

## REFLECTION

### *Ti wa7 szwatenem. What we know: Indigenous knowledge and learning*

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#### INTRODUCTION

**T**he title of this article is from the Liíwat language. In this language, there are various ways to speak about knowing. “Zwaten” describes what a person knows, and the closest word that could be translated as “knowledge” is “emham,” meaning “to be skilled at doing something or to be good at something.” “A7xa7” is the state of wholistic knowing, knowing after a lifetime of training, practice, and study. Like most Indigenous languages, the Liíwat language focuses on the process, on the action, not on the object (Battiste, 27). How do we become “emham” or “zwaten” or “a7xa7”? For each individual, it is a process from before birth and continues throughout life. When asked to define the term “Indigenous knowledge,” it is a struggle because of the disruption of the languages and lives of Indigenous peoples due to colonization and the need to discuss the term using another language and worldview. The knowledge of Indigenous peoples is of value today as Indigenous peoples rebuild their lives after near annihilation. All people can learn from this knowledge.

Indigenous peoples agree that their knowledge cannot be defined from a Western orientation. Indigenous knowledge is diverse; there is no “one definition.” As previously stated, it is action oriented, not an object or subject. Indigenous knowledge is difficult to define, and it is not a product or object to be defined and studied in isolation (Little Bear 2012). Knowledge is connected to the land where it emerged; it comes with the people, animals, plants, water, earth, sky, and trees. Indigenous knowledge is connected to the spirit and to states of sacredness; it is both thinking and feeling, and reveals itself through physical actions. It is oral and transmitted orally. This view of Indigenous knowledge is reflected in the languages of the land; for example, in Diné, the word “K’í” means “understanding interdependent compassionate relationships

as they manifest in life, earth/sky, self/family/community, and ancestors/descendants” (pers. comm., L. Emerson, Diné).

Indigenous worldviews have developed over millennia and are expressed and shared in a vast web of stories, songs, dances, art designs, symbols, and images. The stories metaphorically relate central ideas of interdependence and respect for plants, animals, and places and for those behaviours that each generation must learn in order to maintain a reciprocal relationship with the natural world (Snively, Williams 2016).

#### THE NATURE OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

I will try to convey how Indigenous peoples understand Indigenous knowledge. When I use the term “Indigenous,” I am speaking of the peoples who are connected to the land, stories, and languages from the beginning of time. Although Indigenous knowledge is place based and unique to a people, there are shared understandings. To try to convey these understandings, I will use the language of my own people and how I came to understand “Indigenous knowledge” so that non-Indigenous peoples can find resonance with the understanding from my people. When possible, I will include the language of peoples from around the world to come closer to conveying what we mean by Indigenous knowledge while using the language and worldview of English.

*Interconnectedness – everything is connected, nothing is excluded, everything is related.*

Knowledge and how we come to know is connected to place and people. When we say “people,” we include all people: our ancestors and those who follow us, our descendants. We begin gatherings – times when we come together to learn, discuss, and make decisions – by acknowledging the land we are on, the ancestors who walked that land and left their memories there, and we acknowledge the people who will come after us, as our actions will affect them. We acknowledge all our relatives – the air, earth, animals, plants, insects, water, and all that share the place and space, seen and unseen. As a young girl, I learned a teaching that has guided my life, told to me by my mother. Before entering the forest where we were going to dig roots for our basket making, she told me I needed to stop and cleanse my thoughts. We do that by consciously brushing our minds; some people actually use a tree bough to brush their bodies, to shift their thinking and feelings into a positive frame. The way my mother explained it to me was that, in the course of living,

comes negativity. Something makes us annoyed and angry; someone else might bring annoyance and anger into our midst and we absorb it. If we don't consciously remove those feelings, we bring them into our relationship with the trees and the roots that we are harvesting. It affects the work we do – how we approach our task and how successful we will be. My mother said, “If you approach your work in an angry way or you are carrying anger, the roots will hide.” This is an example of what we mean when we say that everything is connected. Our feelings, thoughts, actions, and spirits are all present; we cannot separate any part.

*Everything is in a constant state of flux and motion.*

Everything is animate and has spirit, energy, and knowledge (Little Bear, 2000). This understanding leads to seeing in a wholistic way. Indigenous peoples are socialized to relate wholistically in life, to see everything as a set of patterns in a whole. A story told to a class I brought to the land of the WSÁNEĆ people helped students see what we mean by this. Our WSÁNEĆ guide to the land showed us the place where his people would wait with their canoes to cross a strait. They would wait for the moment when the tides and ocean currents and the wind were flowing in perfect alignment; they would board their canoes and paddle off toward their destination; with these conditions they could travel in safety and travel with very little exertion to reach their destination on the mainland, crossing the Salish Sea from Vancouver Island to mainland British Columbia.

