss a topic long enough that they express how they think, feel, and experience information.

Time is crucial to work through information from the inside out. Often teachers are too quick to move a lesson forward. The teacher's task is to help Aboriginal students to understand information, how they come to understand it, and the significance of the information to them. The informed teacher helps Aboriginal students make the connections to the intellect, the physical, and the spiritual.

The student sifts the information through his or her knowledge center and interprets meaning. This is the step the Aboriginal student must take. However, the student can only do this well if his or her spirituality is respected and accepted in classroom discussions and activities. Such a holistic approach to information acknowledges Aboriginal epistemology and celebrates its uniqueness as the student is freed to think and to express that distinctiveness.

Pewewardy (1999) agrees that a holistic education would give "new recognition of the organic, subconscious, subjective, intuitive, artistic, mythological, and spiritual dimensions of our lives" (p. 28). One of the results of ignoring a holistic approach to education occurs in the well-intentioned Native Awareness Days held periodically in many schools. Usually schools focus on Native Awareness Days, which feature speakers in traditional dress, traditional foods, and displays of Aboriginal artifacts. Such initiatives are designed carefully and executed by concerned teachers and parents whose goal is to increase students' appreciation of aspects of Aboriginal culture and make students aware of existing stereotypes. However, the methods have served ultimately to emphasize differences to such an extent and in such a way that the gap between people of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures is widened, not bridged.

Often neglected in many units on Native Awareness is the understanding that knowing the person makes the culture known (compare Couture, 1985). People construct their culture socially by developing commonality in how they think, what they value, and what they feel about things and why. Culture is both personal and social. It is a misconception to think that culture is solely a social phenomenon. Therefore, to understand Aboriginal culture one must understand the Aboriginal people, the individuals who are living it now. Traditions are only one aspect of the ever-changing dynamic within a culture. So to focus on traditional dress, food, music, ceremonies, and artifacts freezes a culture in time and perpetuates stereotypes. Artifacts are static. People and their values, beliefs, feelings, and thoughts are dynamic, and these define the culture. Spiritual ideas and

traditions like sweetgrass and sweatlodges must be understood from the perspective of Aboriginal epistemology. Otherwise, the identifying values of Aboriginal people are treated as fixed as well. As Battiste (1998), a Mi'kmaq professor at the University of Saskatchewan, says, too often Aboriginal "social and cultural frames of reference" are presented in classrooms without an understanding of the "philosophical foundations of spiritual interconnected realities" (p. 27). It is relatively easy to incorporate culture-based content into a curriculum of study and to incorporate various teaching methods to accommodate various learning styles.

The challenge is, as Couture (1985) says, "to acquire an understanding of fundamental Native cultural values and to create the conditions for maintenance and reproduction of these values" (p. 7). The acceptance of Aboriginal students must consider and go beyond whether they are visual learners, for example, to an understanding and acceptance of the knowledge paradigm from which they make meaning. Couture (1985) and Pewewardy (1999) agree that something more than "Native units" must exist for Aboriginal students. Pewewardy (1999) supports Couture's (1985) idea that a "holistic philosophy and psychology of education rooted in traditional Native values" (p. 12), or Aboriginal epistemology, is necessary for traditional "Native learning and western endeavor" (p. 11) to meet. The extent to which Aboriginal epistemology is reflected in the curriculum determines the extent to which education can be culturally appropriate for Aboriginal students. The responsibility lies with the classroom teacher to accept and accommodate Aboriginal students in the pedagogy.

The second principle that assists acceptance of spirituality in the classroom is the creation of a relational, safe learning environment that values Aboriginal students and all students. First and foremost, with an understanding of Aboriginal epistemology, a sensitive teacher must acknowledge that not all Aboriginal students know their cultural heritage and that they hold differing ideas about spirituality. Therefore, the wise teacher begins with what the student knows and wants known by others.

The path into what Aboriginal students know and want known is "uncovering the aboriginal story" (Couture, 2000, p. 157) or uncovering, as Couture further states, "some of the underlying realities and processes that mold the topography of the traditional, aboriginal mind" (p. 157). Each Aboriginal student embodies these "realities and processes" that are still influenced greatly by "a timeless traditional reflection" (p. 158) taught to Aboriginal children by their parents. "In turn," Couture adds, "native traditions manifest themselves as principles such as spiritual awareness and values development" (p. 158). Thus discussing values, beliefs, morals, and being human infuses spirituality into learning. Such discussions free Aboriginal students from being subordinate to the system and encourage them to be themselves. They enjoy such freedom as long as, according to Cajete (1994),

> The educator enters the cultural universe of the learner and no longer remains an outside authority. By co-creating a learning experience, everyone involved generates a critical consciousness and enters into a process of empowering one another. With such empowerment, Indian people become enabled to alter a negative relationship with their learning process.

