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# TRANSFORMATION *and* RE-CREATION: CREATING SPACES *for* INDIGENOUS THEORISING *in* CANADIAN ABORIGINAL STUDIES PROGRAMS

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## ■ Abstract

This paper explores the professional experience of an Anishnabe educator working in various organisations teaching Indigenous knowledge issues in both Aboriginal and primarily non-Aboriginal settings. The reflections span a number of years of teaching Aboriginal worldview and knowledge issues courses and include formal evaluations from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students who have participated in the courses over that time. This paper draws upon two examples of educational institutions where Indigenous knowledge is being explored: the University of Toronto's Aboriginal Studies Program and the Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources' (CIER) National First Nations Youth Environmental Education and Training Program. Both settings represent special places for thinking about decolonising Indigenous education. Integral to Aboriginal philosophy and decolonising education is the role elders play in informing and implementing meaningful education for Aboriginal learners. Both programs involve elders in central roles where they are recognised as authorities, facilitators and teachers. Discussion is offered on the subject of Aboriginal philosophies pertaining to education and some models for acting upon them, particularly as they relate to environmental education. Further analysis summarises the challenges faced by both programs and initiatives taken to advance Aboriginal educational goals. Finally, recommendations are made as to the types of changes which may be undertaken to realise creative spaces for resistance and creativity.

## ■ Introduction

Global interest in Indigenous knowledge as a potential source of solutions to worldwide environmental problems has been increasingly documented as a result of such international undertakings as the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987) and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNSD, 2004). Currently, however, Indigenous knowledge most often lacks a significant voice in those mainstream organisations well-positioned to address these problems. Such agencies, including governments, resource management agencies, industrial corporations and NGOs, are making efforts to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into their planning and operations (e.g., FSC, 2003; OMNR, 2004). As welcome and necessary as these efforts are, they have thus far struggled to meet with great success on a practical level, due primarily to issues around trying to integrate Aboriginal values into Western-derived operational frameworks (McGregor, 2000, 2004). Rather than continue trying to force Aboriginal concepts to "fit" within non-Indigenous agendas (very much the square peg, round hole scenario), various authors are now calling for more of a "co-existence" model of Indigenous/non-Indigenous collaboration, where both systems are free to develop according to their own goals and aspirations, but where there is ongoing communication between the two for the purpose of providing mutual assistance towards the resolution of common problems (McGregor, 2000, 2004).

If Indigenous or Aboriginal theory is to rise to the challenge of contributing to the resolution of various global issues, then the development of such theory ("Indigenous theorising", as Smith, 2005a, 2005b, refers to it) needs to be pursued in supportive, stimulating and creative environments around the world, much as is the case with non-Indigenous theory in the multitude of existing universities and other educational institutions. This need for improved "postcolonial" Indigenous education has been the subject of previous study (e.g., Battiste, 2002; Battiste et al., 2002). Given the all-pervasive nature of colonial influences, it is even

more important that such creative spaces be provided with the freedom they need to explore what exactly Indigenous theory is, and how it can be developed, enhanced and applied in a contemporary context.

This paper reflects on two decade-old Canadian examples where attempts to develop Indigenous knowledge are being made – the Aboriginal Studies (ABS) Program at the University of Toronto (where I am currently an Assistant Professor), and the National First Nations Youth Environmental Education and Training Program of the Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources (CIER) (where I have served as a curriculum developer and instructor, and which is associated with the University of Manitoba). While these are divergent programs in many ways, they both provide a formal educational setting in which Indigenous knowledge is explored. The University of Toronto offers a primarily non-Aboriginal setting, but houses a rapidly developing Aboriginal studies program which has been actively promoting Indigenous knowledge, language and education since its inception in 1994. CIER, established in Winnipeg, Manitoba, also in 1994, is an organisation focused on educating specifically Aboriginal youth, while creating a space for the exploration of both Indigenous and Western knowledge in an environmental context.

Both of these institutional settings represent special places for the consideration of Indigenous education. Both are attempting, in their respective ways, to undertake a process of “decolonising” Indigenous education. While in no way discarding Western knowledge, a decolonising approach seeks to at least understand what an Indigenous approach versus a Western scientific one is. This is by no means an easy task, given the centuries-old history of colonisation on this continent. As Māori scholar, Graham Smith (2005a, p. 9), notes, “Just being brown does not make theorising Indigenous”. Nevertheless, the goal of each program is to produce graduates with an understanding of the relationships and differences between each knowledge system. Despite having some similar overall goals, the approaches taken to achieve them differ substantially between the institutions. What follows, then, is a brief description of each, with a subsequent discussion of their respective strengths, weaknesses, and challenges faced, based on the author’s time spent working in each environment. Finally, suggestions are offered which should facilitate the realisation of ever more highly creative, Aboriginal-supportive educational environments.

