

Taking Indigenous Thought Seriously: A Rant on Globalization with Some Cautionary Notes

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Preamble

As I have been taught by many Aboriginal teachers, I begin this paper with a respectful acknowledgement of the Musqueam people. They are the first peoples of the land with whom¹ this conference was held.

Let me begin with a brief history of my connections to curriculum as a field of study as background to the substance of this paper. In 1983, when I applied to be a masters student in Kamloops, British Columbia—because I had had two babies in a row and wanted to do some deeper study beyond the French conversation course I enrolled in at what was then Cariboo College—there was one program available off campus. The University of British Columbia (UBC), for whom I had been working for five years on secondment from the Kamloops School District where I had been a teacher of high school Biology and English, was about to offer the first course of a masters degree in Curriculum and Instruction in Kamloops. It was a rich and life-changing experience. In the first course taught by Jim Gaskell, we thought deeply about the political implications

of curriculum development and I finally read Paulo Friere. With Don Fisher and Frank Echols I studied social science research methods from experimental, lab-based investigations to surveys and statistical analysis. And in the last days of the course, I fell in love with ethnography, field studies as they were called. Leroi Daniels brought us through the history of curriculum: Bobbitt and Tyler, Bloom and Apple among others. In a hot Vancouver summer in the Adult Education building, I took a course with Paulo Freire and the following summer, wondering who could possibly be as engaging as Freire, found myself entranced with Ted Aoki. Although somewhat disturbingly called Curriculum Implementation, his course became a firm and gentle immersion in the arts and science of hermeneutics. And despite the gentleness, the understated wisdom that life as a Japanese Canadian during World War II embeds has always made Aoki's work so much more than an apolitical interpretive act. I used the thesis point of my degree to write my first book, which had been my intent all along. At the same time, I found there was no turning back from academe and all its tantalizing possibilities.

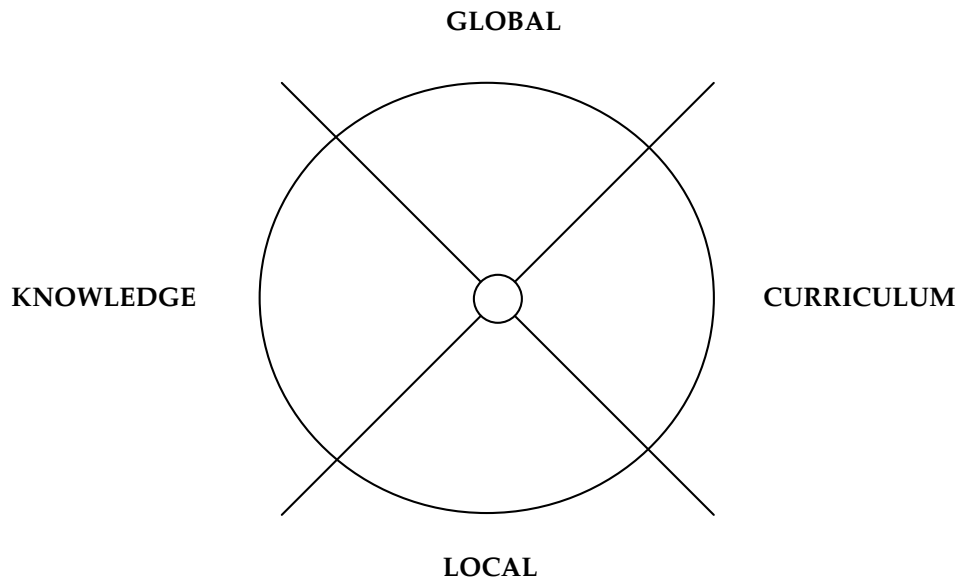
Although my doctoral work moved me into the social foundations of educational policy, the learning from that first graduate degree has never left my consciousness. In my second graduate degree, I learned from Leroi Daniels to think of curriculum-related documents as policy. My first tenure-stream job may have been in Curriculum Studies (when John Willinsky decided to turn down Simon Fraser University in favour of UBC) but that's another story. As I was pursuing the doctoral course of study in policy that the university laid out, I was following another, equally challenging, scholarly path as my research took me deeper into Aboriginal education in a range of contexts. Building on my then ten years of working for UBC as a coordinator of the Native Indian Teacher Education Program (NITEP), I slowly and inevitably came to appreciate the Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies informing the work and