As this positive relationship develops toward learning in the classroom, a safe, equitable environment results. In such an environment Aboriginal students are acknowledged as being vital to the formation of an acceptable classroom language that reveals Aboriginal thoughts, feelings, way of life, and ways of understanding life. Consequently, meaning and learning are constructed socially, and this supports and perpetuates Aboriginal epistemology. In addition, the teacher is liberated from the position of the outside authority, which in turn destigmatizes the Aboriginal student from being disadvantaged and viewed as the ignorant outsider to meaningful learning.

Furthermore, Battiste (1998) calls for the reinstatement of Aboriginal values as a move toward a decolonized approach to Aboriginal education. For her, spiritual connection is a vital Aboriginal value and needs to be incorporated into any education involving Aboriginal students. For too long the education of Aboriginal students has been a "secular experience with fragmented knowledge imported from other societies and cultures" (p. 21). She advocates an education that

> draws from the ecological context of the people, their social and cultural frames of reference, embodying their philosophical foundations of spiritual interconnected realities, and builds on the enriched experience and gifts of their people and their current needs for economic development and change. (p. 21)

These interconnections must be embedded in the "dynamic of interpersonal relationships," as Couture (1985, p. 9), an Aboriginal educator, reminds teachers. Developing community in the classroom honors the individual while promoting communal attitudes that are essential to honoring the spirits of others.

Couture (1985) also states that "native philosophy of life manifests a characteristic person-centeredness, a holistic personalism that regards the human person as a subject in relationships; both the subjects and the relationships exist in a dynamic process of being-becoming" (p. 7). The relationships between students and teachers create and maintain the learning dynamic that comes from open, honest discussion and negotiation. The relationships keep the personal, psychological meaning-making at a deep level where more is understood than information about different cultures. The single most convincing concept that helps establish culturally appropriate education is identified by Couture when he says that once education is "embedded in the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, one can learn to discern some or all of the underpinning traditional values" (p. 9). Teachers must operate and plan around the dynamics of interpersonal relationships because knowing a person makes a culture known in personal, meaningful ways.

Forbes (1979) voices what I hear many Aboriginal educators say: "There can be no education that is multicultural involving the Native American tradition unless it gets into this area of the meaning of life, unless it gets into the area of values" (p. 11). Who a person is, his or her ideas, thoughts, motivations, and understanding about life meanings and corresponding actions are what matter. Education that provides for personal development and understanding so that students are able to make sense of their worlds and live contentedly is education that helps students grapple with their own values and that will encompass a student's culture as well. According to Battiste (1998), Aboriginal students must be able to connect their skills and factual knowledge to their values, their life experiences, and how they

feel about those experiences in order to gain perspective and be able to question and justify their attitudes, beliefs, and understanding.

What is called for here is not just an understanding of Aboriginal values, but also a valuing of each Aboriginal student. This valuing is not mere appreciation, but a connectedness with the student at an affective level. One could describe this as evidence of the teacher's spirituality in his or her connection to the otherness in Aboriginal students. The practical application of this valuing is permitting Aboriginal students, indeed all students, time to connect with their learning in their own way of knowing and what they are learning.

Some teachers establish patterns of teaching that do not permit students to interact at an intimate level and for a sustained time with their experiences, achievements, and difficulties. In the first place some teachers are uneasy with allowing students to come to their own conclusions. What if students miss the main points of a prepared lesson? Second, perhaps more prevalent than the first, some teachers fear being accused of forcing cultural values on others. Therefore, discussing cultural values is not permitted at all. Third, and the most voiced explanation that I hear, is that a classroom discussion of values, especially if a spiritual connotation is expressed, should not occur because spirituality should be developed separately from public education. This third explanation is most detrimental to culturally appropriate education for Aboriginal students because, as Forbes (1979) reminds teachers, education is "learning how to be a human being. That is, how to live a life of the utmost spiritual quality" (p. 11).

One of the reasons why valuing the spirit of the Aboriginal student is so crucial to making education culturally appropriate is because of the devastating effect stigmatization has had. When an Aboriginal student suffers the pains of racial slurs that are inherent in the stereotyping and discrimination that still exists in our schools, he or she is stigmatized. When a student is stigmatized, that student's personhood is devalued and he or she disconnects from the attributes that assist in the development of self-respect, confidence, and the ability to trust oneself and others (compare Steele, 1992). This rift is the insidious tool of disenfranchisement because not only is the student told that he or she is unacceptable, the student now feels inferior and rejected. The affective, spiritual part of the student has been jeopardized.