*Sharing, caring, giving, kindness, harmony, balance, and beauty.*

These are the words I hear when I am listening to Indigenous people speak about their world and how they contribute to the health and well-being of the community. Within Indigenous worlds, the focus is on family, extended family, and community. In Líl'wat, the word for family members, friends, community, and a gathering of people is the same word: “nshukwnukw7a.” The root of this word “nukw’ ” means “to help.” Sometimes it is thought that because we concentrate on community that we don't have a sense of self or individualism, but that is not the case. In order to be an active and contributing member of a community, individuals who are self aware and who know their gifts and expertise are essential. Indigenous peoples use stories, singing, dancing, and ceremonies to maintain a sense of community. Harmony, balance, and beauty are evident in the way people use language, in the cadence

of their voice when conversing and telling stories, and in the way they move and walk on the land and among people.

All of our learning and teaching are to help us to be a “whole human being.” In the SENCOFEN language of the WSÁNEĆ on Vancouver Island the word is ELTELNIWT. It means that all knowledge is connected and inseparable from the land, ancestors, and community (pers. comm. J. Elliot, WSÁNEĆ knowledge keeper).

*Indigenous knowledge is expressed, transmitted, transferred, and practised in varied forms.*

Due to the oral nature of knowledge sharing, a primary tool is the “story.” A story can be told in telling or through songs, dances, and images; for example, in the Lílwat tradition, there are many genres of stories such as the spetakwelh – these are the teaching stories, the stories that help people to live life in a good way. Some of the stories in this group are called the “trickster” stories or “coyote” stories, which relate the life challenges of coyote. In some of these stories, coyote runs into trouble because he outthinks himself, or he thinks only of himself and forgets he is part of a family or community. Note here that I am using the pronoun “himself”; in Lílwat we have the term “ti7,” which can refer to “he,” “she,” or “it.” In our stories, coyote can be male or female unless it is made clear in the story that coyote is one or the other gender. The main thing is that these stories are for teaching purposes about how to behave in the world of the Lílwat. In addition, within the stories we learn about the land; about all our relatives on the land: plants, animals, fish, birds, insects, and land forms. We have creation stories and stories about the transformers, the beings that travelled and changed the land forms and all life forms on the land. We have flood stories about how the people coped during floods. On our land, we can still see what the water did to the land, and we can see how our people survived the land. Our stories and songs help us to remember.

Another set of stories are called nsququwel'. These stories are about life experiences. When people travelled and returned home, people would gather so that the traveller could tell all that they saw, heard, and experienced while travelling. When a Lílwat hunter returned, the people looked after the animals the hunter brought home and distributed the meat to the families. The hunter would tell about the hunt, how the animals came in a dream directing where the hunter went. The hunter would describe features of the land, such as the creeks and streams and rivers. Did they have debris and deadfall that people needed to clear?

What plants were in abundance and where? In what state are the medicine plants? How healthy are all the various animals? The hunter would report seeing other hunters, and then describe in detail the relationship with the animals that came to be hunted. That way, the whole community learned about the state of the land and knew what they needed to do to support the land and animals. They also had an opportunity to have a relationship of respect and gratitude with the hunter and the animal that gave itself for the sustenance of the community.

Other stories are told to make people laugh, sometimes to laugh at themselves and their foibles. Stories come in the form of dances and songs. Some stories were told only in certain seasons. Stories are repetitive. Some stories last several days. Grandmothers and grandfathers tell stories; a story doesn't stop until every child is asleep. Stories are told as an interruption, when least expected. Those stories are often for a specific person for a specific reason. No one says who it is for or why. The listener hears or comes to be aware of the message in the story that is pertinent to them. Stories are how we learn what we need to know to be a "good human being."

## WISDOM

As Indigenous peoples, we learn from everything – all experiences teach us; plants teach us; animals teach us; water teaches us; people, no matter of what age or gender, teach us. We are always learning, feeling, thinking, and doing. We learn from what we hear, see, and feel, and we know that everything we learn must be put to use for everyone and ourselves. It must be purposeful and useful to others. Elders in a community are often called knowledge keepers. As noted above, much of our knowledge is kept and recorded in memory with the use of stories, songs, dances, and other memory tools. This knowledge is held for when it is needed and of use. Generally, Indigenous peoples train their whole lives to synthesize information and see patterns. Indigenous peoples do not impose their knowing on others unless it is asked for, and often advice is given in very indirect ways. Each listener takes what is meaningful to them; sometimes a story listener might come to a teaching from the story long after the telling. The storyteller too is a learner, gaining insight from the new telling, by the energy generated among the listeners. In listening to other stories in a telling and listening community, there is a knowledge and wisdom exchange. In the Hawai'ian language, "a'o" is the word for the exchange of expertise and wisdom; sharing is cyclical

and shared as action (Galla 2017). In the Indigenous worldviews, the old ones, the elders, are looked to for mentorship and guidance. An elder gives because they can, for the well-being and health of the community.

