

Dreaming and Journeying Orality: A Mnemonic Pictograph of a Dream Shared at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Chicago

Ahningoohs, Brent Debassige
York University

It is intended to mean nothing else than myself, or the singing, bathing, and sacrificing Indian. No one knows it but I and the man who gave me the writing and explained it. If it were an easy matter for any of our friends to see or guess what the signs mean, they would soon steal our birch-bark books. Hence all our ideas, thoughts and persons are represented in various mysterious disguises. (Kitagiguan, or Spotted Feather, as cited in Kohl, 1860, pp. 289-290)

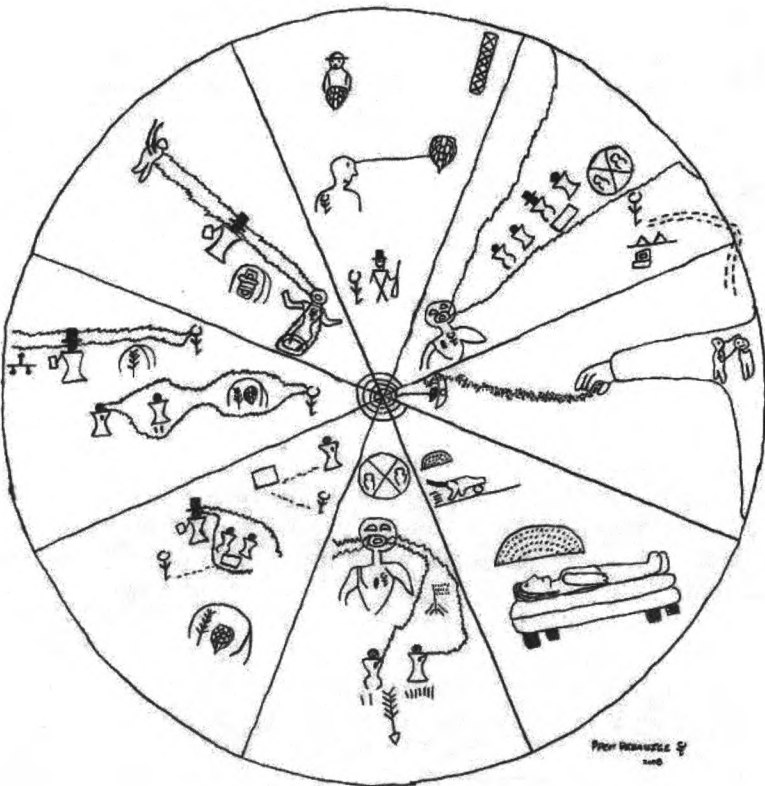


Figure 1. Hand-drawn mnemonic pictograph as incised on birch bark.

The above mnemonic pictograph¹ is a representation of a dream I shared at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual meeting in Chicago in May 2007. I co-presented with four colleagues at the Pacific special-interest group symposium session entitled "Fighting Terrorism Since 1492: Exploring the Terrain of Indigenous Knowledge in the Academy." My co-presenters asked if I would be willing to include the dream as part of our submission to this publication. I placed asemaa on the earth and asked Gze-Manidoo if it would be appropriate. This work is a step along the ongoing journey of receiving that answer.

Locating Myself

Boozhoo, my Ojibwe-Anishinaabe name is Ahnungoonhs, which translates to *little star*. My English name is Brent Debassige. I am caribou clan. My home is in M'Chigeeng First Nation and Toronto and many other places in our traditional Anishinaabe territory. I am not a language-speaker, but I am learning. I did not grow up in a traditional way, but I am learning. I am Midewiwin, I am a Sundancer, I am a student, and most of all I am a helper.

I would like to say miigwetch to gzhe-manidoo, miigwetch to all my relations, and miigwetch to all my teachers in all the various forms that they have appeared in my life. In this life I have stood on the shoulders of giants, and it is with great humility and the deepest respect for all those Indigenous and non-Indigenous people that have provided me with the privilege I appreciate today that I say chi-miigwetch.

The Story

My teacher and madoodiswan (sweatlodge ceremony) conductor Wes Whetung extended me an invitation to a sweat a couple of weeks before the AERA presentation in Chicago. The sweat was to be held in Shawanaga First Nation, ON, and happened to fall on the Friday before the conference. As the days before the ceremony passed, I felt an increasing urge to seek guidance from the Spirit through the ceremony for how I should present the AERA paper. Although weeks earlier I had submitted a draft to the discussant for comment at the presentation in Chicago, I still felt the desire to seek guidance with the oral component of the presentation. The knowledge related in the paper had significance to a teaching shared with me by a well-respected Anishinaabe Elder who had since made his walk through the Western doorway. I wanted to be sure that the oral presentation was made in a respectful way and true to the knowledge that was shared. I initiated the request to the Spirit in a good and respectful way with my asemaa (tobacco) before entering the lodge.