Consequently, the connections that Aboriginal students must make to learning are at an affective level for two reasons: (a) because that is where the disconnection originates; and (b) because that is where meaningful learning occurs (compare Barnes, 1976; Battiste, 1998; Couture, 1985; Forbes, 1979; Mezirow, 1991; Pewewardy, 1999; Rogers, 1969; Williams, 1962/1976). Aboriginal students do not fail in the Western school system because they are less intelligent than non-Aboriginal students. Cajete (1994) says, "too often the Indian student is viewed as a problem, rather than the unquestioned approaches, attitudes, and curricula of the educational system" (p. 188). The problem may be with the system! Indeed, Aboriginal students often fail because the system fails them by not empowering them to connect with others and with their learning in ways that are meaningful to them. Cajete further states, "the knowledge, values, skills, and interests that Indian

students possess are largely ignored in favor of strategies aimed at enticing them to conform to mainstream education" (p. 188).

Not respecting, cherishing, valuing the spirit of the Aboriginal student deeply affects "the process of the individual's being and becoming a unique person, responsible for his/her own life and actions in the context of significant group situations" (Couture, 1985, p. 7). This "concept of being" is a thread that runs through Native traditional values, according to Couture, and he adds that the "traditional Native being-becoming posture requires trust of self and others, a nonmanipulative relatedness and a sense of oneness with all ... experienced and perceived as possessing a life energy of their own" (p. 7). Teachers must make a determined, conscious effort to create and maintain a nonmanipulative, trusting environment that fosters meaningful relationships and learning. This effect is key to the concept of the classroom as a critical environment where culturally appropriate education for Aboriginal students can occur.

The teacher remains as the facilitator of learning and guides students to resources and through assignments while monitoring and directing the interpersonal dynamics between students. Each student in the class is as important as the lesson content. The challenge for the teacher is to understand the importance of the balance between dissemination of knowledge and integration of that knowledge, or at least how it is disseminated. To strike this balance in every lesson is a central part of the meaningful task of a teacher, or it can be if a teacher comes to accept the reality that learning resides within the learner and that the resultant meaning is constructed socially. This concept is not foreign to well-established Western educational philosophy (compare Barnes, 1976; Dewey, 1916; Rogers, 1969) and is foundational to Aboriginal epistemology, as noted above.

The third and final principle that assists acceptance of spirituality in classroom learning is the promotion of authentic dialogue. As far as Aboriginal educators are concerned, authentic dialogue must be useful, seek to understand Aboriginal culture, develop a critical consciousness, and be transformative in nature.

The term *useful learning* embodies more than the idea of a practical application of knowledge. In seeking to establish the validity of "Native studies" in a University program, Couture (2000) states that "useful" learning is an "ages-old understanding" in Aboriginal epistemology and "is comprehensive and leads to the development of mind, attitude, and adaptation in conduct" (p. 161). Consequently, discussing values, beliefs, and the many stories about being human infuses spirituality into learning and permits students to relate individually to the information and on reflection to make it practical in their lives.

How one listens to dialogue determines the direction and outcome of the exchange of information. Marker (1998) warns against becoming a cultural broker, "a mediator between natives and non-natives ... [who has] an incomplete understanding of the way that aboriginal knowledge is interconnected and holistic" (p. 474). He further states that teachers who are cultural brokers

> Are not compelled toward a critical or analytic stance but, rather, toward an emotional or romantic posture that has few edges.... These sorts of educators simply brush past the genuine edges and boundaries of a complex history of Indian-white relations to arrive at a dubious commonality of aboriginal rights and practices. (p. 474)

To some Western academic minds, infusing spirituality into learning compels teachers and students toward the emotional and romantic view of a complex history. Many would argue that to develop a critical, analytical conscience toward information, spirituality must be eliminated from curriculum considerations. Ironically, spirituality is the very element that Aboriginal educators say enables students to become critical participants in the genuine edges and boundaries of a complex history because they know and understand themselves and their fellow students. Education must be holistic and transformative in order to create and promote authentic dialogue. According to Cajete (1994), this dialogue is about

> What is important to people in contexts of social and political situations that directly affects them. The relevance of what is being learned and why it is being learned becomes readily apparent, because it is connected to the cultural orientations as the people themselves perceive them.

