The Spider's Web: Creativity and Survival in Dynamic Balance

Bill Cohen
En'owkin Centre, Penticton, BC

What is your vision for positive change for First Nations people? The question is surely a critical one, and I answer it as best I can. This article, however, also represents a shift in my own thinking. I was cynical and suspicious of academia in general, a view I know is shared (for good reasons) by many Indigenous individuals. I registered in the Simon Fraser University Master of Education Program to get a credential that would be useful in my work. I was ready to endure what I expected to be a Western academic supremacist indoctrination process to get a piece of paper—and hoped I would learn a few useful things in the process. However, I learned that Indigenous peoples can engage in dialogue in the universities and create their own intellectual, theoretical, and epistemological spaces. All of us carry our belief systems into the classrooms, and through respectful engagement and sharing, generate understanding and appreciation for the diversity of peoples and cultures: new ideas form, paradigm shifts occur, networks expand. Webs are created.

> on this page i assert myself with words like bones sinking deep into the earth. Into earth memory ... this voice is mine and yet through me my ancestors speak and sing and are given voice ... their thoughts flow through me. there is strength in this voice that is theirs and mine....
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> Indigenous writers. this is our territory. this is indigenous land. where our values, our ways of speaking, our oral traditions, our languages, our philosophies, our concepts, our histories, our literary traditions, our aesthetics are expressed and accepted and honoured each according to our nations. this is where we carve stories into the memories of our people. we sing songs our children will remember. it is to them we speak. it is for them we sing. (Akiwenzie-Damm, 1996, p. 1)

The vision I share is a weave or synthesis of story, history, theory, poetry, epistemology, and creativity—a web. This weaver is a 21st-century Okanagan learner and teacher, artist, poet, and lately critical theorist and philosopher. I present my ideas as a contribution to a continuing dialogue. I am one of the many foxes in the Okanagan gathering up the bits of skin, bone, and hair of coyote. When enough is gathered we can breathe on the assembled pile and *Sinkleep*, coyote, will awaken, yawn, and say, "Oh, I must have closed my eyes for a few minutes" and carry on as if he'd only had a brief nap.

The fundamental question for this weaver-educator is how Okanagan language, and subsequently Okanagan world view, culture, and people will survive. Of course I do not exclude the many Indigenous peoples the world over, for their survival and vitality is part of the Okanagan struggle for self-determination and autonomy. This is true especially in the light of the ominous threat of ecological

systems failure—yet another contribution to the planet by colonization. Diversity. Cultural, ecological, and national diversity, therefore, becomes central to positive change for Indigenous peoples. The *s* on peoples, for example, is a big issue at the international level. Canada and the United States particularly oppose that little letter. "A key issue in the international debates has focussed on the term 'peoples.' It is regarded as crucial by indigenous activists because it is 'peoples' who are recognised in international law as having the right to self-determination" (Smith, 1999, p. 114).

Indigenous networks, working relationships, are now global. There are many webs to weave, especially in Indigenous languages, webs involving the expression of Indigenous thought and experience. The webs, the relationships have expanded. During a gab session with Maori educators during the 1999 Noted Scholars Program at the University of British Columbia, Maori lecturer Micky Roderick said, "Your struggle is our struggle mate": a strong assertion of sharing and responsibility in a global context.

> We affirm the ties of the past, the bonds of the present, when we relearn our history, nurture the shared sensibility that has been retained in the present, linking these gestures to resistance struggle, to liberation movement that seeks to eradicate domination and transform society. (hooks, 1992, p. 194)