I recently began seeking Anishinaabe (Ojibw[a][e][ay]) forms of documenting dreams and experiences that originated from ceremonies for my personal use. I have refused to document particular kinds of Anishinaabe

knowledge (e.g., dreams and visions) in the literal written form that is predominant today. I have sought guidance through Midewiwin and Sundance ceremonies for a respectful approach to communicating spiritual knowledge in a documented form. The following describes aspects and the purpose of this approach.

The events relating to the dream are represented symbolically in an effort to maintain the sacred connection of a way of knowing between dream and dream-teller. Through this esoteric process (method) of obscuring the literal meaning of the events relating to the dream, I ensure that only those who have been part of an oral presentation receive the details of the dream. In addition, although the mnemonic pictograph borrows on some publicly available Anishinaabe pictographs (see references), the mnemonic aspect ensures that access calls for respectful protocol and an understanding of the respectful relationship to knowledge before it will be shared and fully understood. This is not done for exclusionary purposes. Rather, it acknowledges a process of coming to know in a particular kind of way. For example, I am Mide of the three fires Midewiwin lodge, but I have not used pictographs that have been shared with me as part of those teachings because of the spiritual, ceremonial, and respectful protocol necessary for the presentation, access, and understanding of that knowledge. Coming to know in a respectful way begins with participatory contexts (e.g., ceremonies), which contribute to a wholistic understanding of knowledge rather than just an intellectual one. In addition, mass forms of dissemination such as academic journals make monitoring the respectful use of knowledge virtually impossible. Indigenous people continue to face challenges relating to the respectful handling and use of Indigenous knowledge by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.² I believe the answers to these challenges are in our own ways of knowing. We have to be conscious and cautious about our willingness to surrender to what is commonly done as part of the academic status quo. For example, the English language in both its spoken and written form is a useful allied view, but this begs the question: What would we see if we were using Indigenous ways of seeing, relating, knowing, and doing (Rice, 2005)?

My efforts with this mnemonic pictograph have been guided spiritually and in a good and respectful way. Through a process involving ceremonies I have learned that the dissemination of knowledge and sharing locations of learning (e.g., ceremonial sites) can be openly available in a good and respectful way. I also believe that the value and importance of oral transmission and experiential knowing also have the potential to gain ground through this process in literature. I believe that there are circumstances when activating our own ways of knowing is of great importance and relevant to a contemporary context. We must be inclusive of our ways of knowing not only as integrative and/or adaptive approaches in the Western model, but also partnered with the distinct Indigenous

processes that have and continue to involve how we have come to know and *be*. A vast sea of knowing is gained from practicing traditional ways of being and knowing. Anishinaabe/Indigenous knowing and doing involves a sacred relationship with knowledge that academe can complement but not achieve on its own. A sacred relationship with knowledge finds its primacy in participatory involvement. Being active practitioners of Indigenous knowledge in the academy means taking risks. A revitalization effort limited to discussing and theorizing about Indigenous knowledge falls short of the sacred relationship with knowledge.

After the sweat I went home, and I slept and I dreamt. I dreamt a good and powerful dream. When I woke up I had my answer, and the AERA paper that I prepared, submitted, and was accepted to present was not going to make it with me to the conference. With approximately 26,000 members worldwide, 16,000 members in attendance, 2,000 papers accepted through a discriminating evaluation criterion, it is easy to see why AERA can be intimidating (American Educational Research Association, 2008). But this was about Spirit and being a practitioner of Indigenous knowledge. Some things are just more important.

My hope is that this work will contribute to how we can think about orality and ways to involve a sacred relationship to knowledge that verb/alizes ideas of knowledge to ways of knowing. Perhaps through actions of taking risks and doing Indigenous knowledge we can verbalize the written narrative to a form of orality. So in the interest of not just writing and theorizing about dreaming and journeying orality, I have chosen to extend myself as a practitioner in an obvious and explicit way.

For those who may be interested in learning more about the dream, respectful protocol among the Anishinaabeg dictates that *asema* (tobacco) be presented when initiating a request.

Miigwetch,
Ahnungoonhs.

Notes

¹The mnemonic pictograph acts as a memory aid for the dream I received via a Midewiwin sweatlodge ceremony. I have chosen to use the descriptor *mnemonic pictograph* to make clear that my knowledge of pictographs and petroglyphs is that of a novice, and the descriptor is used to emphasize a process concerned primarily with a participatory connection with knowledge.

²The misuse of Indigenous knowledge among non-Indigenous people is clear in the historical record about Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). The misuse of Indigenous knowledge among Indigenous people is not so clear; however, it is beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, I believe that it is worthwhile in the interests of awareness to mention some examples: I have taken witness and heard anecdotal evidence of individuals taking it on themselves to take on spiritual leadership positions (e.g., taking the lead at a funeral) with little or no knowledge of what

they are doing; I have also attended a ceremony where an intermediary charged money to participants unknown to me and the conductor; I have also heard of the existence of a "cowboy sweat" (i.e., people going into a sweatlodge ceremony while inebriated).

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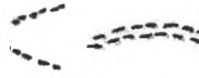


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and modified form

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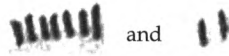


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