### ■ Transformation, re-creation

Throughout this paper, the terms “transformation” and “re-creation” will be repeated. Pivotal concepts in Aboriginal philosophy, transformation and re-creation are central to the notion of decolonising Aboriginal education. In essence, being Aboriginal

or Indigenous in a modern context does not imply being “traditional” as is often expected by non-Native people. Rather, what it means to be Aboriginal has transformed or changed over time, as has always been the case. Since the arrival of the Europeans, however, Aboriginal people have gradually lost much of their control over this process of continual re-creation and self-determination. Through processes of colonisation, opportunities for continuing traditional ways of living have been greatly diminished. Aboriginal peoples’ ability to live as Indigenous people has been seriously undermined over the last three centuries. In decolonising education, the goal is to explore ways in which Aboriginal people can regain control over their own transformation, re-creation and self-determination in a contemporary educational setting.

Since 1972, when the Assembly of First Nations (then the “National Indian Brotherhood”) first released the Aboriginal position paper, “Indian Control of Indian Education” (NIB, 1972), Aboriginal education in Canada has undergone remarkable transformation. However, much still needs to be accomplished and significant challenges remain. The two Canadian Aboriginal studies programs discussed in this paper, while both committed to creating positive spaces facilitating such transformation and re-creation, present divergent approaches to doing so. The ABS program at the University of Toronto aims to support Aboriginal students and programs within a conventional Western academic institution. CIER, on the other hand, while including Western science as an equally important part of the curriculum, offers students the chance to learn within an Aboriginal-organised setting. At CIER, students develop the ability to work within the paradigms of both Indigenous knowledge and Western science. The approaches of these two institutions are discussed further in the pages that follow.



### The University of Toronto Aboriginal Studies (ABS) Program: First Nations House

Walking into the University of Toronto First Nations House, which houses the Office of Aboriginal Student Services and Programs and which serves as a “home away from home” for University of Toronto’s Aboriginal students, one becomes immediately conscious of having entered a unique space. While the building itself is fairly nondescript from the outside, students have made a significant effort on the inside to make all who come here aware that this is an Aboriginal environment first and foremost. The winding staircase leading up to the third floor (which is taken up entirely by First Nations House) provides the backdrop for a continuous three-story mural depicting whales, fish and other water-related scenes. On the third floor itself the visitor is first greeted by large wall hangings proclaiming the “dodems” or clans of the Anishnabe people. At various locations around First Nations

House are displays containing information relevant to Aboriginal students, as well as numerous pieces of artwork, much of which has been created by students themselves. To enter the main lounge one must pass under the teachings of the seven grandfathers, painted above the door, which serve as a constant reminder of the conduct required of all who enter this area. This seems additionally appropriate as this is where the bulk of ABS program courses are taught.

The various displays and artwork provide much more than decoration for visitors. They remind and assure students that this is a place on campus where they can feel secure in the knowledge that others here have come from similar backgrounds as themselves, and that there are people here who share their values and worldviews. This supportive atmosphere is strengthened by the fact that although many ABS courses are taught here, the primary focus of First Nations House is the delivery of student services and programs to University of Toronto Aboriginal students. Aboriginal students come here to access a variety of services, including student counselling, financial aid and academic advising.

#### *Formation of the ABS program*

There is a close and mutually beneficial relationship between First Nations House and the ABS program (Rice, 2003). It was in the late 1980s when the University of Toronto's Governing Council charged the Academic Board with looking at the relationship between the University and Aboriginal students in terms of both services and academics. One of the first major outcomes of this work was the opening of First Nations House, established to begin providing support specifically to Aboriginal students at University of Toronto in 1992. Further consolidating this directive, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science in 1992 established a committee to investigate how to integrate a focus on Aboriginal Studies into the Arts and Sciences curricula. The committee consisted of faculty from the Arts and Sciences and from other divisions, as well as the Director of the Office of Student Services and Programs at First Nations House. The committee consulted widely both within the University of Toronto and with Aboriginal communities from around Ontario. At the end of that first year, the committee proposed to the Dean that an Aboriginal studies minor program be established within the Faculty of Arts and Science, with a major program to be developed in subsequent years. The Aboriginal Studies Program thus opened its doors to students in September of 1994.

Since that time, the program has grown from offering only two courses per year to offering six or seven in a range of areas. The impact of the program has been impressive: although it has not been quantitatively measured, recruiters at First Nations House find that the ABS program attracts new students to the University.

Recognising this, the University has actively utilised the program to attract students with the development of a brochure which highlights Aboriginal students and its Aboriginal faculty. While the ABS program itself does not yet offer a graduate component, it has provided the necessary interdisciplinary experience to allow numerous students to go on to graduate school at University of Toronto and other educational institutions. In the last five years, enrolment in ABS has tripled, and continued growth is expected.

