American Indian Epistemologies

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This chapter explores a vision of American Indian education and epistemologies, which unfold through the tracking of a very special story. It is an honoring of a process for seeking life that American Indian people represent and reflect through their special connections to nature, family, community, and spiritual ecology. It is an honoring of relationships and the place that traditional teaching and learning have in American Indian life. This chapter maps a journey through shared metaphors, making various stops to recognize, appreciate, and contemplate traditional American Indian epistemologies and implications for the future of American Indian children and the tribal cultures that they will carry into the twenty-first century.

Education from an American Indian Perspective

There is no word for epistemology in any American Indian language. However, there is certainly a body of understandings that can be said to include what this branch of Western philosophy would explore as the origins, nature, and methods of coming to know a way of life (Deloria, 1973; Deloria and Wildcat, 2001; Kawagley, 1995; Peat, 1996; Suzuki and Knudtson, 1992; Waters, 2004). Indeed, one might say that there are as many American Indian epistemologies as there are American Indian tribes. To understand the nature of American Indian epistemologies, it is useful to explore the realm of cultural ideals from which the learning, teaching, and systems of education of Native America evolved.

American Indian education historically occurred in a holistic social context that developed a sense of the importance of each individual as a contributing member of the social group. Essentially, tribal education...
worked as a cultural and life-sustaining process. It was a process of education that unfolded through reciprocal relationships between one’s social group and the natural world. This relationship involved all dimensions of one’s being while providing both personal development and technical skills through participation in the life of the community. It was essentially an integrated expression of environmental education.

Understanding the depth of relationships and the significance of participation in all aspects of life are the keys to traditional American Indian education. *Mitakuye Oyasin* (we are all related) is a Lakota phrase that captures an essence of tribal education because it reflects the understanding that our lives are truly and profoundly connected to other people and the physical world. Likewise, in tribal education one gains knowledge from firsthand experience in the world and then transmits or explores it through ritual, ceremony, art, and appropriate technology. The individual then uses knowledge gained through these vehicles in the context of everyday living. Education in this context becomes education for life’s sake. Indigenous education is at its very essence learning about life through participation and relationship to community, including not only people but plants, animals, and the whole of nature (Cajete, 1994).

**Elemental Points About Indigenous Education**

A number of elements characterize indigenous education and processes. These elements characterize the expression of indigenous education wherever and however it has been expressed. These elements are like the living stones, the *Inyan* as the Lakota term it, that animate the expressions of indigenous education. A few of these characteristics are included here to provide landmarks to assist the reader (Cajete, 1994).

The sacred view of Nature permeates and contextualizes the foundational process of teaching and learning.
Integration and interconnectedness are universal traits.
Relationships between elements and knowledge bases radiate in concentric rings of process and structure.
Its processes adhere to the principle of reciprocity between humans and all other things.
It recognizes and incorporates the cycles within cycles, that is, that there are always deeper levels of meaning to be found in every learning-teaching process.
It presents something to learn for everyone, at every stage of life.
It recognizes the levels of maturity and readiness to learn in the developmental process of both males and females. This recognition is incorporated into the designs and situations in which indigenous teaching takes place.
It recognizes language as a sacred expression of breath and incorporates this orientation in all its foundations.
It recognizes that each person and each culture contain the seeds of all that are essential to their well-being and positive development.
It recognizes and applies ordering through ceremony, ritual, and community activity.
It recognizes that the true sources of knowledge are to be found within the individual and entities of nature.
It recognizes that true learning occurs through participating in and honoring relationships in both the human and natural communities.
It recognizes the power of thought and language to create the worlds we live in.
It resonates and builds learning through the tribal structures of the home and community.

Finding Face, Finding Heart, and Finding a Foundation

The characteristics of American Indian epistemologies reflect traits that indigenous cultures of the world share. They are really expressions of the ancestral tribal roots of all the families of humankind. In exploring the tribal foundations of American Indian education, we are really tracking the earliest sources of human teaching and learning. What these foundations have to teach us is that learning is ultimately a subjective experience tied to a place: environmentally, socially, and spiritually. Tribal teaching and learning was intertwined with the daily life of both teacher and learner. Tribal education was a natural outcome of living in close communion with each other and the natural environment.

The living place, the learner’s extended family, the clan and tribe provide both the context and source for teaching. In this way every situation provided a potential opportunity for learning; and basic education was not separate from the natural, social, or spiritual aspects of everyday life. Living and learning were fully integrated.

