Aboriginal Learning Styles and Pedagogy

Following decades of efforts by Aboriginal peoples to regain control of their children's education – recall in brief #1 the 1970s were cited as decade of struggle for local control (at least at the Mt. Currie School in British Columbia) - the 1990s were accented by "concentrated efforts to rethink Aboriginal education and to articulate what is 'Aboriginal' about Aboriginal education."[1] Because the "vibrancy of Aboriginal education is to be found in communities," Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache studied four instances wherein "Aboriginal people [sought] to reclaim the theory and practice of educating Aboriginal children and youth."[2] Extending the "classroom" to "include the community" means inviting "parents" and "Elders" to become active planners and decision makers in education."[3] Money is needed too, as the "lack of sustained funding for innovative curriculum development has shackled Aboriginal education for decades."[4]

"For thousands of years Aboriginal peoples had a very effective education," Watt-Cloutier begins, teaching "our children to handle the challenges they would face when living on the land."[5] After "contact" it was "no longer clear what our own time and place was or what we now had to learn in order to control our own lives."[6] In Nunavik, in northern Quebec, the schools were operated by the governments in Ottawa and Quebec City, "outpost" versions of "southern schools"" with "programs [that] had nothing to do with our language, culture, or the adaptive challenges faced by our people."[7] While preparing Aboriginal youth to "move more freely into the ways of the southern culture, they did little to bridge the gap between our own culture and situation," instead, undermining "our confidence and identity."[8] After Aboriginal control of schools,[9] she reports, "Many will agree that this rigour and challenge no longer exists in our schools and that we have gone from the extreme of a paternalistic system to the extreme of a system that challenges our youth so little that it undermines their intelligence."[10] Moreover, "what our school system provided was a watered down, superficially adapted version of the official Quebec curriculum," having "little to do with the real challenges our people are facing."[11]

As a consequence, "many youth are demoralized and dispirited," and "parents … don't know what to do."[12] To address this crisis Watt-Cloutier reminds that in "Aboriginal culture our Elders are our source of wisdom," as "they have a long-term view of things and a deep understanding of the cycles and changes of life."[13] What is "important," she reminds, is "not the school – it is learning, especially learning to be independent."[14] Complicating the crisis is the matter of language, "an essential part of our heritage," but, she adds, "it takes more than language to become wise, and language without wisdom is hollow."[15] What must be present is "the Native spirit," and Elders personify that; "legends," for example, "should be taught by Elders telling the stories and explaining the meaning behind them, not by children colouring pictures in a so-called legend book."[16] Without the translation of Native spirit into "effective programs and operations," education becomes like a "journey" on which one is "making good time" but one is "lost."[17] Watt-Cloutier thinks "we can use modern technology to bring out the best of our culture and apply it to today's challenges,"[18] although I wonder how

the "Native spirit" – how any spirit - can manifest on a screen. Perhaps because "we … still have a natural respect for wisdom,"[19] technology can contribute in welcomed ways to Inuit education.

Issues of Aboriginal education are altered in the city. Williams discusses these as evident in Vancouver, where some 20 percent of students in "special remedial behavior classes" were First Nations.[20] Since 1984, provincial funds were designated to "enhance" and "enrich" educational services for Aboriginal students, based, however, on assessments of "disability, deficiency, and deprivation."[21] Williams points out that "Making a case for the funds means highlighting and amplifying the negative aspects of some First Nations students, thus further entrenching the negative stereotypes."[22]

"We also face ongoing difficulties in making our presence felt in the classroom," Williams writes, noting that the First Nations Studies 12 course developed in 1997 had (by the time of writing) yet to be taught.[23] The "integration of First Nations content into school subjects" is left to the discretion – and "initiative" – of individual teachers; provincial funds available to all school districts to modify curriculum are not automatically dispensed, further complicating the question of curriculum integration.[24]

Hodgson-Smith recounts planning – with three others - for a June 1993 workshop on the subject of Aboriginal pedagogy. One member of the group of four spoke in Cree with her grandmother Annie in northern Saskatchewan who said: "We teach what we know as an act of love," an insight that "became our guiding thought and the title for the workshop, and it has stuck with me ever since."[25] Rather than the science of teaching, pedagogy is, should be, "an act of love," contrasting definitions that "definitions frame two distinct epistemologies: one that seeks knowledge from an external source (science) and one that acknowledges the personal, internal nature of knowing (love)."[26] In such a conception "relationship" is paramount, "between teacher/student and teacher/community."[27] She notes that

