

Indigenous Epistemologies and Pedagogies

Thoughtfully interwoven Indigenous content and approaches must be informed by an understanding of Indigenous epistemologies (how knowledge can be known) and pedagogies, (how knowledge can be taught). While there is much diversity among Indigenous Peoples, and therefore among Indigenous way of knowing, teaching, or learning, many Indigenous education scholars have argued there are also some notable commonalities among Indigenous societies worldwide (Cajete, 1994; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Hampton, 1993; Henderson, 2002; Marker, 2004).

Indigenous epistemologies

Key aspects of **Indigenous epistemologies** are relationality, the interconnection between sacred and secular, and holism.

Relationality

Relationality is the concept that we are all related to each other, to the natural environment, and to the spiritual world, and these relationships bring about interdependencies. Curriculum developers can apply the concept of relationality by creating learning opportunities that emphasize learning in relationships with fellow students, teachers, families, members of the community, and the local lands.

Sacred and secular

According to Hoffman (2013), “Aboriginal ontologies and epistemologies are rooted in worldviews that are inclusive of both the sacred and the secular. [In Indigenous ontologies] the world exists in one reality composed of an inseparable weave of secular and sacred dimensions” (p. 190). In Western educational approaches, spirituality is often seen as taboo in the classroom. In an Indigenous approach, spiritual dimensions cannot be separated from secular dimensions, and spirituality is a necessary component of learning. This does not mean that students need to embrace a specific “religious” approach or practice, but rather that educators should not ignore spiritual development as a component of learning.

Holism

The principle of **holism** is linked to that of relationality, as Indigenous thought focuses on the whole picture

because everything within the picture is related and cannot be separated. Cindy Blackstock (2007), the executive director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, identifies four interconnected dimensions of knowledge that are common in Indigenous epistemologies: “emotional, spiritual, cognitive, and physical,” which are “informed by ancestral knowledge which is to be passed to future generations” (p. 4). In Indigenous epistemologies, these four elements are inseparable, and human development and well-being involves attending to and valuing all of these realms.

Indigenous philosophies are underlain by a worldview of interrelationships among the spiritual, the natural and the self, forming the foundation or beginnings of Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

– Willie Ermine, 1995

Indigenous pedagogies

A basic assumption of Indigenous education scholars is that there are modes of Indigenous pedagogy that stem from pre-contact Indigenous educational approaches and are still ingrained in Indigenous contemporary culture. The exclusion or devaluation of Indigenous pedagogies can create a barrier to academic success for Indigenous students, limit a genuine understanding of Indigenous culture and history for all students, and prevent people from learning how to exercise highly valuable and useful modes of thought which could potentially address many problems in the modern world. Some key commonalities among Indigenous pedagogical approaches are outlined below.

Personal and holistic

As a result of the epistemological principle of holism, Indigenous pedagogies focus on the development of a human being as a whole person. Academic or cognitive knowledge is valued, but self-awareness, emotional growth, social growth, and spiritual development are also valued. It is a useful for curriculum developers to keep this in mind when creating learning experiences that interweave both Indigenous and Western ways of knowing. For example, Indigenous approaches can be brought to life by providing opportunities for students to reflect on the four dimensions of knowledge (emotional, spiritual, cognitive, and physical) when they engage in learning activities. This may also include allowing students opportunities to challenge dominant ideologies that neglect emotional and spiritual knowledge domains.

Experiential

Indigenous pedagogies are experiential because they emphasize learning by doing. In traditional pre-contact societies, young people learned how to participate as adult members of their community by practicing the tasks and skills they would need to perform as adults. In a contemporary setting, an emphasis on experiential learning means a preference for learning through observation, action, reflection, and further action. For curriculum developers, this also means acknowledging that personal experience is a highly valuable type of knowledge

and method of learning, and creating opportunities within courses for students to share and learn from direct experience.

Place-based learning

Indigenous pedagogies connect learning to a specific place, and thus knowledge is situated in relationship to a location, experience, and group of people. For curriculum developers, this means creating opportunities to learn about the local place and to learn in connection to the local place.