The ideals of such a process naturally became founded on the continuous development of self-knowledge, on finding life through understanding and participating in the creative process of living, on direct awareness of the natural environment, on knowledge of one’s role and responsibility to community, and on cultivating a sensitivity to the spiritual essences of the world. To attain such ideals required participation in a shared cultural metaphor and the continuity of knowledge, perception, experience, and wisdom that the understanding and experience of tribal elders afforded.

The cultivation of all one’s senses through learning how to listen, observe, and experience holistically by creative exploration was highly valued. In addition, all tribes highly regarded the ability to use language through storytelling, oratory, and song as a primary tool for teaching and learning. This was because the spoken or sung word expressed the spirit and breath of life of the speaker and thus was considered sacred.
A quality of informality characterized the greater part of American Indian teaching and learning, because most traditional knowledge was contextualized in the day-to-day life experience of the people. However, formal learning was almost always required in the transfer of sacred knowledge. Therefore, various ceremonial practices formed a complex for the formal teaching and learning of sacred knowledge that was founded on experience and participation in a tribal culture. Initiation rites occurred at graduated stages of growth and maturation. Important initiation ceremonies and accompanying forms of formal education were integrated with the natural physical and psychological transitions occurring at the end of early childhood; puberty; early, middle, and late adulthood; and old age. Ceremony was a lifelong process of introduction to sacred and environmental knowledge, graduated and programmed in such a way that individuals were presented new levels of knowledge when they were physically, psychologically, and socially ready to learn them.

*Hah oh* is a Tewa phrase sometimes used to connote the process of learning. Its literal translation is to breathe in. *Hah oh* is an Indian metaphor that describes the perception of traditional tribal education—a process of breathing in—that each tribe creatively and ingeniously applied. As a whole, traditional tribal education revolved around experiential learning (learning by doing or seeing), storytelling (learning by listening and imagination), ritual or ceremony (learning through initiation), dreaming (learning through unconscious imagery), the tutor (learning through apprenticeship), and artistic creation (learning through creative synthesis). These methods fully honored the integration of the inner and outer realities of learners and teachers, and they fully engaged the complementary educational processes of both realities (Cajete, 1994).

The legacy of the traditional forms of American Indian education are significant because they embody a quest for self, individual and community survival, and wholeness in the context of a community and natural environment. Indigenous education is really endogenous education; that is, it is an educating of the inner self through an enlivening and illumination from one’s own being and the learning of key relationships. Therefore, the foundations for indigenous education naturally rest on increasing awareness and developing innate human potentials through time. Based on this orientation, American Indians and other indigenous groups used ritual, myth, customs, and life experience to integrate both the process and content of learning into the very fabric of their social organizations, thereby promoting wholeness in the individual, family, and community.

**Foundations of Indigenous Epistemologies**

Indians throughout the Americas incorporate a number of symbolic expressions that reflect the metaphysical, ecological, and cultural constructs of tribal epistemology. These symbolic constructs, when translated, include
the following: Tree of Life, Earth Mother, Sun Father, Sacred Twins, Mother of Game or Corn, Old Man, Trickster, Holy Wind or Life’s Sake, We Are All Related, Completed Man/Woman, the Great Mystery, Life Way, and Sacred Directions. These expressions, which occur in a variety of forms in nearly all American Indian languages, reflect common understandings and shared foundations for traditional ways of learning. That is, behind each of these mythic metaphors are the philosophical infrastructures and fields of tribal knowledge that lie at the heart of American Indian epistemologies. For instance, among the Iroquois, the Tree of Life and its white roots of peace form a rich matrix of interrelated myths that present not only Iroquoian traditional knowledge but truths that other tribes recognize. Likewise, the Iroquoian myth of the Great Turtle is an archetypal Earth Mother tale that embodies the understanding of the Whole Earth as a living, breathing, and knowing entity who nourishes and provides for every living thing through its own magnificent process of life. The Earth Mother’s counterpart in maintaining life, the Sun Father, is represented in various key roles in such myths as Scar Face among the Blackfoot and the Old Man of the Crystal House among the Chumash (Wood, 1982).

These myths, and the variety of myths related to the other symbolic complexes mentioned, present the Nature-centered orientation of indigenous epistemologies in the Americas. Indeed, rightful orientation to the natural world is the primary message and intent of the mythic perception that the sacred directions symbolize among American Indians. The majority of American Indian tribes recognize seven sacred or elemental directions: East, West, North, South, Zenith, Nadir, and the Center. Through deep understanding and expression of the metaphoric meaning of these orientations, American Indians have intimately defined their place in the Universe.