Suknaqinxw translates as "the ones who stand on a mountain and are seen and heard from far away," It also means "the ones who can see and hear far away." The word for ourselves is *silxw*, which means "the dream in a spiral," "the dream or vision unravelling, coming to be." The people of the stories, the people with the power to dream, this is who we are, because our language says this is who we are. If we honor our Elders who say, "Our language is our culture," then Okanagan concepts, principles, and metaphors must be used to create a transforming and liberating holistic education system of our own. I realize that to honor our Elders this way is to commit a "naturalistic fallacy," which according to Tasos Kazepides is a "distorted value rooted in a narrow intellectual perspective ... and from an *is* you cannot derive a *must* or an *ought*, for example, 'he is black, he ought to be killed'" (Personal communication, October 15, 1999). The value, however, is not distorted; the semantic manipulation is distorted, and the value of respect is absent. A fundamental belief of many Indigenous peoples is that we are caretakers or keepers of the earth, not owners or rulers. In other words, the world is a beautiful place, everything we need is here, we ought to keep it that way. This is good systems thinking even if philosophically (or physically) impossible. How about, "this water is polluted: we ought not drink it," or "language loss is causing identity crises and related social ills; we ought to do something about it."

The recognition of Indian education as distinctive indicates a legitimate desire of Indian people to be self-defining, to have their ways of life respected, and to teach their children in a manner that enhances consciousness of being an Indian and a fully participating citizen of Canada or the US (Hampton, 1995).

Hampton (1995) was doing so well until he forgot about treaties, no treaties, and the many unresolved moral, legal, and sovereignty issues. The Okanagan have no treaties, and with the exception of Westbank First Nation have no participation in pseudo-treaties with Aboriginal rights and title extinguishment clauses. Under-

lying this propaganda-ridden process is the misperception that "we're all Canadians." Smith (1995) addresses this notion in a similar fashion:

> the "we are one people" myth, within a shared, single, British culture and anyone who disagrees is a "separatist," [representing] a subversive danger to a harmonious society ... Such arguments have little factual foundation in relation to what might or might not happen to Pakeha [non-Maori] people if Maori gained more control over their own lives. (p. 161)

We are the people of the stories, and part of my task as an educator is to gather concepts and metaphors from *nsilxwcen*, the Okanagan language, and the *cipcaptikwl*, the Okanagan story system and tradition. I do this because:

Story-less Figures Are Lonely Metaphors

what's it worth to play charades and look for the wishing rock
at an Indian Assembly my relative is talkin' Indian
and feelin' good about bein' mad,
mad at those who don't understand he did have to
shift to English so all would know
ya know sometimes we forget how babies talk
mat swit i xnumpt
wanna hear about mountains?
"Beautiful-Majestic-Spiritual-Epic" Nice words? Original? Mine?
Nah ... i learned 'em from books
we've so many people with wonder in their voices ...
and yet there are so few gifted translators
and that's why i look for the wishing rock and play charades

A central element of Okanagan world view—and, I venture, Indigenous world view generally—is the belief that humans are not the supreme beings on the planet; and that although humans are pretty special, our health and vitality are directly related to the health and vitality of the natural world of which we are a part. "How Food Was Given" is an Okanagan story that describes this relationship and honors the sacred gifts from the natural world. To summarize the story: before humans arrived, four communities represented by four chiefs got together to decide what to do about the people to be (humans). *Skmxist*, black bear, chief of land animals, gave his life in order that a sustainable and harmonious relationship be established between humans and deer, mountain sheep, squirrels, horses, and all the mammals. *Ntitiyix*, spring salmon, chief of the fish and water life, gave his life to create an accord between humans and salmon, turtles, frogs, water plants, and all aquatic communities. *Siya*, saskatoon or service berry, chief of the berries, plants, vegetation, and birds of the skies, offered her life to establish a synergistic relationship between humans and flowers, bees, trees, birds, and all the plant, winged, and insect life, *Speetlum*, bitter root, chief of the roots and bulbs, honored the coming of humans with her life and established a balanced relationship between humans and camas, wild potato, worms, and all the foods and life forms from the depths of the earth. The Food Chiefs, before humans came to the earth, agreed to give their lives and bodies to the humans so that the new people could survive and flourish on the land. It is understood that the Food Chiefs gave humans the means to survival, and

humans must in turn ensure the survival of the natural communities and ecosystems.

The story is about societal organization and leadership. The principle of expressed leadership is always addressing the question: what can you do for the "people to be"? The story also illustrates an Indigenous Okanagan cultural perspective that knowledge comes from the world, the ecology, the land, the animals. Instead of Aristotle and Newton, we have *Spitlem*, Bitter root and *Senklip*, Coyote, archetype, trickster and teacher of Okanagan mythology, the one who was given special powers from the creator. The stories taught all how to survive, how to learn from each other, and how to live in harmony.