#### The Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources (CIER)

The Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources (CIER, pronounced "seer") is a First Nations-directed environmental non-profit organisation located in Winnipeg, Manitoba. It was formed in 1994 by First Nations leaders who felt it was critical for the long-term resolution of Aboriginal environmental issues to establish an accessible Aboriginal educational organisation capable of providing Aboriginal students with both the theoretical understanding and practical skills needed to address these issues. Originally created with the specific goal of providing environmental training opportunities (Sellers et al., 2001, p. 37), CIER's mission is now to "build the environmental capacity of First Nations, and other Indigenous communities, and to work with or for these communities to come to the successful resolution of environmental problems" (CIER, 2005). In meeting this commitment, CIER has undertaken such activities as policy development, capacity-building, program and service delivery, and education and training for Aboriginal students. It has offered a number of courses and programs, including its "National First Nations Youth Environmental Education and Training Program" which involves both classroom and fieldwork, and which provides graduates with a certificate in "Environmental Assessment and Protection". Aimed at developing First Nations human resources (capacity-building) in Environmental Studies, this program provides First Nations students "with knowledge and skills in the areas of environmental assessment, monitoring, auditing and analysis" (CIER, 1997). Graduates are eligible for transfer to Environmental Science or Native Studies programs at the University of Manitoba.

What makes CIER unique is its promise to "incorporate Indigenous environmental knowledge in all areas of study" (CIER, 1997). CIER literature refers to the "integration" and "combining" of Indigenous knowledge and Western knowledge (CIER, 1997, 1998, p. 4), although this approach has changed to reflect a new ideology involving the "collaboration" of Indigenous and Western knowledge (Wastasecoot & Sellers, 2001, p. 16). Aboriginal philosophy guides curriculum delivery at CIER, and the teaching methodology "ensures the transmission of both

the substantive and cultural aspects of the course content from both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives" (CIER, 1998, p. 4). Students are taught using Indigenous as well as Western knowledge and learn how to operate within each system. CIER's approach to course delivery is "rooted in the experience, history, and opportunities of the people ... The presentation and collaboration of indigenous and Western knowledge is facilitated through team teaching, which unites disciplines, culture and generations" (Wastasecoot & Sellers, 2001, p. 15). Each course is delivered by a team of three instructors: two who offer a primarily Indigenous perspective and one whose expertise is based primarily on a Western discipline. One of the Indigenous instructors is an elder, a vital aspect of the program.

CIER programs are thus intended to provide much more than access into mainstream university programs; they hope to present students with Aboriginal perspectives on all subject matter. They are intended to provide students with a viable alternative (or reinforce an existing alternative, if the student is already schooled in Aboriginal worldviews) to the perspectives which permeate dominant Western society. In this way, it is hoped that the graduates who go on to complete their university degree will be able to return to their communities with not only the skills of Western ecological science, but also those of Indigenous knowledge. Such graduates will be able to translate, alter, ignore, or use "as is" Western knowledge, as per the needs of the community. Moreover, such graduates should recognise and respect Aboriginal knowledge as an equally viable system of knowing, and be able to support the use of such knowledge alongside Western knowledge. Aboriginal professionals with skills such as these will be invaluable to any community dealing with environmental and other issues, but particularly to First Nations. CIER's goal of providing Aboriginal individuals with these tools is truly admirable.

#### ■ Comparing the ABS and CIER programs

Both the ABS and CIER programs face various challenges in meeting their respective visions for Aboriginal education. Both demonstrate a commitment to creating a supportive environment for the expression of Indigenous perspectives, and where Indigenous knowledge can be validated. In addition to these similarities, however, are a number of differences in situation and approach. Lessons learned from each of these approaches may be useful for the development of existing Aboriginal studies programs and the creation of new ones. Consideration of such experience is particularly relevant as the number of Aboriginal studies programs across Canada continues to increase (Rice, 2003), as is likely the case elsewhere in the world. Understanding the similarities and differences between these two programs is vital to

such consideration. The two programs are therefore compared below, and an overview of this comparison is presented in Table 1.

Put briefly, University of Toronto's ABS program, notwithstanding the valuable contribution of First Nations House, is housed in a primarily non-Aboriginal university setting, with the goal of serving both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. While a significant effort is made to investigate the history and effects of colonisation on Aboriginal people, knowledge and culture, this is done so within the confines of having to largely conform to the norms of a mainstream Western university. Aboriginal consultation was carried out during the original design of the program, but this has for the most part not continued through the program's growth and development over the years. Elders are, however, available to support Aboriginal students and faculty through First Nations House, to participate as guest lecturers, and to contribute from time-to-time to program administration. CIER, on the other hand, although it is associated with the University of Manitoba, is much more of an independent institution, conceptualised, designed and operated primarily by and for Aboriginal people. Where University of Toronto's courses generally follow Western approaches to instruction and evaluation (e.g., lectures, examinations, papers), CIER balances these same approaches with more Indigenous ways of sharing and acquiring knowledge (e.g., storytelling, hands-on activities, oral discussion). Direct Aboriginal community input into program development is assured through the integral role played by elders as part of program decision-making and team teaching. There is a downside to CIER's independence, however, and that is that it tends to have more difficulty securing stable funding than the University of Toronto program.