By perceiving themselves in the middle of these directions, they oriented themselves to the multidimensional fields of knowledge and the phenomena of their physical and spiritual worlds. Individual tribes named each direction and associated symbols with the directions that characterized their perceptions and experiences with each. These symbols invariably included natural phenomena, colors, animals, plants, spirits, and holy winds (kinds of thought).

**Seven Foundations of Tribal Education**

Extending the metaphor of environmental orientation and process inherent in these sacred directions to education, we may speak of seven elemental yet highly integrated kinds of thought that form the foundations on which the vehicles and contexts of indigenous education rest (Cajete, 1994). These orienting foundations may include the Environmental, the Mythic, the Artistic, the Visionary, the Affective, the Communal, and the Spiritual. In traditional life these foundations are so intimately interrelated that they act relativistically at all levels of their expression. In every sense they contain
each other in such a way that exploration of any one foundation can take you into the very heart of the tribal education experience. However, a complementary balance occurs in the interplay of these foundations. This balance can be illustrated by the interaction and interpretation of foundations that play within the environmental and spiritual fields of experience. An ebb and flow of interactive realities characterizes the play among these foundations of education.

**Environmental Foundation.** The Environmental foundation forms a context through which the tribe observed and integrated those understandings, bodies of knowledge, and practices resulting from direct interaction with the natural world. This foundation connects a tribe to its place, establishing the meaning of tribe members’ relationships to their land and the earth in their minds and hearts. To say that American Indians were America’s first practical ecologists is a gross simplification of a deep sense of ecological awareness and state of being. The environmental foundation of tribal education reflects a deeper level of teaching and learning than simply making a living from the natural world. For American Indians, as with other nature-centered indigenous cultures around the world, the natural environment was the essential reality, the place of being. Nature was taught about and understood in and on its own terms. Relationship and its expressions in all aspects of life formed the basis for a profound process of education.

Based on the environmental foundation of tribal education, tribal people and their environment established and perpetuated a mutual and reciprocal relationship. Nature was used for sustenance; however, the use of material technology was elegant, sophisticated, and appropriate within the context of traditional society (Cajete, 1994).

**Mythic Foundation.** The Mythic foundation rests on the archetypal stories that describe the cosmology in the language and cultural metaphors of a tribe. This foundation explores the guiding thoughts, dreams, explanations, and orientations to the world. In short, this foundation represents the tribe’s worldview and, through the process and structure of storytelling, presents the script for teaching, learning, and participating in the stories that guide a people. Ultimately, all education is the expression of some sort of storytelling.

**Visionary Foundation.** The Visionary foundation rests on the deep psychological and spiritual experiences at the individual level that lead to or result from a tribe’s practices, rituals, and ceremonies. Such practices and contexts provide a framework for individuals and groups to teach and learn through exploring their inner psychology and their collective unconscious. American Indians applied the visionary foundation to directly access knowledge and understanding from primary sources deep within themselves and in the natural world.

**Artistic Foundation.** The Artistic foundation contains the practices, mediums, and forms through which we usually express the meanings and understandings we have come to see. Art allows us to symbolize knowledge,
understanding, and feelings through image, thus making it possible to transcend a finite time and cultural wrapping. Art itself becomes a primary source of teaching because it both integrates and documents a profound process of learning. Art was such an integral part of American Indian life that the various Indian languages have no words that translate exactly to mean Art. The closest direct translation to English refers to making or completing. The Artistic foundation also acts as a bridging and translating foundation for the Mythic and Visionary foundations. That is, the Artistic mediates the other two.

The Mythic, Visionary, and Artistic foundations form a natural triad of tools, practices, and ways of teaching and learning that, through their interaction and play, form a fourth dimension for deep understanding of our inner being. Remembering the metaphor of the Sacred Twins, we may say that this triad of foundations springs forth from the twin that represents the teaching, learning, and innate knowledge of our inner self. It might be called the Winter Twin or the deeply inward aspect of indigenous education.

**Affective Foundation.** The Affective foundation of tribal education forms a second context that contains the emotional response to learning, living, growing, and understanding in relationship to the world, ourselves, and each other. This is the foundation in which we establish rapport with what we are learning and why we are learning it. It reflects the whole gamut of our emotion as it relates to the educational process. It is the seat of our primary motivation and the way we establish personal or group meaning for our learning. It is the foundation through which we cultivate our intention, choice, trust, responsibility, and heart for learning. And like the Artistic foundation, the Affective foundation acts as a bridge between the environmental and communal foundations. It mediates our feelings for our place and our community. For American Indians love for one’s land and people have always been a primary motivation for learning and service to one’s tribe.