Morgan's (1988) metaphorical approach to organization immediately connects to Indigenous story traditions: the Okanagan are the people of the stories. Metaphor "is a primal force through which humans create meaning by using one element of experience to understand another" (p. 4). Dynamic social concepts and metaphors are carried through traditional stories. The *enowkinwixw*, for example, is a traditional process to address and resolve issues of serious concern to the community. It is not based on conflict or debate. It is rather a unifying and consensus-building process, an organizational model that honors diversity. The challenges and responsibilities are to contribute understanding to the collective and consider and include the feelings and viewpoints of others, and as a group come to the best possible solutions for the whole community and the future generations. Decisions and strategies are shaped by youth, elders, adults, and all the associated roles and positions. The *enowkinwix̣w* is described clearly through metaphor in the story "How Food Was Given." This traditional Indigenous process has shaped the development of an ecological framework for a systems approach to education. "We are learning from the Okanagan people how to shape a process of society around sustainability in our own ecosystem" (Centre for Ecoliteracy, 1999, p. 4).

The medium to the revitalization of these beliefs for the Okanagan is *nsilxwcen*, the Okanagan language. With about 170 fluent speakers[1] out of a population of about 5,000, where *fluent* refers to those who could converse all day with an Elder without using English, our language is critically endangered. The most active advocates of language regeneration are Elders who have had to deal first hand with residential schools, substance abuses, suicides, and so on. The removal of language is a form of disempowerment and oppression. In this context it is clear that healthy self-identity and self-esteem of individuals are necessary for a community to heal itself, and language is the fundamental way to retain cultural values and instill pride and a sense of community among individuals.

Language loss, however, is symptomatic of a greater tragedy caused by genocidal assimilationist policies that have caused much dysfunction and emptiness in Indigenous communities. In the Okanagan nation, this can be described as the loss of the *sqilxwcut*. The *sqilxwcut* is commonly referred to as *the Indian way*. More accurately translated it means the dream way in a spiral way, the coming to pass or realization of dreams or visions. The dream suggests that the creative, visionary aspect of ourselves is strong, and the spiral symbolizes how our dreams affect, and are influenced by, people and everything in the world around us. The Okanagan word for Creator, *kwulencuten*, translates as "the one, or oneness who

re-creates oneself continuously," and refers to all of creation rather than a hierarchical God; on a natural, holistic scale (very large), *kwulencuten* is an "aesthetic, a field or environment containing conditions for the creation of beauty" (Kenny, 1989, p. 100). The evolutionary dynamic of *kwulencuten* synthesizes with the *sqilxwcut*, and the spiral, a symbol of organic interrelationships, becomes the spinning of webs, similar in a societal/cultural sense to "Creative process ... a result of the interplay among all the previous elements yet it is the process itself, as well as the product ... It is organic in that it emerges sequentially from each previous influence and existential in that it proceeds from and to each moment in time" (p. 108). The spider's web reflects awareness, creativity, structure, and symbolizes the interplay between creativity and survival, which in essence is the Okanagan way of living, the *sqilxwcut*. But let's hear it from the spider:

> Survival, when it is strictly only survival, is an ugly thing. Life is something more than just survival. To be alive is to know splendor and beauty. Living is an art form. I am immersed in art. I am forever spinning art from out of my flesh. My purpose in spinning webs is no longer merely to catch flies to eat. There is much more to it now. (Simon, 1999, p. 210)

With the coursework of the past two years I have been developing a model for education and community transformation: the *sqilxwcut* model. It is quite simple. It is grounded in Okanagan philosophy and complemented by "The Circle of Courage," a conceptual model of Native American philosophy of child development with "belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity as the central values—the unifying theme—of positive cultures for education and youth work programs" (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990, pp. 35-36). The model of Indigenous transformative praxis[2] offered by Smith (1995) also fits easily into the diagram. This Okanagan language-based conceptual model embodies sustainability and exposes short-term economic gains at the core of current educational practices. Consider *sqilxwcut* a pedagogy, with the community, including the schools, as the parents, and the education system becomes an act of love.

