

Discussion Papers

Aboriginal Perspectives and the Curriculum



The *discussion* papers, written by *Dwayne Trevor Donald*, are intended to stimulate conversation amongst teachers, pre-service teachers, administrators and members of the community about aboriginal perspectives and the social studies curriculum.

The Edmonton Regional Consortium appreciates the perspectives and views shared by the author in addressing the following questions (perspectives represent those views held by the author and do not represent a formal position held by the ERLC):

- ***Why are Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum?***
- ***Why is it necessary for all teachers and students in Alberta to be required to work with Aboriginal perspectives?***
- ***What are the hopes, wishes, goals of Aboriginal people and their communities?***
- ***What notions of curriculum are most helpful in understanding the large curriculum shift occurring in Alberta?***



About the author

Dwayne Trevor Donald was born and raised in Edmonton, on the very land from which his ancestors of the Papaschase Cree were displaced in the 1880s. He left Edmonton to begin his teaching career and taught high school social studies at Kanai High School on the Kainai (Blood) Reserve in southern Alberta for ten years. Currently, he is a full-time doctoral student in Secondary Education at the University of Alberta. His work involves Aboriginal Perspectives and Curriculum.



Why are Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum?

Many educators were taken by surprise when it was first made known to educational stakeholders that Alberta Education was planning to introduce curricular initiatives that emphasized Aboriginal perspectives. It was a fairly dramatic and unexpected policy shift. Many people wondered why such a shift was made.

Of course, the more cynical people among us have their own theories. Probably the most common explanation was that the move was just another example of the 'dance' of Indigenous victimization, white guilt, and political correctness. To be politically correct is to avoid expressions or actions that can be perceived to exclude or marginalize or insult people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against. The cynical argue that the inclusion (interesting word) of Aboriginal perspectives in curriculum is motivated by a desire to apologize for past injustices and assuage white guilt—hardly the basis for sound policy decision-making. I have heard teachers at curriculum workshops argue against Aboriginal perspectives on the grounds that: (a) they do not have adequate background knowledge of Aboriginal issues (b) they do not have any Aboriginal students in their classes (c) we already have multiculturalism as a curricular focus.

These resistances are deeply rooted in issues of identity, culture, and the stories that Canadian students have been told in school for many generations. The story, in summary form, is that Canadian settlers have carved civilization out of wilderness. Of course, Aboriginal peoples are perceived to be unfortunate remnants of this process. They have been considered outside the national narrative. Learning this official version of Canadian history has left many of us unable to comprehend the resurgence of Aboriginal cultures and ways of knowing. It leaves some educators also unable and unwilling to accept that Aboriginal cultures could have something meaningful to contribute to mainstream educational processes.

As Aboriginal populations continue to grow significantly, especially in urban areas, this historical problem of insiders (Canadians) and outsiders (Aboriginal peoples) has become an issue of political and social concern in Canada. Increasingly, Aboriginal people who wish to demonstrate the ongoing presence and participation of their people in Canadian society are asserting their own notions of knowledge, citizenship, ethics, and sovereignty. The perspectives being shared are very much related to the exclusion or isolation of Aboriginal ways of knowing from EuroCanadian ideas, and the process of colonization through which Aboriginal peoples and communities were relegated to the sidelines as the nation of Canada was developed.

Canadian society is slowly beginning a détente with this difficult past. The potential exists for a new era of respect, integrity, and renewed partnerships. An ethical space has been created. Aboriginal perspectives are an educational issue today because there is growing acknowledgement that Aboriginal wisdom traditions, as organic world views, can help deepen our connections with the land and places we call home. This policy shift requires a tour through the contested terrain of the past, rereading and reframing Aboriginal presence and participation in Canadian history and society. We need to identify the holes in the story of our country and note what has been left out. This is necessary, not to lay blame, but to repair the story. Doing so will



repair us as citizens. Holes in a story mean that passageways for new understanding still have a chance.



Why is it necessary for all teachers and students in Alberta to be required to work with Aboriginal perspectives?

These days people seek knowledge, not wisdom. Knowledge is of the past; wisdom is of the future.

Vernon Cooper, Lumbee Elder

A 19th century English philosopher named Herbert Spencer asked an enduring question that has influenced the field of education for decades: What knowledge is of most worth? Spencer's question has helped guide curriculum development and associated initiatives for many years since he first posed it. Teachers and curriculum planners answer this question daily when they make program decisions specifying what it is that young people need to know.

Schooling is set up to convey the knowledge and develop the young in ways that a society considers important. This often involves consideration of the significance of particular people, events, and knowledges from the past. This seems like common sense. Until recently, most curricula have been based on the common sense assumption that knowledge derived from European history, culture, and discovery was of most worth. European philosophers insisted that human immaturity could be overcome if we all adhered to *universal* principles of scientific reason and rationality. Such evaluations undoubtedly grew out of the tremendous upheaval that occurred in Europe as a result of the processes of colonialism. The flood of information about new people in new lands coupled with the wealth and new products generated, required new ways of making sense to justify it all. Education today is still struggling to come to terms with the legacies of these processes.