Often in the classroom, how students perceive their own cultural orientations is glossed over too quickly, as suggested above. Time and the encouragement to grapple with one's feelings of prejudice, empathy, misinformed interpretation, and injustice are necessary elements in authentic dialogue. Aboriginal culture needs to be appreciated at an affective as well as a cognitive level. In order for students to gain a true appreciation of another's culture, they must learn what the other values and believes at a deep spiritual level. The evidence is strong for Aboriginal educators' insistence that spirituality in learning is the essential link to wed traditional Aboriginal education and the Western system of education. Students in ED 4688 agree with these educators.

### *What Students Observe About Spirituality in the Classroom*

This section of is taken from students' comments[1] about a current university course, ED 4688, for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, which is entitled Canadian Aboriginal Children's Literature (CACL)[2] and taught in an eastern Canadian university teacher education program. The stated goals of ED 4688 are to have students examine CACL to gain an understanding of how this literature can be an asset in any classroom and to create effective ways of using the books in the classroom and with individual children. However, students need to be permitted to be themselves without pretense so that genuine knowledge and genuine ignorance can be recognized, rather than producing simulated knowledge based on what they think the teacher wants to hear. This unstated goal of the course means that for me as the teacher, the focus is on social interaction as an indispensable part of academic performance. This social action is often displayed in what Mezirow (1991) calls "rational discourse as a means of validating beliefs" (p. 250) because students discuss their beliefs in an open forum where they explore the views of others.

The learning process, although informative, must also be liberating for both teacher and students, because, as Wells (1986) states,

> Knowledge cannot be transmitted. It has to be constructed afresh by each individual knower on the basis of what is already known, and by means of strategies developed over the whole of that individual's life, both outside and inside the classroom. (p. 218)

Consequently, learning resides within learners and not within a decontextualized body of knowledge; students need to be permitted to grapple with content such that they come to think and feel differently about themselves and how they fit into their surrounding worlds. As a result, they are set free to discover and change their perceptions and their feelings. As learned above, Aboriginal educators say that such change occurs for Aboriginal students when the teaching is holistic and transformative, which allows spirituality to infiltrate the learning.

If I wish ED 4688 to be culturally appropriate, I must ask, Is Aboriginal spirituality considered in ED 4688? The comments in this section are excerpts from students' journals that are reflective in nature. The one requirement of the journal assignment is that students must demonstrate a direct link to their learning as they draw a practical significance between their observations and teaching philosophy and/or practice. How well the significance is drawn determines the grade.

Many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students recognize that what they have learned in ED 4688 is linked to their values and beliefs, thus their spirituality. For example, one student says,

> As I am challenged by other students to think about what I am saying, I am making real and practical connections to what I am learning and believe. Like, when other students ask if I would use a book even though I do not know its spiritual and historical context, I have to think about what I will really be doing with these books (CACL) when I get into the classroom.

Another student says that ED 4688 enables her to think beyond the medicine wheel and sacred ceremonies to relationships, attitudes, and values. This student says,

> It has been fine, until now, to say I will have to be aware of cultural differences as a teacher. But, in this class, people share some of their experiences. It is a very clear wake-up call which affects my thinking and beliefs as I hear real Aboriginal people speak about real experiences.

Not only Aboriginal students speak about their "real experiences," non-Aboriginal students do as well. For example, they read a book like *Nanabosho Dances* by Joe McLellan and realize that a story is told within a story and that the inner story is part of oral tradition. As students begin to discuss the value to them of oral tradition, they discover the oral stories that are passed from generation to generation are part of all cultures. Also they discuss how long Aboriginal culture has been both oral and written compared with non-Aboriginal culture and the implication of this comparison. Their discussions help them understand and value their similarities and differences and gain insight into their own values and beliefs. According to one non-Aboriginal student, the CACL facilitates such insightful discussions. She says,

> The contemporary Native children's stories that we have discussed in class illustrate strong spiritual and human connections that Natives have with the environment. These stories are valuable because they show us a different perspective—a more spiritual way of interpreting and understanding the world.

These honest discussions about the themes in the CACL tap into individuality and spirituality.

Being able to respect others for who they are is another example of spirituality in ED 4688. An Aboriginal student commenting about respect identified it as "a key value. In this class, somehow we find that we can respect one another and care about what others think." Another student recognizes that respect is present in the class because students have a voice. This student says,

> Everyone has a voice and is permitted to use that voice to express their feelings about what is going on around them. For people to express such intimate thoughts and desires, fears and dreams, they need to be surrounded by an environment that fosters confidence and openness.