daily life of the students, and later study participants, with whom I was working. Although worries about cultural appropriation led me to a lack of direct acknowledgement of what I was learning and who my teachers were, I found some solace in one of the teachings (something academics might call a piece of curriculum theory) I heard early in my involvement in Indigenous education. Mary Thomas, respected Secwepemc elder, now passed on, explained to me that a learner has a responsibility to tell others about what she has learned. I relate her words to Freire's notion of praxis: until one does something with acquired knowledge, it remains dormant. Only with thoughtful action does it take on meaning. It also resonates with the words of an Anishinaape elder years later who listened to her children and grandchildren pine for Indigenous knowledge: she responded, in her first language, that she would be happy to teach them all they wanted to know as long as she could be assured that they would actually use that knowledge.

So in this paper, I want to pass along some things I have been learning; some teachings/theory I have heard and read from Indigenous intellectuals and other scholars of Indigenous thought which, if taken to heart, have the potential to speak to curriculum studies. Be prepared to engage with the knowledge. It can only take on meaning if you are willing to take the time to listen to what is said, to take it into your context and to consider its meaning for you. Even then, Dale Turner, Associate Professor, Dartmouth College and a member of the Temagami First Nation, reminds us, "Whether these [Indigenous] ways can be explained to the dominant culture, and understood by it, or at the very least respected as legitimate, remains to be seen." (2006, p. 119). I pass them along with respect for those who have taught me through extant literature, at scholarly conferences, with their stories and in their quotidian practices. The cautionary notes attached to all I say include: Note 1) simply put, I speak as a Euro-American white woman who can never experience what it is to be Aboriginal in this country no matter

how empathetic I aspire to be; Note 2) what I have to say comes from a lifetime of learning from and with Aboriginal people across many cultures and from thirty years of scholarly work with the same diversity of people. There is nothing simple about the teachings and “a little learning may indeed be a dangerous thing” – although I fully acknowledge I may be a rather slow learner; Note 3) it is never too late to start somewhere in our quest for better questions and better stories to give meaning to our scholarship. I often think of the day in my research methods class when Haudenosaunee scholar John Hodson said to all the students (and I paraphrase, apologies to John for any errors in the articulation), “You want to begin to learn about the teachings – great. Let’s talk together and get started.” If permission is needed, there is one voice granting it.

Heuristic



GLOBAL INDIGENOUS THOUGHT:
POSSIBILITIES FOR CANADIAN CURRICULUM STUDIES

By Indigenous thought, I mean...

So what do I mean by Indigenous thought? Let's start with what it is not: not the naive and self-serving idea that anyone who digs their hands in the dirt has Indigenous knowledge. I am referring to the contemporary knowledge that arises from innumerable generations of people living in relation to a specific land and seeing it as the source of all their relations. And by land, I reach beyond any simple material notion to the spiritual, intellectual and emotional dimensions thereof. Land includes rivers and streams, air and wind as animate beings in our existence. Indigenous thought is founded in a deep understanding that we all live in relation to land. Whether we are city dwellers in profound denial or Aboriginal people drawing on old ways to regenerate new knowledge, we live in relation to land—we bundle up when the snow comes, we fuss when spring is late, we breathe deeply and restore our souls when the sun warms us into a new season. Non-Aboriginal scholar, Peter Kulchyski (2005) in his book *Like the Sound of a Drum* rejects any suggestion that Aboriginal people are closer to the land: "One cannot be closer to or further away from that which is within us. ('do you need to pee?' is how the Italian novelist Italo Calvino raises the question.)" (p. 18).