#### ■ Meeting the challenge, realising the vision

Although both the CIER and University of Toronto's ABS programs to varying degrees promote Indigenous knowledge, ways of knowing and teaching, they offer very different settings. One is part of a large non-Aboriginal institution, and serves non-Aboriginal as well as Aboriginal students. The other is a primarily independent Aboriginal organisation designed by and for Aboriginal people. Despite such differences, there are some areas for improvement which are common to both in their quests to achieve their respective visions. First of all, neither institute has produced pedagogical guidelines or models to be applied in teaching Aboriginal students. Expressions of intent in this regard are contained in existing statements of philosophy, but instructors receive little direction as to what "traditional Aboriginal teaching approaches" or "culturally relevant and meaningful student evaluation techniques" might be. Having been through Western educational institutions themselves, most students and instructors have a pretty clear idea as to what

Table 1. Comparing the primary characteristics of University of Toronto's ABS program with CIER.

University of Toronto Aboriginal Studies (ABS) Program	Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources (CIER)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>open to and aimed at meeting the needs of all students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, rather than separating out Aboriginal students from the rest of the university</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>created specifically by and for Aboriginal people</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>interdisciplinary, drawing from wide range of university resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>interdisciplinary, drawing on expertise of various instructors, but with environmental studies as the main focus</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>agreement with overall goals of the university</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>goals developed in consultation with Aboriginal people</li> <li>associated with University of Manitoba, but with independent goals and objectives, and located in an independent setting</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>focus on critical analysis, both logical and creative thinking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>focus on presenting both Indigenous and Western perspectives as an integral part of all subjects taught</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>focus on "re-conceptualisation" of knowledge, requiring students to critically examine their own knowledge and experiences from different perspectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>focus on developing Aboriginal capacity for resolving environmental issues using both Indigenous and Western knowledge</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>focus on language, culture, and history of First Nations people, contributing to understanding the interaction between First Nations and Euro-Canadian society</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>language courses key to the program, as per recommendations of Chiefs of Ontario and Elders Council of Ontario (Rice 2003)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>courses built around an environmental focus, with Indigenous environmental knowledge a key component of all instruction</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>core language and culture courses to be the first stage in building a broader program including courses in other areas such as science</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>students participate in both theoretical classroom study and practical fieldwork</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>elders play a peripheral role through the Elders Program at First Nations House, though they are not directly associated with ABS. They are involved in guest-speaking and providing support to faculty and students, and occasionally in program decision-making</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>elders play an integral part of the design and delivery of each program, through team teaching and direct involvement in program design and decision-making</li> </ul>

constitute "appropriate Western means" of instruction and evaluation. This is not true of Aboriginal teaching methods. Careful selection of instructors and faculty who have experience in Aboriginal systems of education would go a long way to ensuring that Aboriginal methods are employed. However, there is no clear or transparent framework to ensure this occurs.

It is the suggestion of this paper that both institutes develop a clear definition and framework of Aboriginal education as they expect it to be applied in their respective settings. To that end, what follows is a brief outline of some key Aboriginal perspectives on education, including some relatively well-known Aboriginal educational models. While this should

provide the reader with a starting point in considering the types of issues that need to be addressed, it is critical that the development of educational definitions, models and guidelines for practical application occurs with the direct involvement of the Aboriginal communities being served by each institute. While both CIER and University of Toronto involved Aboriginal communities in their original development, only CIER has continued such involvement with the inclusion of elders and Aboriginal community leaders as partners in program design and team teaching. CIER is thus, to my mind at least, a step ahead of University of Toronto in this regard. Although University of Toronto's original ABS program development received significant Aboriginal input,

subsequent program development and modification have not. This topic will be discussed further at the conclusion of this paper.

### ■ Aboriginal worldviews and philosophies of education

If CIER and University of Toronto are to move towards a system of education which promotes Aboriginal knowledge as equally valid with Western systems, both must define what is meant by "Aboriginal knowledge" (or "knowledges") in an educational setting. While the specific content of Aboriginal knowledge will often differ from community to community and will continue to evolve over time, defining the overall *concept* of Aboriginal knowledge with meaningful community input is critical to ensuring the needs of Aboriginal communities are met in the educational setting. It has all too often been the case that, for public relations and other reasons, processes have been labelled "Aboriginal" without significant community input. Such processes can end up providing limited or even negative results to Aboriginal communities. In developing such definitions, the worldview and philosophy that informs such knowledge is critically important to understand. To ensure consistency in their ability to meet the needs of students, CIER and University of Toronto each need to construct a framework of Aboriginal educational principles such that current and future instructors have a basis for developing and delivering culturally appropriate theory and programming. To that end, a brief discussion of Aboriginal worldviews and principles of education follows. While much has been written on Aboriginal worldview and philosophy in the last decade or so, and an increasing amount is from an Aboriginal perspective, the literature is too extensive to review here. However, for some of what I feel are perhaps the best overviews, see Bopp et al. (1988), Couture (1991), Fitznor (1998), Graveline (1998), O'Meara & West (1996), Silko (1996), Sioui (1992) and Thorpe (1996). For the purposes of this paper I will explain briefly some principles of Aboriginal worldviews that are found to be common throughout the many diverse Aboriginal cultures in Canada.

