

Look To the Mountain

An Ecology of Indigenous Education

Introduction

American Education from A Tribal Perspective

Learning Is Always a Creative Act. We are continuously engaged in the art of making meaning and creating our world through the unique processes of human learning. Learning for humans is instinctual, continuous, and the most complex of our natural traits. Learning is also a key to our ability to survive in the environments that we create and that create us.

Throughout history human societies have attempted to guide, facilitate, and even coerce the instinct for learning toward socially defined ends. The complex of activities for forming human learning is what we call “education.” To this end, human societies have evolved a multitude of educational forms to maintain their survival and to use as vehicles for expressing their unique cultural mythos. Cultural mythos also forms the foundation for each culture’s guiding vision, that is, a culture’s story of itself and its perceived relationship to the world. In its guiding vision, a culture isolates a set of ideals that guide and form the learning processes inherent in its educational systems. In turn, these ideals reflect what that culture values as the most important qualities, behaviors, and value structures to instill in its members. Generally, this set of values is predicated on those things it considers central to its survival.

This book is a journey into the realm of cultural ideals from which the learning, teaching, and systems of education of Native America have evolved. As such, these ideals present a mirror reflecting on the critical dilemma of American education. While the legacy of American education is one of spectacular scientific and technological achievement resulting in abundant material prosperity, the cost has been inexorably high. American prosperity has come at the expense of the environment’s degradation and has resulted in unprecedented exploitation of human and material resources worldwide.

Education is in crisis as America finds itself faced with unprecedented challenges in a global community of nations desperately struggling with massive social, economic, and cultural change. Education must find new ways of helping Americans learn and adapt in a multicultural, twenty-first century world. It must come to terms with the conditioning inherent in its educational systems that contribute to the loss of a shared integrative metaphor of *Life*. This loss, which may ultimately lead to a social/cultural/ecological catastrophe, should be a key concern of every American.

The orchestrated “bottom-line, real world” chorus sung by many in business and government has become the common refrain of those who announce *they lead* the world. Yet, what underlies the crisis of American education is the crisis of modern man’s identity and his cosmological disconnection from the natural world. Those who identify most with the bottom line often suffer from an image without substance, technique without soul, and knowledge without context. The

cumulative psychological result is usually alienation, loss of community, and a deep sense of incompleteness.

In contrast, traditional American Indian education historically occurred in a holistic social context that developed the importance of each individual as a contributing member of the social group. Tribal education sustained a wholesome life process. It was an educational process that unfolded through mutual, 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 community life. It was essentially a communally 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. In Tribal education, knowledge gained from first-hand experience in the world is transmitted or explored through ritual, ceremony, art, and appropriate technology. Knowledge gained through these vehicles is then used in everyday living. Education, in this context, becomes education for life's sake. Education is, at its essence, learning about life through participation and relationship in community, including not only people, but plants, animals, and the whole of Nature.

This ideal of education directly contrasts with the dominant orientation of American education that continues to emphasize objective content and experience detached from primary sources and community. This conditioning, to exist as a marginal participant and perpetual observer, is a foundational element of the crisis of American education and the alienation of modern man from his own being and the natural world.

In response to such a monumental crisis, American education must forge educational processes that *are* for Life's Sake and honor the Indigenous roots of America. A true transition of today's American educational orientations, to more sustainable and connected foundations, requires serious consideration of other cultural, life-enhancing, and ecologically viable forms of education.

Traditional American Indian forms of education must be considered conceptual wellsprings for the "new" kinds of educational thought that can address the tremendous challenges of the twenty-first century. Tribal education presents models and universal foundations to transform American education and develop a "new" paradigm for curricula that will make a difference for Life's Sake.

To begin such a process, American education must move from a focus on specialization to holistic knowledge; from a focus on structures to understanding processes, from objective science, to systemic science, and from building to networking.¹

American education must rededicate its efforts to assist Americans in their understanding and appreciation of spirituality as it relates to the Earth and the place in which they live. It must engender a commitment to service rather than competition, promote respect for individual,

cultural and biological diversity, and engage students in learning processes that facilitate the development of their human potential through creative transformation.

American Indians have struggled to adapt to an educational process that is not their own. Yet, American Indian cultural forms of education contain seeds for new models of educating that can enliven American education as a whole, and allow American Indians to evolve contemporary expressions of education tied to their cultural roots. For American Indians, a new Circle of education must begin, rooted in Tribal education and reflecting the needs, values, and socio/political issues Indian people perceive.

As Indian educator Eber Hampton so aptly states, this new circle must encompass the importance Indian people place on the continuance of their ancestral traditions, respect individual uniqueness in spiritual expression, facilitate an understanding within the context of history and culture, develop a strong sense of place and service to community, and forge a commitment to educational and social transformation that recognizes and further empowers the inherent strength of Indian people and their cultures.²

To accomplish this, Indian people must open avenues of communication and establish a reflective dialogue toward evolving a contemporary theory for Indian education that originates from them and their collective experience.

Politicians and institutions have largely defined Indian education through a volume of legislative acts at the state and federal levels. For decades, this has entangled Indian leaders, educators and whole communities in the government's social/political bureaucracy.

Historically, Indian education stems more from the U.S. government's self-serving political relationship with Indian tribes than any cultural process rooted in Tribal philosophies and social values. No recognizable contemporary theory of Indian education exists to guide the implementation or direction of educational curriculum development. Instead what is called "Indian education" today is a "compendium of models, methodologies and techniques gleaned from various sources in mainstream American education and adapted to American Indian circumstances, usually with the underlying aim of cultural assimilation."³

It is time for Indian people to define Indian education in their own voices and in their own terms. It is time for Indian people to enable themselves to explore and express the richness of their collective history in education. Education for Indian people has been, and continues to be, a grand story, a search for meaning, an essential food for the soul.