Intergenerational

In Indigenous communities, the most respected educators have always been Elders. In pre-contact societies, Elders had clear roles to play in passing on wisdom and knowledge to youth, and that relationship is still honoured and practiced today. Some Elders are the knowledge holders of 60 different Indigenous languages in Canada, and language is a key component of Indigenous culture that should be integrated in teaching practices if we are to move toward Indigenization of curriculum. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students can learn a lot from Elders, and curriculum developers can seek opportunities to engage with Elders as experts in Indigenous pedagogies. Section 3 of this resource provides more information about how to respectfully engage with Elders.

Tribal/Indigenous education is really endogenous education, in that it educates the inner self through enlivenment and illumination from one's own being and the learning of key relationships. Therefore, the foundations for Tribal/Indigenous education naturally rest upon increasing awareness and development of innate human potentials.

– Gregory Cajete, 1994, p. 34

The learning spirit

Tunison (2007) states that “the **learning spirit** is a conceptual ... entity that emerges from the exploration of the complex interrelationships that exist between the learner and his or her learning journey” (p. 10). Tunison notes that “lack of identity, lack of voice, and low self-esteem” can damage the learning spirit. Integration of Indigenous knowledge in post-secondary curriculum will strengthen the learning spirit of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students because holistic learning engages the four knowledge domains that nourish holistic literacy and interweave all aspects of learning: emotional (heart), spiritual (spirit), cognitive (mind) and physical (body).

Activities

Activity 1: Indigenous Worldviews

Time: 10 min

Type: Individual

Watch the following video [Learning from Indigenous World-Views](#)¹ from the University of British Columbia’s course “Reconciliation through Indigenous Education” in which Dr. Jan Hare, who is an Anishinaabe from M’Chigeeng First Nation, talks about Indigenous worldviews and how they apply to teaching and learning.

Activity 2: Principles of Indigenous Learning

Time: 45 min

Type: Individual

As there is a great diversity of Indigenous cultures, there is also a great diversity of approaches to learning. Review the following principles of learning from different cultures:

- [First Nation, Métis and Inuit Principles of Learning \[PDF\]](#) (p. 12–13)²
- [First Peoples Principles of Learning \[PDF\]](#)³
- [Lil’Wat Principles of Learning](#)⁴

Consider the following questions:

- What commonalities do you see between these approaches?
- How would each one affect your curriculum development?
- How could you learn about the epistemological and pedagogical approaches of the Indigenous people local to your area?

Activity 3: The Breath of Life versus the Embodiment of Life

Time: 45 min

Type: Individual

Read Dr. Cindy Blackstock’s article “[The Breath of Life versus the Embodiment of Life: Indigenous Knowledge and Western Research](#)”⁵ in which she contrasts Western and Indigenous thought systems.

She is focused on the application of these thought systems to child welfare, but her article has many important lessons for curriculum developers.

Activity 4: Understanding How Indigenous and Western Knowledge Systems Differ

Time: 15 min

Type: Individual

Reflecting on your experience with Western educational systems, consider the following questions:

- What values or beliefs do you think underlie Western approaches?
- What values or beliefs do you observe in Indigenous educational approaches?
- What are the areas where conflicting views arise?

- What are the areas where commonalities can occur?
- What are the benefits, for *all students*, of integrating Indigenous approaches into curriculum?

Make note of any questions that you may still have about this topic. Reflect on your thinking and how you would answer these questions.

Notes

1. Learning from Indigenous World-Views video: <https://youtu.be/9I2LAWCHNsc>
2. First Nations, Metis and Inuit Principles of Learning: http://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/education2/state_of_aboriginal_learning_in_canada-final_report_ccl_2009.pdf
3. First Peoples Principles of Learning: <http://www.fnesc.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/PUB-LFP-POSTER-Principles-of-Learning-First-Peoples-poster-11x17.pdf>
4. Lil'Wat Principles of Learning: <https://sites.google.com/site/lulwatprinciples/home>
5. The Breath of Life Versus the Embodiment of Life: Indigenous Knowledge and Western Research: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237555666_The_breath_of_life_versus_the_embodiment_of_life_indigenous_knowledge_and_western_research