#### *Relationship to Creation*

Making connections to the broader world is an essential aspect of Aboriginal education. Circles and cycles of life, inherent in Aboriginal philosophy, reinforce this point. Life transitions, as outlined in the medicine wheel (see below) are associated with seasons, animals or plants. There is a close, intimate and relevant relationship between the individual and Creation. Thus, making connections between what is being learned (content or curriculum) to Aboriginal realities (e.g., what's happening in First Nations communities) is essential. Also crucial to this point are the notion and practice of cooperation and reciprocity from all involved. Certainly

in my own teaching I believe that Aboriginal education must begin with our stories. When I think about what I will teach and how I will do it, I think about our own theories and conceptual frameworks for understanding ourselves. I ask myself, "What would my ancestors have to say about this?" Challenges and change are not new to the Anishnabe people. We have dealt with changes for thousands of years. I ask myself how the theories that informed our survival for thousands of years can form the basis for our continued survival. I believe this is the appropriate starting place in which to situate transformative education which in turn creates space for Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous theorising.

When I teach, I begin with the Anishnabe Creation story. There are many tellings of this story, but I refer to those retold by Basil Johnston, an Anishnabe storyteller (Johnston, 1976). Of particular interest to me is the Re-Creation story. In Johnston's version, there has been a great flood and most of life on Earth has perished, except for birds and water creatures. Sky woman survives and comes to rest on a great turtle's back. She asks the water creatures to bring her soil from the bottom of the waters. The water animals try to help her – the beaver, the marten, the loon – all try and fail. Finally the muskrat volunteers, much to the scorn of the other water creatures who failed. Muskrat, the most humble of the water creatures, is ridiculed, but he is determined to help, so he dives down and the animals and sky woman wait. As Johnston (1976, p. 14) relates:

They waited for the muskrat to emerge as empty handed as they had done. Time passed. Smiles turned to worried frowns. The small hope that each had nurtured for the success of the muskrat turned into despair. When the waiting creatures had given up, the muskrat floated to the surface more dead than alive, but he clutched in his paws a small morsel of soil. Where the great had failed, the small succeeded.

There are many lessons to be learned from this story of Re-Creation. It gives me hope. In destruction, the opportunity for rebirth is created. We are provided with the opportunity to transform ourselves and our world in the process of Re-Creation. For Aboriginal people in Canada, our educational experience has followed this same path. For thousands of years, Aboriginal people had their own system of education and ensured sustainable relationships with all of Creation.

#### *Way of life*

Aboriginal knowledges and worldviews are most often conceptualised by Aboriginal people as a way of living (i.e., more of verb than a noun). Various examples include the ideas of "lifeway" (Thorpe, 1996), "the ethics of the people, the way people live, and their

consciousness of living a way of life" (Fitznor, 1998, p. 26), and "Minobimaatisiwin", meaning "the good life" (LaDuke, 1999). Aboriginal worldviews involve living a certain way of life, and are considered everyday forms of knowing. It is something that you do, rather than simply study. There is an underlying belief that it is the simple, common events in which Aboriginal philosophy is expressed (Graveline, 1998).

### *The inner and outer worlds*

Aboriginal worldview involves a perspective of the world that includes both the "inner" and "outer" worlds (Fitznor, 1998, p. 29). This aspect of a person's development or coming to understand the world is so important that a considerable amount of traditional education was spent gaining knowledge of these worlds and the relationships between them. Ermine (1995) observes that, unlike Western education, Aboriginal ways of understanding require one to turn inward. Native individuals were encouraged throughout life to look inward to come to understanding and insights. Ermine (1995, p. 103) calls this "inner space", "that universe of being within each person that is synonymous with the soul, the spirit, the self, or the being". "Inner" world or environment refers to the emotional/spiritual aspects of the person, including recognising his/her own path to personal development, learning self-respect, learning to take responsibility, gaining self-esteem, and gaining a strong sense of identity, to name a few (see Graveline, 1998, p. 58). I have also heard elders and other teachers say that this model would include relating to those who have passed on (our ancestors) and those who are yet to come (the unborn). One needs to understand or know him/herself in order to be fully functional. One needs to have basic self-respect in order to respect others and all of Creation, which constitute the "outer" world. Such concepts were fundamental to Aboriginal educational models, which spent a great deal of time and energy on supporting and guiding individuals through processes of self-enlightenment.