This student also recognizes that spirituality can enter learning only when the appropriate environment exists. An Aboriginal student says,

> The feelings I achieved from this course are almost impossible to describe. It goes far beyond academic learning and has touched a spot deep inside my soul. The other ladies in the class (non-Native) were extremely considerate and understanding. As for us Natives, we felt a sense of importance and belonging, which we are beginning to feel more and more as time goes on.

Holding the spirit of each student in genuine respect is crucial to the learning that occurs in ED 4688. I believe it is also foundational to cross-cultural understanding in any classroom and with any age group. A non-Aboriginal student expresses the evidence that spirituality and learning coexist in ED 4688 like this: "This course has given me an understanding of the manner in which I can cherish other individuals." This *cherishing* is akin to holding another's individuality as sacred or valuing a person for who he or she is.

I look for opportunities for students to connect their learning with who they are (i.e., with their intellectual and affective nature, their spirituality). This student's journal entry reveals the connection and how it occurs.

> This last class, for me, was a very tense situation. I first thought it seemed like a personal argument, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized it was something else. The whole class proved a point to me, which I realized I see in action all the time and don't realize it. As I reflect, what I saw was people from the same culture (not including when Natives spoke) not being able to come to some understanding of what the other person was saying. Only seeing one point of view—their own. Not valuing the other person's thoughts. Then I realized we do this to each other within our own culture so, it becomes easy to do that with other cultures. Hence, all our stereotypes, misunderstandings, and devaluing.

The class discussions enable this student to connect with feelings of uneasiness, which in turn enable her to gain new perspective on stereotyping.

The students become the living dynamic of the learning process. When discussing a particular session, one Aboriginal student says that real learning takes place when we are able to admit to ourselves what thoughts and feelings we have. "Dealing with me," as another student put it, "is real learning." I cannot decide what that "dealing with me" means for each student, for this is their individual spirituality, and they know themselves better than I do. However, with the focus on reading I can create an environment that allows personal responses to be formulated, explored, and developed in safety. Barnes (1976) states that in the case of young learners, the "more a learner controls his own language strategies, and the more he is enabled to think aloud, the more he can take responsibility for

formulating hypotheses and evaluating them" (p. 29). I believe this is also true for adult learners.

Being able to deal with themselves and others in a think-aloud format moves the student learning forward through discovery. Besides creating a safe learning environment, as a facilitator I must make clear to myself and to students how such processes are grounded in theories of reading, learning, and conceptual development (Appleyard, 1990; Barnes, 1976; Bruner, 1971; Meek, 1991; Meek, Warlow, & Barton, 1977; Mezirow, 1991; Rogers, 1969; Von Glasersfeld, 1995; Williams, 1976; Wells, 1986). Students need to know that the discoveries they are making do not derive from sentimentalism but from a credible learning process that can be adopted as a format for lifelong learning.

## *Reflections*

For a long time I was amazed that students were so deeply affected by the classroom discussions and dynamics. I was surprised that they talked about their experiences in "spiritual" terms. This dynamic of ED 4688 is what captured my attention and resulted in this article, because it was subtle and difficult to describe. I knew the phenomenon had something to do with students being personally connected to their learning and their instructor, as Wilson (1997) observed about her "Alaska Native or Canadian Indian" students in a freshman psychology class. However, I was unable to articulate what I saw happening. Another observation that mystified me was that once an emotionally safe environment was established, Aboriginal students talked more easily at an intimate level than non-Aboriginal students. In fact their candor encouraged non-Aboriginal students to join them at their level of discussion. After reading about Aboriginal Elders and educators like Akan, Battiste, Cajete, Couture, Ermine, Forbes, Marker, and Pewewardy, I understand that many Aboriginal students are accustomed to and encouraged by their parents and grandparents to share their thoughts and feelings because this assists their development as human beings.

Although the depth of spirituality is difficult to measure, I believe that to some extent spirituality can be incorporated into most classrooms, as seen in ED 4688. This course is not ideal and it needs continual evaluation and reformatting, but if spirituality is expressed there, it can be expressed in any classroom. The key point is that a culturally appropriate education for Aboriginal students must be holistic and as a teacher of Aboriginal students, I must be willing to engage students at a level of discussion where *who they are* is more important than the content of a course. For me the role of spirituality in learning and education, although thought-provoking and controversial, is essential in making education culturally appropriate and must exist if I wish to be an authentic, effective teacher of Aboriginal students.

## *Notes*

[1]Students' comments are from recent journal assignments. I am greatly indebted to these students for including me in their learning experiences and for sharing with me their insights into teaching.

[2]Canadian Aboriginal Children's Literature (CACL): any literature written by Aboriginal authors, illustrated by Aboriginal illustrators, or retold stories with permission of Elders, who live in Canada.

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