For a working statement on Indigenous thought, I draw on the writing of Maori scholar Makere Stewart-Harawira (2005) now working in Cree territory at the University of Alberta. While she resists any essentialized, fixed notion, she focuses on enunciating a contemporary global Indigenous ontology. Attributes which she ascribes to a global Indigenous knowledge arise from "...broadly shared beliefs about the meaning of meaning and the nature of interrelationships" (p. 35). These include beliefs that interrelationships between and among all things are fundamental to sense-making; that knowledge is sacred; that it cannot be found in a "codified canon" but in life itself; and that it is holistic in that

it always already acknowledges four dimensions—the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. In sum, a refusal to divide and compartmentalize in any reductionist way is accompanied by adherence to recognizing all things existing in relation to one another. Stewart-Harawira claims, in her recent response to globalization, that: “far from irrelevant in the modern world, traditional indigenous social, political and cosmological ontologies are profoundly important to the development of transformative alternative frameworks for global order and new ways of being” (p. xiv). At the same time, she (and I) resist naive notions of unchanging and unchanged Indigenous knowledges. Rather coincident with Homi Bhabha’s notion of third space, Indigenous thought is constantly recreated:

It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixicity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37)

We concur with Métis scholar Carl Urion (1999, cited in Stewart-Harawira, 2005, p. 35) who articulates in response to those who see Indigenous knowledge as frozen in some ideal of long ago traditions, “Traditional knowledge is living knowledge.”

Indigenous thought has the potential to reframe and decentre, in intellectually productive and practical ways, conventional scholarship about most things including Canadian curriculum studies. The current openness expressed in the call for papers for the pre-conference of the Canadian Association of Curriculum Studies (CACS) invited just such engagement. The work of a number of Indigenous scholars and related literature articulate, albeit sometimes within theoretical contexts other than curriculum, the possibilities that lie with engagement with such epistemologies and ontologies. We in education are accustomed to

raiding other disciplines to feed our heads. While we may tend to stick close to the Eurocentric-based tried and true, whether it be Gadamer and hermeneutics or Freud and psychoanalytic theory, our reliance on theory generated elsewhere, as in outside the field of educational study, is well established practice. Interdisciplinarity is our middle name.

When we really begin to take Indigenous thought seriously in our theory and in our practices, we move to inhabit border worlds. Far from being temporary border crossers, we come to see our space shaped irrevocably by the colonial presence that created this new nation, Canada, as an overlay of multiple existing nations. Coming to know this space in this way has the potential to shift our thinking about our work in curriculum studies as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars. Anishnaabe scholar Dale Turner (2006), also cited above, lays out three philosophical projects (in the sense of philosophy being “thinking about thinking”) relevant to a “vigorous indigenous intellectual culture” (p. 9). These projects resonate with the goal of this paper – to stimulate thinking beyond border crossings as we interrogate curriculum studies. In other words, each gestures to a border world. He outlines the following: 1) *“Understanding Indigenous philosophy,”* represented by community-based knowledge keepers who understand Indigenous philosophy in their embracing of Indigenous thought and world views ideally articulated in an Indigenous language orally; 2) *Indigenous scholars who are educated in Western European traditions and engage them on their own terms,* who can articulate their people’s differences usually in scholarly writing; and 3) *Indigenous intellectuals who engage western European thought “as both a philosophical and a political activity.”* These he calls the word warriors. And again Freire’s (Lecture notes, 1983) words that every educational act is a political act – simply put it is either for the status quo or addresses change – come to mind. Indigenous scholars who engage in any of these projects, I would argue inhabit a border world created by colonial conditions. As I have argued elsewhere and long ago in a special issue of

Canadian Literature, I believe that non-Aboriginal people who choose to listen and learn from Indigenous intellectuals in either or both of academe and the communities outside the walls, may also find themselves transported in a life-changing process to the recognition (or is it a cognition?) of their existence in a border world.

Metaphor/Teaching/Theory/Thought

Let's take a moment with the word "theory" which seems to be assigned to particular bodies of knowledge—most often written ones—and denied to others. In the current climate within the university, Indigenous knowledges remain relegated to the margins: first, a twinge of conscience on the part of those who know the history of education in Canada opens a small space. Hard on the heels of this magnanimity comes a tolerant nod to those who engage with the thinking that arises in such places. Do I sound defensive? Do you detect an unattractive note of sarcasm? Many days, I feel that way. But increasingly, as I become more committed to recognizing and articulating clearly my own use of Indigenous thought—both written and oral—in my work and advocating that others take its power seriously in scholarly work, its explanatory power takes on a life of its own. No longer can serious scholars simply see Indigenous thought as an exotic addition to the real work that Western European and American (read Canadian) theorizing does. Let's turn to some examples of the effects of that shift.