### *Relationships*

Aboriginal educational practices emphasise relationships. Students are educated holistically, focusing on the inner relationships among the spiritual, emotional, physical and intellectual aspects of the self. Integral to this approach, however, was the value placed on "outer" relationships with, for example, community and family (Haig-Brown & Archibald, 1996; Graveline, 1998). Education thus dealt with all aspects of an individual's life, including relationships with others (including family, community, nation, humanity and the rest of Creation). Hart (1996, p. 61) writes that "all effort must be given to maintain positive relationships between yourself

and another ... maintaining positive relationships is important for growth". Aboriginal students, whether they were children, youth, or adults, were considered to need positive relationships with other students and family members. Ideally, a teacher or instructor would encourage the student to feel positive about him or herself and to relate positively to his or her peers. This was not enough, however. The student would also be required to relate meaningfully to his or her relatives, family, clan, community, nation, and all of Creation. Relationships are paramount in Aboriginal worldview, and thus it is not surprising to see this reflected in the theory and practice of Aboriginal education.

### *The role of elders*

Integral to Aboriginal philosophy is the role elders play in informing and implementing meaningful education for Aboriginal learners. Much respect is paid to elders and the immeasurable contribution they have made and continue to make to Aboriginal education (Couture, 1991; Ellerby, 2001; Fitznor, 1998; Knudtson & Suzuki, 1992; Longclaws, 1994). Hart (1996, p. 62) writes:

Elders are often sought out for their knowledge and abilities. Due to their long lives and experiences it is believed that they have come to understand much about life, and may also have developed certain skills. Therefore, Elders are respected for their abilities, such as unifying the family, offering spiritual guidance and advising appointed leaders.

Canada's 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) included among its numerous published documents a discussion on the roles and perspectives of Aboriginal elders. According to RCAP (1996, p. 10):

Elders are generally, although not exclusively, older members of the community. They have lived long and seen the seasons change many times. In many Aboriginal cultures, old age is seen as conferring characteristics not present in earlier years, including insight, wisdom and authority. Traditionally, those who reached old age were the counsellors, guides and resources for the ones still finding their way along life's path. Elders were the ones who had already walked a great distance on this path and were qualified to advise based on their knowledge of life, tradition and experience.

RCAP (1996, p. 11) continues:

Age itself does not make one an Elder, however ... Elders have special gifts. They are considered exceptionally wise in the ways of their culture and the teachings of the Great Spirit. They are



recognized for their wisdom, their stability, and their ability to know what is appropriate in a particular situation. The community looks to them for guidance and sound judgement. They are caring and are known to share the fruits of their labours and experience with others in the community ... While Elder is a distinguished title, traditional Elders do not seek status; it flows from the people. Communities elevate their Elders, but the Elders keep their feet planted firmly and humbly on the ground.

More recently, Battiste et al. (2002) include the participation of elders as a key criterion in the development of a "postcolonial university". Rather than being lost icons of a former way of life, elders are critical to the contemporary resurgence and communication of Aboriginal knowledge and culture. They are vital to efforts to find within that knowledge what Couture (1991, p. 201) refers to as a potential "saving grace" of insights and a creative power ... crucial to human continuance". The development of any Aboriginal studies program must include the ongoing input and collaboration of Aboriginal elders if it is to benefit both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities being served.

#### ■ Aboriginal educational models

Within Aboriginal traditions there are many diverse models or paradigms that guide the education process. I will briefly discuss two prominent models or symbols and their applicability to CIER and University of Toronto.

##### *The medicine wheel*

The medicine wheel is a complex, sacred, dynamic and popular symbol used by many First Nations all over North and South America. It can be adapted to many situations and has transformed over the years to reflect Aboriginal realities. It has been applied as a model for research (Webster & Nabigon, 1993), healing (Longclaws, 1994) and education (Graveline, 1998; White, 1996; see Figure 1) among other fields. Generally, the wheel is divided into four directions. As Webster and Nabigon (1993, p. 165) write, "The spiritual interpretation of this native world view is divided into four sacred directions ... These directions are used to search for harmony and peace from within". The directions can be expressed as colours (which vary from nation to nation), orientations, life stages, animals, elements, aspects of human relations, and many other components of life too numerous to mention here. In representing four aspects of a given phenomenon on a single circle, the medicine wheel symbolises the interconnections or relations among all the aspects. This means that all aspects of

the student (or instructor, for that matter) must be considered and respected in the learning situation. This means that the emotional is just as important as the intellectual; the physical as important as the spiritual. They are all related and any imbalance will interfere with the student's ability to grow and benefit from the program.

One expression of the medicine wheel is the description of the four stages (or cycles) of life. The stages are the child, youth, adult and elder (see Bopp et al., 1988; Longclaws, 1994). Each stage brings with it gifts that are unique, yet related to the other stages. Each stage gains and grows from the others. Elders can learn from children, children can learn from youth, and so on. Intrinsic to the medicine wheel model is the idea that everyone involved in education is both a learner and a teacher. The student, the instructor and the coordinator all interact and learn from one another. In the circle, all are equal, necessary and valued. Understanding the similarities and differences among the stages, as well as their relationships to each other, becomes critical for developing an effective education program. The nature of the students changes depending on their stage in life. In developing curricula and instructional approaches, consideration of life stages or directions from an Aboriginal point of view, which is circular and interrelated, rather than purely from the linear and hierarchical view of Western education, is required. Understanding and practising principles of reciprocity and interconnectedness are keys to expressions of spirituality. Spirituality is often expressed as the understanding, appreciation and practice in everyday living that one is part of a larger circle (RCAP, 1996). Spirituality, along with the other aspects of a person, must play a key role in education.