#### CHALLENGES AND TRAPS WE FACE IN DEFINING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

The study of “Indigenous knowledge” has had a relatively short history in Canadian education. In my experience, a turning point was 1972 when the Canadian government adopted the policy paper *Indian Control of Indian Education* (NIB/AFN 1972). This paper paved the way for band-controlled schools, where First Nations were able to begin the process of documenting and incorporating their knowledge into the curriculum and educational processes across the country. At this time, Native Studies programs were developed in colleges and universities. Indigenous knowledge existed in isolated areas of education; the practice was to segregate Indigenous knowledge to be learned only by Indigenous students. In British Columbia, this changed around 2003 when the BC Ministry of Education moved to make First Nations Studies 12 a credit course for graduation and later added First Peoples English Literature 12. This development was in partnership with the First Nations Steering Committee, who are relentless in their lobbying efforts to address the needs of Indigenous learners.

In the effort to define “Indigenous knowledge” as it is to be included in school curricula and in academia, we encounter many pitfalls. Knowledge may be subject to Pan Indigenism – the generalizing and simplifying of Indigenous knowledge and wisdom. There are many commonalities and shared understandings, but each Indigenous peoples’ knowledge is unique to the land where it emerges. There is a diversity and plurality of Indigenous knowledges. Naming and articulating Indigenous knowledge in another language, most likely English or French, requires that Indigenous knowledge be defined through the lens of another cultural worldview. Due to hundreds of years of colonial policies to obliterate Indigenous languages as well as cultural and spiritual practices to separate people from their land, to separate the generations by removing children from the care of their parents, and to impose Christianity and Euro-Western values, today Indigenous knowledge may be distant from its roots. The Indigenous languages generally have been written only in the past forty or fifty years, so many Indigenous peoples are developing ways to access their knowledge and wisdom through a literary medium.

Ways that Indigenous peoples transmit and transfer their knowledge and wisdom through varied and multiple practices generally have not been accepted in the world of academia and school education. Professionals such as teachers, professors, lawyers, linguists, health-care providers, anthropologists, historians, archaeologists, all professions educated in every discipline, lack knowledge about Indigenous peoples from Indigenous perspectives. What people might know about Indigenous people is from a Euro-Western perspective and Indigenous knowledge is filtered through a Euro-Western lens. Indigenous peoples portray and act their knowledge rather than explaining it in a disconnected, abstract process. Our knowledge is slowly finding a place in academia due to the efforts of Indigenous scholars in all disciplines and the adoption of the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) and Canada's endorsement of the United Nations Declaration of Indigenous People (2016).

#### LEARNING AND TEACHING IN AN INDIGENOUS WORLD

In 2003, I designed a course at the University of Victoria in British Columbia called *Learning and Teaching in an Indigenous World*. The course was presented in a series of four separate activities: pole carving, weaving, drumming, and singing and storytelling. The course was designed for all participants to experience an Indigenous learning process while engaged in a collective activity. The course attempted to create learning where the learner gains knowledge and understanding from their experience while being engaged in practical activities; they ask themselves questions, seeking understanding from making connections between their prior experiences and the current situation. Within Indigenous worldviews, the teacher or mentor rarely asks direct questions or gives instruction. Learners ask themselves questions and, through observation and watchful listening, they learn from the modelling of the teacher. The class follows an oral tradition with talking circles for sharing information, thoughts, and feelings.

Expert–novice relationships with rich modelling and observation opportunities are abundant. From an early age, children and youth work alongside those who are more knowledgeable, skilled, and adept. There are ample opportunities to be involved in creative and innovative practices. They engage in family and community activities that are contextually based and time appropriate. These learning opportunities are relational, interdependent, integrated, and wholistic. Much of the work

on the land is difficult, intense, monotonous, tedious, and tough, so the work is eased with humour, fun, play, quiet talk, and silence. Maintaining spirit, physical, mental, and emotional balance is important in everyday life. Much of the teaching is designed so that the learner is able to observe and practise with some watchful guidance. They have opportunities to develop their own unique practice. The feedback on accomplishments is usually quiet appreciation. The teaching practice lends itself to habit formation, identity affirmation, and knowledge integration. Learning is purposeful and of benefit to the self, family, and community.