The circles can be considered dissipative structures. Within each circle is a self-organizing system. The *sqilxwcut* model, like the metaphoric concepts that describe it, is in a continual process of change. Children rather than the individual are at the center along with the *sqilxwcut*, as the collective vision of family, community, and nation. The collective vision is balanced by all four central values of the Circle of Courage; if not, a pyramid forms and the vision is distorted, devoid of complementary values, which negatively affects the circles.

The model makes an efficient systems' tool to evaluate the Okanagan language initiative in the current public schools—and why it is not working. Language classes are taught up to two hours per week in the classroom. The Okanagan kids are removed from the center of the *sqilxwcut*, and thus the influence of extended family and community, and put in a classroom (a box) where they are surrounded by English language and Western knowledge, history, and culture. The teachers, although they are generally fluent Okanagan speakers, are isolated and expected to teach Okanagan in an environment at odds with the *sqilxwcut* or Indigenous way. The Circle of Courage is distorted, which leads to discouragement. No fluent speakers are emerging and the language classes, like the standard curriculum, are clearly an acculturation process.

On the other hand, the Te Kohanga Reo, the Maori language nest initiative, which has proven to be successful, can be assessed quickly using the *sqilxwcut* model. A strong circle was formed in the community sphere by Maori educators that filtered/blocked Pakeha social, economic, cultural, and political dominance in the education system. The children, at the center, are thus at the center of Kaupapa Maori (Maori philosophy or life way), and the pedagogy of the school is effective because it incorporates Maori social mechanisms, extended family, the ring through which the teachers and students interact. The strength of the center resonates out through the Maori community network and comes back.

A recent project using a project-based curriculum rather than the conventional textbook and test method is another example. For me this project was the starting point for the development of an Okanagan educational framework. The high school upgrading class that I taught put together an Okanagan photo-history book *Stories and Images of What the Horse Has Done For Us* (Cohen, 1998). Elders and community members were utilized as resource people—real Okanagan experts. The class hosted potluck suppers throughout the seven Okanagan communities and invited Elders to come in and bring their families, appetites, stories, and photo albums. The project united Elders with youth, generated much community pride, and the publication is a tangible product of the interactive work, a legacy for the future of which the students were understandably proud. The Okanagan extended family system of Elders and community members was used and made a strong ring in the community sphere, and the dissipative feature influenced families and communities in good ways.

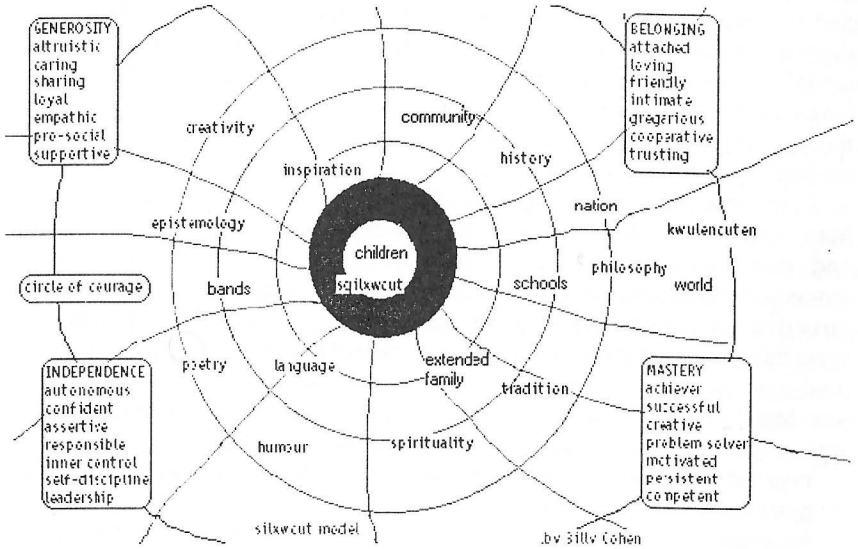

Figure 1. The sqilxwcut model.