Such struggles can be seen in current (re)considerations of curriculum. Picking out what knowledge is important is no longer a simple matter of looking backwards and employing the proper intellectual habits; it is also about looking forwards, and talking about whose or which knowledge is to be valued and deemed worthy of consideration. This imperative implies an ethical responsibility to work for balance in our relationships with those usually considered outside of our own identifiable group. This ethical call holds that the past occurs simultaneously in the present and influences how we conceptualize the future. It requires that we see ourselves related to, and implicated in, the lives of others. In this sense, then, curriculum is no longer a Eurocentric monologue, but has instead become a complex dialogue on our shared reality that traverses and influences all subject areas and disciplines.

If we accept the basic tenet that Aboriginal peoples in Canada are historically and culturally distinct members of our society, then we need to think carefully about how they will participate in this dialogue. Until recently, Aboriginal peoples and their communities have been isolated and excluded from these deliberations. In curricular terms, Aboriginal content was assumed to only be relevant for Aboriginal students. Attempts at the *inclusion* of Aboriginal perspectives have usually meant that an outdated cultural study of Aboriginal people is offered as a possibility in social studies classrooms if there is time and enough people are still interested. This 'tipis and costumes' approach has been tried for many years, but often leaves teachers and young people with the unfortunate impression that the Indians have not done much since the buffalo were killed off. It also perpetuates the widespread assumption that Aboriginal peoples and their societies are *unable* to adjust to present circumstances, comprehend 'civilization,' and conform to new ways of living.

In contrast, many Aboriginal people understand that while the fundamental principles of traditional knowledge do remain fixed, they also provide the framework within which new experiences and situations are understood and given meaning. This encourages a successful



What are the hopes, wishes, goals of Aboriginal people and their communities?

Education, broadly conceived, can be considered an endeavour focused on hopes, wishes, and goals for humanity. However, while mindful of this fundamental truth, we must also respect human difference. All educators should come to understand that peoples from other cultures might think differently from them and construct the world in ways appropriate to their familiar cultural context and values. Such cultural difference is not a consequence of miseducation or deficiency. Nor is its expression limited to costumes, food, and dance. Rather, cultural difference is evidenced when people interact and make assumptions according to values and ethics derived from functional and viable, but distinct, world views.

So, what is *different* about Aboriginal hopes, wishes, goals? Answering such questions is risky because it requires generalizations to be made that are rarely complete and accurate. However, in the interests of fostering understanding, we can make some general comments regarding hopes, wishes, goals commonly expressed by Aboriginal people when speaking about education and their children.

Participating On Our Own Terms

Formal education has a bad reputation with many Aboriginal people and their families. This attitude towards schooling has resulted from the residential school experience and the social and cultural devastation it has caused. Many Aboriginal parents send their children to school with reluctance because they recognize that the pressure to conform and assimilate will have a serious affect on them, and could ultimately have damaging effects on who they think they are. Many Aboriginal people wish that their children could attend school and not have to become someone else to be successful. They want their children to have the freedom to participate in school on their own terms, in ways which support and encourage them to link family and cultural teachings with classroom experiences. They wish educators would help their children respect and maintain this balance.

Respectfully Remembering the Past

In most Aboriginal communities, historical consciousness is a primary component of citizenship. The spirit and intent of this notion is to respect those that have gone before and honour them in our present lives through spiritual renewal and ceremonies. What is recognized is the indebtedness that all of us should feel towards our ancestors and the role they have played on helping us be here today. We have a responsibility to live with respect to this view of the past. Thus, when Aboriginal people speak of the past, it does not mean that we wish to turn back the clock, live in tipis, hunt buffalo, and give up all modern conveniences. Rather, implicit in the expression of this value is the assertion of a different way of thinking about history, society, and the future.

Cultural and Linguistic Revitalization

Many Aboriginal people believe that the survival of Aboriginal cultures and societies will only occur if their people continue to speak their language. Indigenous languages provide fluent speakers with specific and ancient insights regarding wisdom, values, traditions, and cultural practices. Since very few Aboriginal students today are fluent in their language, most Aboriginal communities consider cultural and linguistic revitalization their most critical goal. Some Aboriginal people wish that mainstream schools would support and encourage Indigenous language instruction on a broader scale as a way to express solidarity with their goals.

Understanding and Respecting Diversity



While certainly sharing some important commonalities, Aboriginal students within the same classroom and school can hold very different perspectives regarding Aboriginal culture and identity. This difference can often be traced back to the experiences and memories of their different families. Some parents educate their children by speaking the language and participating in cultural ceremonies and practices. Other families do not have these same connections to language and traditional culture, and these children may arrive at school without understanding these things. Despite these differences, it is important to remember that one student should not be considered more authentically Aboriginal than another.

The ethic of non-interference has been strongly maintained in most Aboriginal communities and families. This cultural value has grown out of the belief that it is wrong to force young people to do things. Every person is viewed as an individual who has been given particular gifts that make them complete in a certain way, and they should be respected as that. No one has the right to insist that a young person should change or be different. They have to make their own decisions. However, a responsible older person can and should constantly talk to that young person, giving advice, and presenting possibilities.