#### LÍ'WAT LANGUAGE CONCEPTS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

The following includes concepts in the Lí'wat language embedded in the teaching and learning process that are shared at the beginning of the classes and revisited throughout the course at the most optimum times. Note that Tim Hopper, a faculty colleague who joined the Storystick class, organized a website so that you can hear the Lí'wat words and access a phonetic pronunciation guide for the words below (<https://sites.google.com/site/lulwatprinciples/home>). These concepts are from the Lí'wat First Nation, but they resonate with other Indigenous peoples as sustaining the teaching and learning process. Lí'wat language concepts are as follows:

**Cwelelep** – being in a place of dissonance; uncertainty in anticipation of new learning; to spin like a dust storm. We all feel the excitement in the pit of our stomachs when we are on the verge of doing something we want to do but it is new and we aren't sure we can master it, like pushing off the first time we are going solo on a bicycle. When we are learning we need to make friends with that energy, make use of it to do what is new to us and to get past our fear of the unknown and our feelings of inadequacy.

**Kamúcwkalha** – the felt energy indicating group alignment and the emergence of a common group purpose; a group is ready to work together, to listen to one another and speak without fear. When the Lí'wat7úl gather to make decisions, they first spend time visiting, telling stories, often funny ones so everyone is laughing. They might share some food and they have time to catch up with everyone. There can be singing and drumming. There is no particular order to events; it is time for connecting. Then the meeting begins, with someone

describing what is bringing the group together. Learning is individual but takes place in a group; every task requires the combined gifts of a group. We need to practise learning to read the environment, both of the land and of groups of people. The group needs to know that their learning affects and is affected by the whole community and beyond. In the class, we learn by being in service to the community.

**Celhcelh** – each person is responsible for their learning; finding and taking advantage of all opportunities to learn and maintain openness to learning. Each person must take the initiative to become part of the learning community by finding their place and fitting themselves into the community. This means offering what knowledge and expertise you have to benefit the communal work being carried out.

**Emháka7** – each person does the best they can at whatever task and keeps an eye on others in order to be helpful; to work respectfully and with good thoughts and good hands.

**A7xa7** – how teachers help us to locate the infinite capacity we all have as learners; developing one's own personal gifts and expertise in a wholistic, respectful, and balanced manner. Knowing is the fine synthesis of the mind, feeling, spirit, and body.

**Kat'í'la** – finding stillness and quietness amid our busyness and need to know; learning to keep oneself calm is necessary on the land and living in close quarters with a large group of people.

**Responsibility** – each person is responsible for helping the team and the learning community to accomplish the task at hand in a good way, entering the work clear of anger and impatience.

**Relationship** – each person will be conscious of developing and maintaining relationships – with the people, the task, the teachers and guides, and the communities beyond the learning community; relating what you are experiencing to your past knowledge and to what you will do with what you are learning.

**Watchful listening** – oriented to an openness to listening beyond our own personal thoughts and assumptions; being aware and conscious of everything around you as you focus on the task at hand.

## SELF-REFLECTION

Reflection is an important tool for learning within Indigenous worlds. The one writing assignment in the class was for students to keep a reflection journal; they were encouraged to write about their class experience after every session. Midway into the course, the whole class community had an opportunity to share what they had learned to that point, what stood out for them about learning in an Indigenous world. At the end of the course, they reviewed their journals and wrote an essay about their experience. All the instructors too had an opportunity to share their reflections with the learning community. They shared what they learned and appreciated about their experience.

## CEREMONY

Ceremony is critical to the experience; in each of the activities, ceremony was built into the experience. In the “pole” activity, a group was assigned to organize the ceremonies. One of the challenges was to think about how a group honours the protocols and values of the entire community and context; for example, in the “pole” activity, we needed to honour the land of the Lekwungen, the land on which we were meeting, and the land of Elder instructor and lead carver Butch Dick’s people. We also needed to honour lead carver Fabian Quocksister’s people, the Ligwilda’xw; in the final ceremony, his family was involved in the planning and the ceremony, it was the first time some of their family songs were performed away from their land. The students needed to make sure that this was done in a respectful and conscientious way. Because it was a University of Victoria accredited course, taking place at the university, involving the university community, we also needed to be cognizant of university protocols. Ceremonies help us to connect with one another in community, to remember that our actions and existence are part of a bigger picture in place and time. It is a time to include our ancestors and to remember our descendants. We are all related – everything we do reminds us that we are related and connected to everything; we are not alone. Giving thanks and gratitude in ceremony helps us to keep this in mind. Our learning is not only for us alone; it is for the community, for our ancestors, and for those yet to come.