> similar words, such as "caring," are sometimes referenced, but the scientific method requires that we maintain our objectivity in searching for knowledge. Love is too subjective, too emotional, too unprofessional; caring, on the other hand, might be an acceptable compromise.[28]

For Hodgson-Smith, pedagogy is not "merely" a matter of styles or methods, or strategies but also the "epistemological-philosophical framework from which one approaches instruction."[29]

To illustrate, Hodgson-Smith references the Medicine Wheel of the Plains Cree, which, "in its broadest interpretation, holds as a central teaching the importance of relations,"[30] including in learning, traditionally achieved by "observing and imitating the actions of Elders."[31] She concludes from research on Aboriginal Learning Styles (LS) that "Using aspects of the oral tradition in the classroom, storytelling, and extensive examples seemed to be the most effective learning strategies."[32] Hodgson-Smith wonders:

> What are the implications of suggesting a uniquely Indian LS? What brings us to ask about Aboriginal LS in the first place? I suggest that this line of inquiry is assimilationist in nature. The question is part of addressing the larger issue of

> how Aboriginal students might find success in non-Aboriginal systems of education.[33]

Perhaps research on Aboriginal LS is another instance of "good intentions gone awry?[34] In the effort to become "culturally sensitive," what results is, she suggests, generalizations and stereotypes, creating an illusion of "universal attributes" encouraging "ghettoization."[35]

Despite the research, drop-out rates for Aboriginal students in Canadian schools have remained high, Aboriginal parents remain on the periphery of educational decision-making, communities remain in "battle over local control of educational policy and the language of instruction."[36] Hodgson-Smith concludes: "Pedagogical issues remain at the heart of the matter because students make the final judgment and students themselves remain voiceless."[37]

An 1876 amendment to the Indian Act required those who enrolled in institutions of higher education to relinquish their Indian status – to become "enfranchised."[38] Even after "enfranchisement was no longer a legal consequence of attending university, Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache explain, the "intensity of the socialization experienced by Aboriginal individuals tended to alienate them from their communities and their origins," and "strong assimilative forces are still a prominent feature of the post-secondary education experience."[39] The challenge becomes, they continue, the negotiation of "conditions within which Aboriginal values, culture, and identity can thrive."[40] In curricular terms, this has meant placing "Aboriginal knowledge and core values at the centre of learning [and] has led to the creation of many Aboriginal programs."[41] They ask:

> Will accommodations to Aboriginal needs within mainstream universities be sufficient to achieve the educational outcomes that Aboriginal people desire? Or will Aboriginally controlled post-secondary institutions assume a dominant position in educating the next generation of Aboriginal learners?[42]

Regardless how that question gets answered, "Aboriginal educators will continue to be challenged to nurture the spirit and values of Aboriginal knowledge while negotiating the complex terrain of post-secondary education."[43]

COMMENTARY:

What does the fact that Aboriginal education worked well during pre-contact imply for post-contact education? Other Aboriginal scholars imply that curriculum integration - think of Battiste's blending[44] or Dion's braiding[45] - is needed. Aboriginal learning and pedagogy may not only be Aboriginal, as my references to Edgerton and Jung indicate. And while important, "voice" is no self-evident or transparent concept,[46] complicated even further, I should think, in the post-contact era.

REFERENCES

Battiste, Marie. 2013. *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit.* Saskatoon, SK: Purich Publishing Ltd.

Brant Castellano, Marlene, Davis, Lynne, and Lahache, Louise. 2000a. Innovations in Education Practice: Renewing the Promise. In *Aboriginal Education: Fulfilling the Promise*, edited by Marlene Brant Castellano, Lynne Davis, and Louise Lahache (97-100). Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Brant Castellano, Marlene, Lynne Davis, and Louise Lahache. 2000b. Post-Secondary Education: Negotiating the Promise. In *Aboriginal Education: Fulfilling the Promise*, edited by Marlene Brant Castellano, Lynne Davis, and Louise Lahache (171-175). Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Dion, Susan. 2009. *Braiding Histories: Learning from Aboriginal Peoples' Experiences and Perspectives*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Edgerton, Susan Huddleston. 1996. *Translating the Curriculum: Multiculturalism into Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge.