Building On Earlier Realities

The Mayan practice of building one pyramidal structure by encasing a previous one provides an appropriate metaphor for the developmental building process of Indigenous education.

At the end of each Mayan dynasty, the nobles of the ascending dynasty would commemorate their new order by erecting a symbolic new reality. They would build a new ceremonial pyramid by encasing an older one.

This new structure became the visible symbolic expression through which they espoused the new reality. As is evident from current excavations, these successive facades recycled many of the materials used previously in the structures. A constant building upon earlier realities is a basic characteristic of Indigenous process. The newest reality may seem different from earlier ones, but its essence and foundation remain tied to the earlier realities it encases. The pyramids are restructured and enlarged, but their ancient foundations remain.

Many temple pyramids served as tombs for the noble elite of each dynasty. The practice of burrowing into the heart of a pyramid to place a tomb metaphorically connected the deceased noble to the realities of both past and present.

Building on the realities of past generations and expressing new realities, while remaining true to basic principles, reflects the structuring process natural to the evolution of Indigenous education. Extending the metaphor of the Mayan pyramids to building a contemporary Indigenous education, we engineer the new reality built upon earlier ones, while simultaneously addressing the needs, and acting in the sun, of our times.

Education is *always* in process and is being built from the stones, and upon the foundations, of prior structures. Indigenous education has prior structures, i.e., stones and foundations from which it can again be built. The following chapters describe these foundations of Indigenous education and some of the “stones” from which they are made.

Foundational Characteristics of Indigenous Education

There are a number of elements that characterize Indigenous educational processes. These elements characterize Indigenous education wherever and however it has been expressed. They are like the living stones, the “Inyan” as the Lakota term it, which animate and support the expressions of Indigenous education. A few of these characteristics are included here to provide landmarks for the reader:⁴

- A sacred view of Nature permeates its foundational process of teaching and learning.
- Integration and interconnectedness are universal traits of its contexts and processes.
- Its elements, activities, and knowledge bases of teaching and learning radiate in concentric rings of process and relationship.
- Its processes adhere to the principle of mutual reciprocity between humans and all other things.
- It recognizes and incorporates the principle of cycles within cycles (there are deeper levels of meaning to be found in every learning/teaching process).
- It presents something for everyone to learn, at *every* stage of life.
- It recognizes the levels of maturity and readiness to learn in the developmental processes 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 contains the seeds that are essential to their well-being and positive development.

- Art is a vehicle of utility and expression. It is recognized as an expression of the soul and a way of connecting people to their inner sources of life.
- The ritual complex is both structure and process for teaching key spiritual and cultural principles and values.
- It recognizes that the true sources of knowledge are found within the individual and the entities of Nature.
- It recognizes that true learning occurs through participation and honoring relationships in both the human and natural communities.
- It honors the ebb and flow of learning as it moves through individuals, community, Nature, and the cosmos.
- It recognizes that learning requires letting go, growing, and re-integrating at successively higher levels of understanding.
- Its purpose is to teach a way of life that sustains both the individual and the community.
- It unfolds within an authentic context of community and Nature.
- It uses *story* as a way to root a perspective that unfolds through the special use of language.
- *Story*, expressed through experience, myth, parables, and various forms of metaphor is an essential vehicle of Indigenous learning.
- It recognizes the power of thought and language to create the worlds we live in.
- It creates maps of the world that assist us through our life's journey.
- It resonates and builds learning through the Tribal structures of the home and community.
- Indigenous thinking adheres to the most subtle, yet deeply rooted, universals and principles of human learning.
- It integrates human individuality with communal needs.
- It is founded upon successive stages of learning, i.e., how to see, feel, listen, and act.
- It honors each person's way of being, doing, and understanding.
- It recognizes that we learn by watching and doing, reflecting on what we are doing, then doing again.
- It is always grounded in the natural basics of life.
- Indigenous thinking recognizes that learning is complete only if it starts from the beginning and follows through. One skill builds on another, but the basics must always be honored. Learning is step by step.
- It recognizes that learning and teaching require overcoming doubt.
- It honors the fact that learning requires seeing what is real about a situation, a thing, or an entity.
- It recognizes that learning is about seeing the whole through the parts.
- It honors the fact that true learning builds your self-confidence by coming to understand who you really are and living to your full potential.
- Indigenous thinking honors the reality that there are always two sides to the two sides. There are realities and realities. Learning how they interact is real understanding.
- It recognizes that thinking and learning who one is can be accomplished by learning who one is not!
- We learn through our bodies and spirits as much as through our minds.
- From the Indigenous perspective, the purpose of training in learning and thinking is to bring forth your personal power; training develops your personal power through focused attention, repetition, and context.

- Indigenous people recognize that personal power, learning and thinking are expressed through doing. Therefore, learning the doing is an essential process.
- It recognizes that culture and its reality are invested anew with each generation.
- Indigenous teaching mirrors thinking back to the learner.
- Indigenous teaching emphasizes seeing things comprehensively: seeing things through and through.
- The *orientation* of Indigenous learning flows from expectation, through exchange and context, to application of experience and vision.

These essential points are reflected throughout the contexts, methods, and expressions of Indigenous education presented in this book. They can provide building stones for new structures, new foundations, and new realities in contemporary Indian education. The key lies in our collective ability to create the contexts and to erect a new expression of Indian education in a twenty-first century world. We are the architects of our future!