##### *The sacred tree*

Another powerful symbol with widespread appeal and application is the Sacred Tree (Bopp et al., 1988; Colorado, 1988). As Bopp et al. (1988, p. 9), explain, "The life of the tree is the life of the people". The tree is a symbol of transformation, life changes and life gifts. The sacred tree, much like the medicine wheel, concerns itself with balance, harmony and turning inwards for reflection and direction. The sacred tree represents the stages of human development and symbolises unity with oneself and the universe as a whole. Common to the paradigms described above is the reinforcement of "inner" and "outer" environments, growth, development, change (transformation), and the interrelatedness of all components of life. The models focus on holism, so that all aspects must be considered. This means that in education, it is not enough to focus on the "mind" alone; the heart, spirit and body must be considered as well. The relationships the students and instructors

have with others and the rest of Creation are also critical, as are the stages of life that the students and instructors currently occupy.

■ Making the transformation to “Indigenous theorising”

Many Aboriginal educators (e.g., Bastiste, 2002; Battiste et al., 2002; Cajete, 1994; Haig-Brown & Archibald, 1996; Smith, 2005a, 2005b) speak of transformation required in Native education, arguing that change is needed in numerous areas and programs. Smith (2005a, 2005b) reflects on the idea that in order to achieve positive transformation, Indigenous people must move beyond a focus on decolonisation

(which puts the coloniser at the centre of discussion), to one in which “Indigenous theorising” is both recognised and achieved. Aboriginal people must focus on creating their own positive future, using Aboriginal-derived concepts and undertakings; rather than always reacting to negative situations imposed by non-Aboriginal parties. Smith (2005b, p. 3) states that, “In moving to transformative politics we need to understand the history of colonisation but the bulk of our work and focus must be on what it is that we want, what it is that we are about, and [on imagining] our future”.

It has been my experience that both CIER and University of Toronto have to date focused a great