At a recent conference, I heard a presenter speaking of the metaphors that inform Indigenous analysis – for example, one might cite the circle used in the heuristic above (often in the form of the Medicine Wheel), or ceremony (which assumes meaning beyond any specific act as in Leslie Marmon Silko's (1977) preface note to her novel, "The only cure/ I know/ is a good ceremony,"), or stories and story-telling, or the place of dreaming. As I listened, I found myself squirming a bit feeling

that such a designation did not do justice to the power of analysis embedded in the words. In the next presentation, Sto:lo scholar and Associate Dean of Indigenous Education at UBC, Jo-ann Archibald talked of “teachings.” In a flash, I recognized that what she was calling teachings and the other presenter had called metaphors were entirely commensurable with what other scholars might call “theory.” In more conventional (European-based) scholarship, we might, for example, take the notion of transference using it as a metaphor of transferring meaning in the form of emotion from one object/event/person to another. When we use one of Freud’s teachings, we say we are working with Freudian theory. When we imagine base and super structure, use and exchange value in a Marxist analysis, we use those metaphors as theory. When we consider the act of interpretation as the metaphorical merging of horizons, we engage with hermeneutics.

Time for another cautionary note, perhaps this time, a warning: If we, scholars all, have learned anything from the postmodern, poststructural, and post colonial discourses circulating throughout academe and beyond, it is to assume nothing. Dismissive critique based in cries of essentialism has allowed scholars immersed in Western/Euro-Canadian (and American) discourses to continue to relegate Indigenous thought to some marginal space while colonial relations proceed apace and unexamined. Our work as Canadian educators, as citizens of a nation built on persisting colonial relations, exists always already in relation to land and Aboriginal peoples. As Kulchyski reminds us, “In the minutiae of quotidian life, in the presuppositions of service providers, in the structures of State actions and inactions, in the continuing struggles over land use, in a whole trajectory of policies and plans, the work of the conquest is being completed here and now” (2005, p. 3). We can ignore the historical and contemporary circumstances of our country or engage it somewhere in our scholarly thoughts. Taking seriously Gough’s (2000) admonition on “...avoiding the imperial

archive” which the call for papers for the CACS preconference also addressed, what better place to take up such a challenge than with theory arising from Indigenous contexts and developed by Indigenous scholars from knowledge built with and of this land. What does such knowledge say to globalizing curriculum?

Noting that “outside of indigenous scholarship itself, within academic circles little serious attention has been paid to examining the possibilities inherent in indigenous ontologies” (p. 34), Stewart Harawira (2005) acknowledges that any move to universalise Indigenous belief systems or world view, must also acknowledge that, “...ontologies are relative and that the particularities and historicity of indigenous peoples and nations... give rise to unique characteristics and differences...” (p. 35). Such an orientation is reminiscent of Geertz’s (1983) reference to an “intellectual movement... a conceptual rhythm... a continuous dialectical tacking between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structure” (p. 69). As we consider globalization in curriculum studies, the tensions of this challenge can be a guide.

Let’s take a moment with globalization. It cries for a redefinition. As John Ralston Saul says, “In the last twenty years...we have witnessed the abject failure of globalization and the free market to meet its promises—of an international balance of trade, of peace through prosperity, of justice through internationally agreed human rights principles, and of the equal distribution of wealth” (cited in Stewart Harawira, 2005, p. 7). Like other theory and other political moves, globalization beyond Indigenous circles has almost inevitably ignored persisting colonial relations, imperialism, Indigenous peoples and nations and, of course, Indigenous thought in the countries originally said to be experiencing and benefiting from globalization. At the same time, resistance to these dehumanizing and greedy trends has created some powerful opposing movements.