The *sqilxwcut* model is simple and useful for planning and structuring educational projects and programs that will connect with Indigenous, especially the Okanagan eh, communities without compromising values and cultural integrity; it is also an efficient instrument to evaluate past and current projects. The model is in no way complete (to be complete would be to contradict the concepts from which it is constructed). It is still being developed, because it too is in a constant state of change and re-creation, but it is quite promising and is at least preliminary to the articulation of a critical theory based on Okanagan philosophy.

The education of our young and ourselves transcends survival: it is to create a world of splendor and beauty for our children, the future generations.

> In that context, the future is seen not as something inexorable but as something that is constructed by people engaged together in life, in history. It's the knowledge that sees history as possibility and not already determined ... And this generates new kinds of knowledge far more complex than simple adaptation to a given and unchangeable situation. (Freire, 1997, pp. 73-74)

Traditionally, the *sqilxwcut* revolved round the most important group in Okanagan society, the children. A characteristic of Indigenous world view that is both organic and holistic is its inclination to personify. The *Mother Earth* metaphor, for example, is common to many Indigenous peoples. Communities, and subsequently nations, are also personified in the principle that the community is responsible for the care, education, and well-being of the children. In the Okanagan kinship system, parents are as responsible for their nieces and nephews as they are for their own children. There is no term for first cousin; *lilthwilt* is used and means "of that generation." When white communities fulfill the parent role, the effects of assimilation policies or practices, particularly those of the residential schools, become clearer. For generations, communal parents were denied the joy and responsibility of child care; and, similarly, children were denied the day-to-day love, influence, and knowledge of parents and extended family: all of which would have been reflected, evidenced, and received as a given through Indigenous language of everyday interaction. This issue is central to language revitalization theory and practice and to all aspects of educational transformation as elements of the healing or rehumanization process.

In the Indigenous world, when spiritual leaders speak of the, "nation's sacred hoop" (Black Elk, 1961), "mending the broken circle" (Brendtro et al., 1990, p. 46), and other circle metaphors with reference to communities, I believe children are at the center of each hoop or circle. I have spoken of the spiral and how everything we do or don't do affects everything around us, and in turn we are being influenced by everything and everyone around us. Cognition of the spiral effect, like ripples in a pool, and the spinning of webs, the conscious act of simultaneously creating wonderful structures for survival and art, combine with the reason for our existence, our children; and therefore it is *sqilxwcut*, the Indigenous way. This implies a creative responsibility to the children and to ourselves, an obligation that brings pragmatic wisdom to our reason for existence.

My ancestors knew all along about regeneration, systems theory, sustainability, dissipative structures, and well beyond. These terms were expressed metaphorically through story and life ways. I often hear opposition to Indigenous

concepts and practices from both Natives and non-Natives. Opposition comes usually in the form of "Can't return to the past" or simply a blind opposition, a lock-in to ideas not originating from Western discourse. These objections, steeped in ethnocentric and technocratic bias, stifle opportunities for dialogue that involves diverse cultures and knowledge systems that would allow new and powerful ideas to emerge. Indigenous and Western academics and theorists follow similar paths in their searches for knowledge: both examine, analyze, synthesize, and interpret ideas and works from within a cultural context. Taylor, Kazepides, Smith, Kenny, and others are doing this. One difference that I have noted between Indigenous and Western academics is that a Western tendency is to look for understanding in *how it works*, whereas an Indigenous tendency is to look for understanding in *how we are related/connected*. But the two worlds are quickly becoming the same world, and Western researchers and theorists such as David Suzuki and Fritjof Capra (1996) are engaging with Indigenous peoples in an exchange of systems and content with positive results. My attitude toward academia has shifted from cynicism to optimism.

> Proper to right thinking is a willingness to risk, to welcome the new, which cannot be rejected simply because it is new no more than the old can be rejected because chronologically it is no longer new. The old is capable of remaining new when it remains faithful through time to the experience of original and founding intuitions and inspirations. (Freire, 1997, p. 41)

Indigenous allegory time. To lighten things up a bit, I share a story told to me by Jeannette Armstrong who heard it from an Elder from the west coast, a story Wittgenstein and Kierkegard could have chuckled over—or argued over—who was Raven. Coyote was eating chokecherries. He became absorbed in what he was doing. Eating and picking, picking and eating, going round and round, lower and lower, as the berries disappeared from the tops of the bushes. Raven flew by and noticed Coyote. Raven laughed and called out, "Hey! Look at Coyote. He's eating his own shit!" Coyote looked up, realized what he was doing, and sheepishly replied, "No I'm not ... I ... was just smelling it."