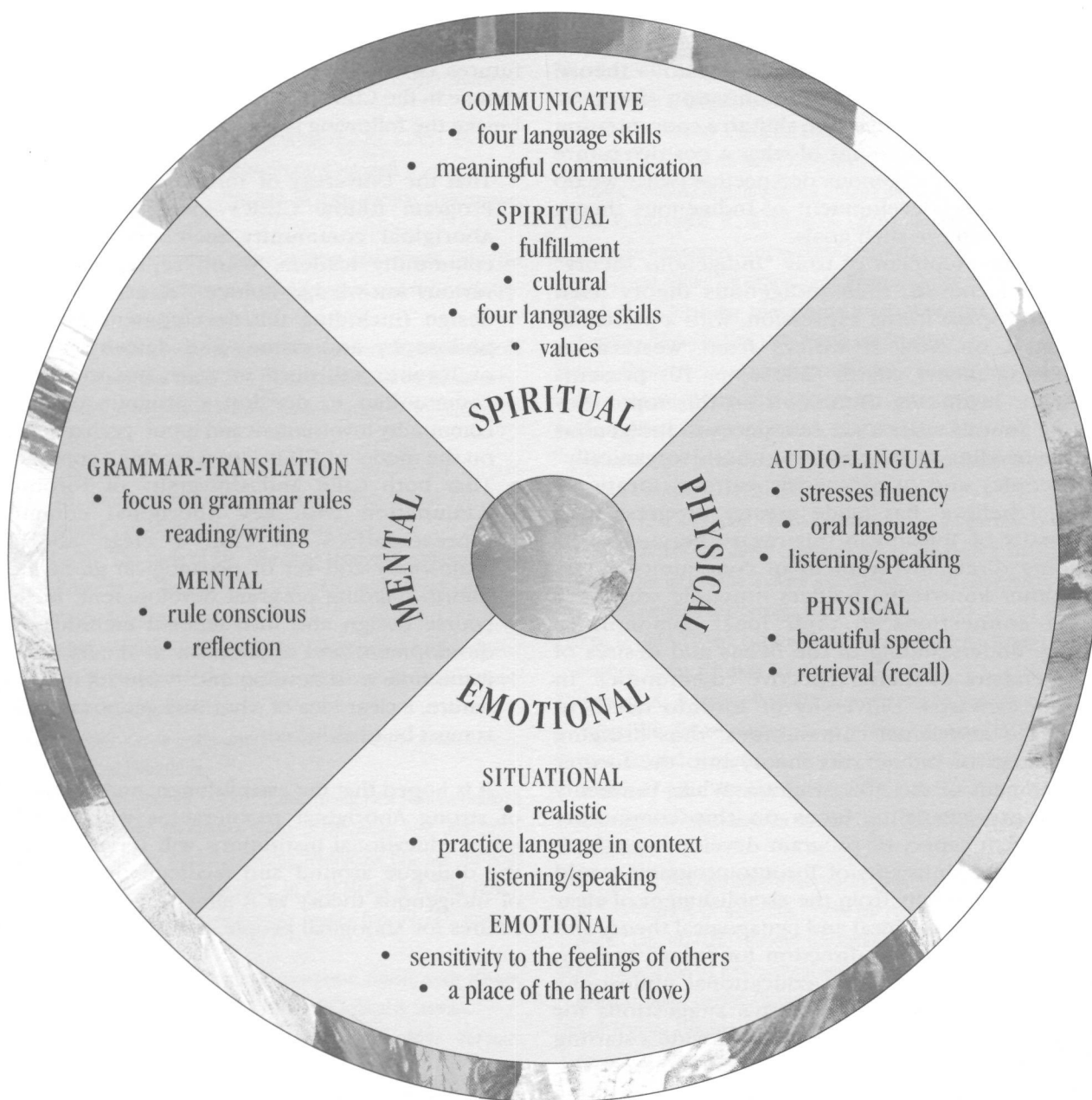


Figure 1. An interpretation of the medicine wheel from an educational perspective (White, 1996, p. 116).

deal on the decolonisation aspects of Aboriginal education. While this has been a necessary step in achieving positive transformation from colonial to Indigenous-controlled education, it is now time to move beyond this. Smith (2005a, p. 12) describes Indigenous theorising as “necessarily, given circumstances of colonizing and colonisation ... simultaneously reactive and proactive. Indigenous theorising is more than a postcolonial resistance initiative (although it is very much this); it is also a pro-active initiative of being self-determining”. Smith (2005a, p. 12) continues that although “in order to argue indigenous theory, one has to show how existing theory falls short”, in the end, “Indigenous theorising is not a movement away from theory, it is movement towards it”. The focus of Aboriginal education programs, including those at CIER and University of Toronto, should now be changing to one of recognising and developing Indigenous theory. The study of colonisation/decolonisation (focus on what we don’t want) needs to shift to a concentration on Indigenous imaginings of what a positive future means from an Indigenous perspective (what we do want), and the development of Indigenous theory on how to achieve such goals.

If the development of truly “Indigenous theory” is to be achieved, then Indigenous theory itself must find space for its expression, with a particular emphasis on how it differs from Western or colonising theory. Smith (2005a, p. 10) presents a list for beginning discussion on this topic. Key among Smith’s criteria are references to Indigenous theory needing to be connected both “organically” (to people) and to a “specific cultural location”. CIER, I believe, has made greater progress than University of Toronto in this regard because of its ongoing direct involvement of community elders and other knowledge holders – people who have direct connections to their local communities and an understanding of the needs and desires of the members of their respective communities. In moving forwards, University of Toronto needs to re-engage Aboriginal communities, thus bringing an element of Indigenous theory into the further development of the ABS program. While University of Toronto needs to focus on this community involvement aspect of program development, both the CIER and University of Toronto programs would benefit substantially from the establishment of clear Aboriginal philosophical and pedagogical theory and guidelines to provide direction for future growth. The aspects of Aboriginal educational philosophy noted above, along with Smith’s suggestions for Indigenous theory criteria, should provide a starting point for the development of such guidelines. Again, direct community involvement is critical in ensuring that programs truly meet the needs of Aboriginal students and communities.

## ■ Conclusions

Both CIER’s and University of Toronto’s programs represent admirable efforts in search of positive Aboriginal educational goals, particularly the transformation from Western colonial-derived educational paradigms to Aboriginal ones. Such a search, of course, is not a discrete or “one-time” entity, but rather a continuous, dynamic process aimed at ongoing growth and improvement. Based on my years working with each institute, as well as on previous discussions and evaluations of their progress, it appears that neither institute has yet achieved in practice a level of development on par with existing theory on this topic. In order to approach such a level, authors such as Smith (2005a, 2005b) have stressed the need to move from focusing on discussion of colonisation (what is not wanted) to focusing on desired Aboriginal futures (what is wanted). In order to facilitate this change in the CIER and University of Toronto contexts, I make the following suggestions:

- That the University of Toronto Aboriginal Studies Program follow CIER’s example of involving Aboriginal community members (e.g., elders, community leaders, youth representatives and various knowledge holders) directly in program design (including the development of program philosophy and vision) and delivery. University of Toronto will need to reach out to Aboriginal communities to develop a program of ongoing community involvement and input, perhaps drawing on the model of CIER’s team teaching approach.
- That both CIER and University of Toronto, in conjunction with key Aboriginal community representatives, develop a clear Aboriginal philosophy and set of pedagogical guidelines to inform ongoing program development, including course design and instructional methods. If the development and application of theory at either institution is to develop and retain its Indigenous nature, a clear idea of what “Indigenous theorising” is must be established.

It is hoped that the establishment and maintenance of strong Aboriginal partnerships with these and other educational institutions will serve to enhance the dialogue around and facilitate the application of Indigenous theory as it aims to generate positive futures for Aboriginal people and society as a whole.

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