Aboriginal people and communities wish that educators would recognize that their Aboriginal students can be very diverse and should not be typecast according to some external model of Aboriginal identity. The hope is that educators will consider the ethic of non-interference and focus their efforts on helping Aboriginal students discover and become the person they were meant to be. For some, this might mean university or college. For others, it might mean becoming cultural leaders in their communities. Each should be valued and respected.

Seventh Generation

There is a teaching passed down from our ancestors that crystallizes our sense of responsibility to the earth and other people that arises out of the tradition law. It is said that we are placed on the earth to be the caretakers of all that is here. We are instructed to treat the plants, animals, minerals, human beings and all life as our relatives, as if they were a part of ourselves. Since we are a part of Creation, we cannot differentiate or separate ourselves from the rest of the earth. The way in which we interact with the earth, how we utilize the plants, animals and the mineral gifts, should be carried out with the seventh generation in mind. We cannot simply think of ourselves and our survival; each generation has a responsibility to ensure the survival for the seventh generation from now.

The story of the seventh generation has a mystical quality to it that blends well with the tired stereotype of Aboriginal as protector of Mother Earth. However, mysticism and stereotypes aside, this value has extremely practical and spiritual notions of long life survival to it. Many Aboriginal spiritual and community leaders wish that public policy discussions—economic, social, political, educational—would take place with all participants mindful of our shared responsibilities to the seventh generation. How would the practice of teaching be different if teachers remembered the seventh generation? How would curriculum be changed? How would evaluation be altered?



What notions of curriculum are most helpful in understanding the large curriculum shift occurring in Alberta?

Some high school social studies teachers were recently heard discussing the validation draft proposals of the proposed curriculum. As former and current textbook writers, much of their talk was focused on how the curriculum would translate into textbook form. When notions of process and inquiry intruded on this curriculum conversation, the most senior teacher cautioned everyone by stating: “Remember, we are concerned with curriculum not pedagogy.”

What does it mean to be “concerned” with curriculum? Common sense educational talk classifies curriculum as a developmental and technical exercise undertaken to get the topics of study accurately organized and presented. An underlying assumption associated with this view is that presenting the ‘right’ knowledge will reduce the ambiguity of teaching. In this sense, curriculum is designed and developed to be the last word; it is an expression of objective presentability. Educators identify the knowledge and students acquire it.

Now, we can probably all agree that educators need to have some fairly clear guidelines describing what they are expected to teach. Curriculum development continues to be an important and ongoing educational process. However, too often in the past school curricula has been formulated and taught based on the assumption that the selected topics of study are objective, neutral, values-free, and apolitical. This is impossible. All curricula are an expression of someone’s view of the world and an articulation of what is important to know. Thus, subject matter for math and science (for example) could be otherwise, but is largely based on Eurocentric interpretations.

It is not necessary to apologize for this. Rather, what is necessary is an acknowledgement that Eurocentrism exists in curriculum and a willingness to engage students in explorations of other views of these same issues. Such an exploration or inquiry will be process-oriented. Here we can rely on Aboriginal wisdom traditions which emphasize that the process of learning is probably more important than what is learned. In this model, curriculum (what we teach) and pedagogy (how we teach and why we teach that way) are intimately linked.

Rather than prioritizing the acquisition of knowledge, curriculum + pedagogy formulates learning as a recursive process of inquiry. What is learned is inseparable from how one went about learning. Knowledge formerly classified as objective becomes personalized through this process.

Perhaps this conceptual shift is an issue of language. The dictionary distinguishes ‘curriculum’ as a noun, a thing, a prescribed program of study. However, the Latin root of curriculum is a verb—*currere*—which refers to running a course. While this original meaning was specifically attached to chariot racing in Ancient Rome, it could influence contemporary meanings of curriculum by suggesting reciprocating movement and cyclic process. In this model, learning is not perceived as a linear progression of knowledge acquisition by the student, but as a recursive movement towards deeper understanding and insight.

These curricular insights are inspired by Aboriginal ways of knowing that focus on the relationship to the Earth as the place where the continuous and/or repetitive process of creation occurs. It is on the Earth that cycles, phases, patterns—in other words, the constant motion or flux—can be observed. Aboriginal cultural traditions recognize seasonal patterns and renewal through ceremonies and observances. People learn by committing to the process of participating in these cultural practices. This is how Elders teach about the nature of the world and how humans are implicated in its workings.



An important message here is that the day-to-day workings of an education cannot be separated from larger questions concerning an ever-deepening understanding of the truth of things. In fact, even in kindergarten, educators should be ever mindful of them. Reconceptualizing curriculum in this way casts teachers in an altered role. The consideration of diverse perspectives in curriculum will mean that teachers will be primarily interpreters of culture, rather than merely holders and managers of information. The task of interpretation is complex, multifaceted, and demanding. It requires that teachers be capable of speaking across disciplines, cultures, and boundaries so as to assert the interrelatedness of all beings and foster understanding such that life together can be capable of sustaining human welfare in its most creative senses.