Unfortunately for many academics, globalizing trends have allowed them to continue to ignore these developments rather than providing them better opportunities to engage with these rapidly developing expression and regeneration of Indigenous thoughts and beliefs. Globalization too often employs moves more culturally and economically imperialist than reciprocal and dialectical. How many of us travel the globe, preconceived ideas in hand in the form of our scholarly work, feeling superior to those who do so as tourists? What difference would it make to our work if we were to take seriously the historical and contemporary relations between the governments who invite us or permit us in and the Indigenous peoples of the place? Do we even know who they are? Do we know whose traditional lands our universities and our houses stand on? Does it matter? How often do either our institutions or we personally benefit economically from this work and from our studied amnesia or refusal to engage with the historical relations underpinning all of what we do?

So how can these little insertions into a day's proceedings have any effect? I leave that question with you: Indigenous thought arises out of traditions and theory distinct from most Western European thought on which curriculum studies are based. It also has resonances with certain aspects of this thought. We can choose to ignore our histories and our contemporary colonial relations and imperial projects in global curriculum moves or we can engage with the problematics they raise as a way to deepen our work. We can respectfully support those who do engage such theory when the occasion arises—in reviews for publication, in applications for tenure and promotion—or we can continue to marginalize and dismiss those who insist that Indigenous thought has much to contribute an impoverished theorizing that we are facing in education. (Is there anything new since Dewey?) We can begin to recognize and articulate our work in relation to the border world we

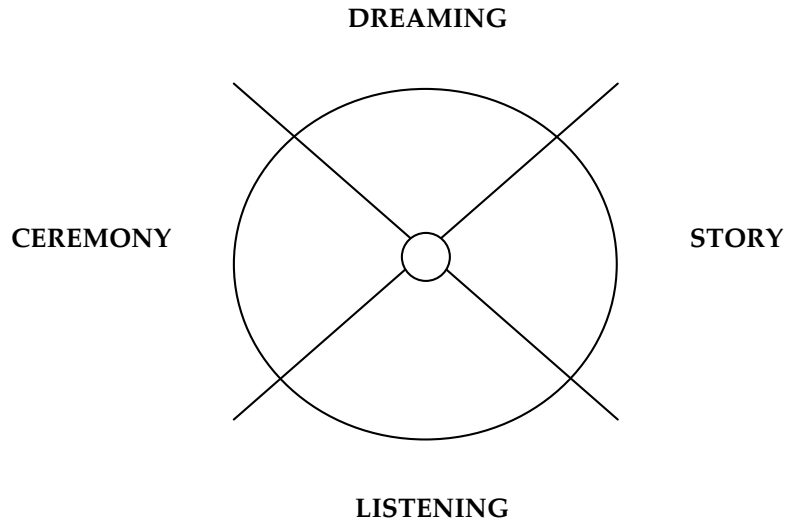
all occupy or we can continue to pretend that we and our ancestors arrived in an empty land or that we and our ancestors never signed treaties. I leave you with the words of Kulchyski, a non-Aboriginal border worker:

The liberal consciences of North America today acknowledge wrongdoings of the past, sometimes pausing to note that their own individual ancestors had not yet immigrated to this land (which is to say, they get a free pass on history), sometimes reflecting that past generations did not have the ethical luxury available in our own time, before moving on to other issues. One need not concern oneself with past generations and one's own ancestors....[T]he work of the conquest is being completed here and now. By our generation. It is our descendants, a hundred years from now, who will protest that they were not there when land claims were being negotiated, when Aboriginal rights were distorted beyond recognition, when the final acts of the great historical drama of conquest were performed. You who remain silent while this injustice continues, you are responsible. Here. And now.

But then again, so am I (2005, p. 3).

I wish I had a gentler conclusion. I wish it were funnier. I wish I could take you to a place of ceremony and dreaming and being in good relation to one another and the world. But I leave that to you. Consider Indigenous thought. Read, listen and watch: inform your selves and when you feel ready, offer tobacco and seek out those who can teach you a new/old way of being in and with the world.

Pay attention to the dreams. Megwetch.



TEACHINGS OF THE CIRCLE = RELATIONS AND FLUIDITY

Note

¹ Personifying the land is a deliberate allusion to a recognition of land as much more than material – spirit dwells here and human beings along with all things animate and inanimate live always already in relation to her.

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