**Communal Foundation.** The Communal foundation forms a third context containing the responses and experiences that reflect the social and communal dimension of tribal education. The life of the community, as well as the individuals of that community, is the primary focus of tribal education. The community is also the primary context—through the family, clan, or other tribal social structures—in which the first dimensions of education unfold for all human beings. All humans after all are social animals who depend on each other directly not only for their mutual survival but their identity. The Communal experience is the seat of human cultures; as such, there is not one thing in human life that it does not influence. The Communal experience and the inherent process for teaching and learning in tribal cultures are tied through history and tradition to some of the oldest and most instinctually human-contexted mediums of education. The structure, process, and content of teaching and learning resulting from traditional American Indian tribal and communal experience were and continue to be inherently human, highly contexted, situational, highly flexible,
and informal. Learning and teaching are going on at all times, at all levels, and in a variety of situations. For American Indian tribal education, the community was and continues to be the schoolhouse!

**Spiritual Foundation.** The Spiritual orientation of tribal education may be considered as both a foundational process and field through which traditional American Indian education occurs. For indigenous peoples, Nature and all that it contains formed the parameters of the school. Each of the other foundations of tribal education are exquisitely complex and dynamic contexts through which a kind of thought develops from a unique yet creative process of teaching and learning. The Affective, Communal, and Environmental foundations form the other triad of tools, practices, and way of teaching and learning that complements the understanding of the first triad. This might be called the Summer Twin or the highly interactive and external dimension of indigenous education.

In traditional American Indian life, the context in which these foundations interact is the Spiritual-Ecological, the seventh orienting foundation of knowledge and process. It is the Spiritual that forms not only the foundation for religious expression but the ecological psychology that underpins the other foundations.

A value many American Indian people share is that they must preserve their stories, languages, customs, songs, dances, and ways of thinking and learning because they sustain the life of the individual, family, and community. The stories in particular integrate the life experience and reflect the essence of the people’s sense of spiritual being through time and space. For the mythic stories of a people form the script for cultural processes and experience.

Culture is the face; myth is the heart; and traditional education is the foundation for indigenous life. And all cultures have indigenous roots that are bedded in the rich soil of myth from which the most elemental stories of human life spring.

Tewa Indian elders often admonish young people to live the myths by saying “these stories, this language, these ways, and this land are the only valuables we can give you—but life is in them for those who know how to ask and how to learn.”

The metaphor for this seeking is coded in the Tewa phrase *pin peyé obe* (look to the mountain)! A first step in reconnecting contemporary American Indian education to its mythic roots begins with looking to the cardinal mountains of thought and perspective from which all the essences of our stories come and to which they return. For with or without our collective and conscious participation, a new story of education is beginning to emerge. Understanding the plot of this new story is a first task for forging an indigenous philosophy of American Indian education that will ensure cultural survival in the twenty-first century.
Final Thoughts

Environmental relationship, myth, visionary traditions, traditional arts, tribal community, and Nature-centered spirituality have traditionally formed the foundations of American Indian life. These elements formed a context for discovering one’s true face (character, potential, identity), one’s heart (soul, creative self, true passion), and one’s foundation (true work, vocation), all of which lead to the expression of a complete life.

A primary orientation of indigenous education was that each person was in reality his or her own teacher and that learning was connected to each individual’s life process. One looked for meaning in everything, especially in the workings of the natural world. All things of Nature were teachers of humankind; what was required was a cultivated and practiced openness to the lessons that the world had to teach. Ritual, mythology, and the art of storytelling combined with the cultivation of relationship to one’s inner self; individuals used the family, the community, and the natural environment to help realize their potential for learning and a complete life. Individuals were enabled to reach completeness by being encouraged to learn how to trust their natural instincts, to listen, to look, to create, to reflect and see things deeply, to understand and apply their intuitive intelligence, and to recognize and honor the spirit within themselves and the natural world. This is the educational legacy of indigenous peoples. It is imperative that we revitalize its message and its way of educating for life’s sake at this time of ecological crisis.

For American Indians a new circle of education is evolving that is founded on the roots of tribal education and reflective of the needs, values, and sociopolitical issues as Indian people themselves perceive them. This new circle encompasses the importance that American Indian people place on the continuance of their ancestral traditions. It emphasizes a respect for individual uniqueness in the diversity of expressions of spirituality, facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of history and culture, develops a strong sense of place and service to community, and forges a commitment to educational and social transformation that recognizes and further empowers the inherent strength of American Indian people and their respective cultures.

References


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