## FUN AND HUMOUR

It was important in the class to have fun, to be playful, and to laugh. When you watch gatherings of Indigenous people, you will witness many times when people tell jokes, tease each other, and tell funny stories to provoke laughter. If people are serious or working intensely, then there is an interruption for laughter to break the tension.

CHALLENGES FACED WHEN TEACHING AND LEARNING  
IN AN INDIGENOUS WORLD

Over six iterations of the *Learning and Teaching in an Indigenous World* course (from 2003 to 2018), we recognized several challenges. It is important when changing habituated practice that the leaders in the institution support and seek to understand the complexity of the change process. This includes adjusting timetables and course duration. Compromises were made by the university, students, and Indigenous communities to adjust. Sometimes the classes went beyond the class time, or extra times were added to accommodate the activity. In these courses, there were students who were undergraduates, graduate students, Indigenous community members, non-Indigenous community members, faculty, and grade-school students. These classes opened the learning community to include students from different ages, statuses, and levels of achievement. Grading is also affected. The course was on a pass or fail basis. In the Indigenous world, people are engaged in their learning, and the value is what they achieve for themselves and what they give back to their community. It is expected that much of the learning will take place after the learning experience.

A community of people is dependent on the uniqueness of each individual and each individual bringing their own creativity, ability, and expertise to the community. Who can teach, and who determines a teacher's expertise, had to be considered; for example, instructor compensation and teaching responsibilities. The Indigenous people who are experts in the knowledge that was required for the classes are not recognized as experts in the Euro-Western system's certification process.

Within Indigenous worldviews, everything has a spirit. During our first class in the series, a log was going to be carved into a totem pole to learn Indigenous processes of teaching and learning. When the log arrived, as is the custom to the Lekwungen and Ligwíłdaxw, a ceremony was held to cleanse the log, to welcome it to our community, and to cleanse the space where it would be carved. In the education system, this

could be looked upon as a “religious” ceremony and it would defy the legislation to ensure secular education. I invited students to participate outside of class time. Participation was optional. Most of the students participated and wrote about the experience in their reflection journals.

#### WHAT IS THE STRUGGLE TO BRING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE INTO THE CURRICULUM?

The discussion above notes challenges that came to light in the experience of one course. Over the past fifty years of bringing Indigenous knowledge into the Canadian curriculum, other challenges are evident. There is a belief that Indigenous knowledge doesn’t exist, that Indigenous knowledge is “primitive” and “uncivilized” and is not needed in the modern world. Acknowledgment of the value of Indigenous knowledge systems to all students is important. This requires recognition of the colonial imposition of the official languages of French and English, as well as making sincere efforts to step out of Euro-Western curriculum patterns. Among educators, we need a willingness to learn and understand Indigenous histories, worldviews, and knowledges. Making curriculum available is a major step, but both educators and the public need opportunities to learn and ask questions and to modify institutional structures to include Indigenous knowledges. It is necessary to put into place assistance in overcoming beliefs that were promoted about Indigenous peoples. When seeking advice and expertise by Indigenous peoples, honour and respect their perspectives but know that you are listening through a Euro-Western lens.

In the course of the settlement and creation of Canada, the Indigenous peoples, like Indigenous peoples around the globe, suffered dislocation from their home territories; they became displaced from their sense of self, history, and meaning. I have listened to people speak of their sense of not belonging in either world, not being able to make sense of their lives. I have witnessed children and listened to youth who could only fight as a way of responding to any situation. I have witnessed these children and youth find other ways of engaging without violence; it took being in a warm and caring environment where there was a long-term commitment to the well-being of all students and attention to the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual development of all members of the program community. The adults in the program supported students to complete tasks, show up, do the best job they could, be open to learning new things, take care of each

other, help one another, overcome barriers and obstacles, and know they can make decisions about their lives (Williams and Belanger 2017). I have listened to students talk about and demonstrate the strength they acquire from learning about themselves in courses and experiences in school. The children, youth, and adults who are in Indigenous language immersion programs are strong, capable, and giving, and they are comfortable with their identity. These children can cross the borders among Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds without losing a sense of self (Chandler and Lalonde 1998; McIvor and McCarty 2017).

Indigenous knowledges are place based so education systems are required to work in collaboration with Indigenous communities and people to build the knowledges of the local area into the school system. It is important to learn from each other but remember that each Indigenous world is unique. ”

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