Critical examination and exploration are helpful in the development of conceptual approaches with a sound philosophical base. We are creative people. By nurturing creativity and critical consciousness in our communities, we as individuals will become empowered, and that strength will resonate to families, communities, and ultimately the nation. Western peoples, institutions, and ideas certainly have much to offer to the world, but no more than Indigenous peoples' institutions and ideas. Assimilation of Indigenous peoples did not work, and the alternative to being Okanagan, Cree, Mohawk, Maori, or any other Indigenous identity is dehumanization. The Indigenous reality is one of resilience, refusal to disappear; it is a reflection of the strength and beauty of peoples who have lived here since humans existed on this land, and will continue to be so. The struggle continues, the struggle to maintain Indigenous knowledge, languages, and nations, in the hope that our children will live and flourish, not merely survive. The struggle is for cultural diversity, perhaps more fundamentally important than biological diversity because it will probably require the former to realize the latter. Perhaps generations from now our children can eat salmon together at a feast, and

peoples from diverse cultures can meet and share in the spirit of generosity and cooperation. "Understanding ultimately rests in the ability to recognize how many different phenomena are really part of a coherent whole. Genuine understanding cuts through surface complexity to reveal an underlying pattern" (Morgan, 1988, p. 320). In the meantime, there are many webs to weave, webs involving the expression of Indigenous thought and experience. "After all, they elevate the act of survival. Somehow webs prevent life from ever degenerating into ugliness" (Simon, 1999, p. 303).

Notes

[1]A 1999 estimate by myself and Herman Edwards, a fluent speaker, teacher, and traditional knowledge keeper.

[2]Transformative praxis follows a linear sequence: awareness, resistance, and action. In Indigenous societies, involvement in transformative praxis can occur in any sequence.

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Orality in Northern Cree Indigenous Worlds

Cora Weber-Pillwax
University of Alberta

Introduction

In this article I present my thinking on a topic that has managed to capture and hold a significant place in most aspects of my work over many years. Although there were years when the daily grind of 18-hour work days did not permit me the luxury of intellectual or scholarly focus on the abstract concept of orality, nonetheless the practical effects of orality were omnipresent in my world. I worked in a public school system that served a population of a predominantly (97-98%) Aboriginal students. Most of these students lived in Cree communities, but there were also several Chipewyan communities and one German community. Like all public school systems, our system was expected to adhere to the standards of education as determined by the provincial ministry of education. This educational context did not encourage or permit the easy identification of students' learning issues that might be directly or indirectly connected with or related to their immersion in cultures of primary orality.

My situation in this context was a continual challenge. I was working not only to improve the level of basic services for students and their families and to improve the quality of work experiences for staff, but at the same time I struggled against the tendency to sink exhausted into an intellectual safe fuzziness that ignored the serious questions about orality and literacy as these were evidenced in the classrooms and communities that we served. Individual survival is instinctual, for teachers as well as for administrators.

Overview

I contextualize the topic of orality in a discussion of the practice of shared memories and their functions in personal and communal healing among the Northern Cree, in particular as this relates to orality in Indigenous worlds. I address one example directly at the end of this article, the example of the *wihkihtowin*, "dance of the ancestors" sometimes referred to as "ghost dance." The bulk of the article provides background and context in a number of areas. It begins with a short history of the Woodland Cree, moves to a much lengthier description of the importance and centrality of orality rather than literacy in the shared lives of the Cree, then to some notes on stories and collective events and their consequences for healing, and finally to the *wihkihtowin* in the context of historical trauma and healing.

Short History

The initial territories of the Cree people of Canada were located in the northern parts of what are now Ontario and Quebec. Slow movement and expansion of the