Grumet, Madeleine R. (1990). Voice: The Search for a Feminist Rhetoric for Educational Studies. *Cambridge Journal of Education* 20 (3), 277-282.

Hare, Jan and Barman, Jean. 2006. *Good Intentions Gone Awry: Emma Crosby and the Methodist Mission on the Northwest Coast*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Hodgson-Smith, Kathy. 2000. Issues of Pedagogy in Aboriginal Education. In *Aboriginal Education: Fulfilling the Promise*, edited by Marlene Brant Castellano, Lynne Davis, and Louise Lahache (156-169). Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Jung, Jung-Hoon. 2016. *The Concept of Care in Curriculum Studies*. New York: Routledge.

Lear, Jonathan. 2006. *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Pinar, William F. 2017. Rethinking Authority in Educational Leadership. In *Bridging Educational Leadership, Curriculum Theory and Didaktik,* edited by Michael Uljens and Rose Ylimaki (395-408). Gewerbestrasse, Switzerland: Spring International Publishing AG.

Pinar, William F. 2019. *Moving Images of Eternity: George Grant's Critique of Time, Teaching, and Technology*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.

Watt-Cloutier, Sheila. 2000. Honouring Our Past, Creating the Future: Education in Northern and Remote Communities. In *Aboriginal Education: Fulfilling the Promise*, edited by Marlene Brant Castellano, Lynne Davis, and Louise Lahache (114-128). Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Williams, Lorna. 2000. Urban Aboriginal Education: The Vancouver Experience. In *Aboriginal Education: Fulfilling the Promise*, edited by Marlene Brant Castellano, Lynne Davis, and Louise Lahache (129-146). Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.

Endnotes

[1] Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000a, 97.

[2] Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000a, 97.

[3] Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000a, 98.

[4] Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000a, 99.

[5] Watt-Cloutier 2000, 114.

[6] Watt-Cloutier 2000, 114. The subjective crisis Indigenous people experienced when the conditions of their cultures change is a topic theorized by Lear 2006.

[7] Watt-Cloutier 2000, 115.

[8] Watt-Cloutier 2000, 115.

[9] In Nunavik, Watt-Cloutier (2000, 116) explains, the "James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement of 1976 gave our people a certain degree of regional autonomy, including the responsibility for operating our own school system."

[10] Watt-Cloutier 2000, 115.

[11] Watt-Cloutier 2000, 116.

[12] Watt-Cloutier 2000, 117.

[13] Watt-Cloutier 2000, 119.

[14] Watt-Cloutier 2000, 122.

[15] Watt-Cloutier 2000, 124.

[16] Watt-Cloutier 2000, 124.

[17] Watt-Cloutier 2000, 125.

[18] Watt-Cloutier 2000, 127.

[19] Watt-Cloutier 2000, 127.

[20] Williams 2000, 142.

[21] Williams 2000, 144.

[22] Williams 2000, 144.

[23] Williams 2000, 145.

[24] Williams 2000, 145.

[25] Hodgson-Smith 2000, 156-157.

[26] Hodgson-Smith 2000, 156-157.

[27] Hodgson-Smith 2000, 157. Relationship is crucial to administration as well as pedagogy: for example, Pinar 2017.

[28] Hodgson-Smith 2000, 157. For a discussion of "caring" see Jung 2016. Actually, "love" does show up in the scholarly literature: see, for instance, Edgerton 1996, 155; for an exposition of "caring" see Jung-Hoon 2016. For George Grant, "love" means

"consent to otherness" (Pinar 2019, 87).

[29] Hodgson-Smith 2000, 158.

[30] Hodgson-Smith 2000, 158.

[31] Hodgson-Smith 2000, 159.

[32] Hodgson-Smith 2000, 161. If relegated to means rather than ends, aren't their meaning and significance altered? Hodgson-Smith detects this too, as the next quoted passage makes clear.

[33] Hodgson-Smith 2000, 161.

[34] Hare and Barman 2006.

[35] Hodgson-Smith 2000, 164.

[36] Hodgson-Smith 2000, 167.

[37] Hodgson-Smith 2000, 167.

[38] Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000b, 171.

[39] Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000b, 171.

[40] Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000b, 171.

[41] Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000b, 173.

[42] Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000b, 175.

[43] Brant Castellano, Davis and Lahache 2000b, 175.

[44] Battiste 2013, 126.

[45] Dion 2009, 78-79.

[46] See Grumet 1990.