

WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum



Worldview

Jagged Worldviews Colliding

Leroy Little Bear

Government of Alberta ■





***Jagged Worldviews Colliding
Leroy Little Bear***

No matter how dominant a worldview is, there are always other ways of interpreting the world. Different ways of interpreting the world are manifest through different cultures, which are often in opposition to one another. One of the problems with colonialism is that it tries to maintain a singular social order by means of force and law, suppressing the diversity of human worldviews. The underlying differences between Aboriginal and Eurocentric worldviews make this a tenuous proposition at best. Typically, this proposition creates oppression and discrimination.

Culture comprises a society's philosophy about the nature of reality, the values that flow from this philosophy, and the social customs that embody these values. Any individual within a culture is going to have his or her own personal interpretation of the collective cultural code; however, the individual's worldview has its roots in the culture - that is, in the society's shared philosophy, values, and customs. If we are to understand why Aboriginal and Eurocentric worldviews clash, we need to understand how the philosophy, values, and customs of Aboriginal cultures differ from those of Eurocentric cultures. Understanding the differences in worldviews, in turn, gives us a starting point for understanding the paradoxes that colonialism poses for social control.

Aboriginal Philosophy

In Aboriginal philosophy, existence consists of energy. All things are animate, imbued with spirit, and inconstant motion. In this realm of energy and spirit, interrelationships between all entities are of paramount importance space is a more important referent than time. Although I am referring to the philosophy of the Plains Indians, there is enough similarity among North American Indian philosophies to apply the concepts generally, even though there may be individual differences or differing emphases.

The idea of all things being in constant motion or flux leads to a holistic and cyclical view of the world. If everything is constantly moving and changing, then one has to look at the whole to begin to see patterns. For instance, the cosmic cycles are in constant motion, but they have regular patterns that result in recurrences such as the seasons of the year, the migration of the animals, renewal ceremonies, songs, and stories. Constant motion, as manifested in cyclical or repetitive patterns, emphasizes process as opposed to product. It results in a concept of time that is dynamic but without motion. Time is part of the constant flux but goes nowhere. Time just is.

Language embodies the way a society thinks. Through learning and speaking a particular language, an individual absorbs the collective thought processes of a people. Aboriginal languages are, for the most part, verb-rich languages that are process- or action-oriented. They are generally aimed at describing "happenings" rather than objects. The languages of Aboriginal peoples allow for the transcendence of boundaries. For example, the categorizing process in



many Aboriginal Languages does not make use of the dichotomies either/or, black/white, saint/sinner. There is no animate/inanimate dichotomy. Everything is more or less animate. Consequently, Aboriginal languages allow for talking to trees and rocks, an allowance not accorded in English. If everything is animate, then everything has spirit and knowledge. If everything has spirit and knowledge, then all are like me. If all are like me, then all are my relations.

In Plains Indian philosophy, certain events, patterns, cycles, and happenings take place in certain places. From a human point of view, patterns, cycles, and happenings are readily observable on land: animal migrations, cycles of plant life, seasons, and so on. The cosmos is also observable, and patterns are detected from a particular spatial location within the territory of a particular tribe. Tribal territory is important because Earth is our Mother (and this is not a metaphor: it is real).¹ The Earth cannot be separated from the actual being of Indians. The Earth is where the continuous and/or repetitive process of creation occurs. It is on the Earth and from the Earth that cycles, phases, patterns - in other words, the constant motion or flux - can be observed. Creation is continuity. If creation is to continue, then it must be renewed. Renewal ceremonies, the telling and retelling of creation stories, the singing and resinging of the songs, are all humans' part in the maintenance of creation. Hence the Sundance, societal ceremonies, the unbundling of medicine bundles at certain phases of the year - all of which are interrelated aspects of happenings that take place on and within Mother Earth.

All of the above leads one to articulate Aboriginal philosophy as being holistic and cyclical or repetitive, generalist, process-oriented, and firmly grounded in a particular place.

Values and Customs

Aboriginal values flow from an Aboriginal worldview or "philosophy." Values are those mechanisms put in place by the group that more or less tells the individual members of the society that, "If you pursue the following, you will be rewarded or given recognition by the group," or, alternatively, "If you pursue the following, you will be ostracized or punished by the group." Aboriginal traditions, laws, and customs are the practical application of the philosophy and values of the group.

Arising out of the Aboriginal philosophy of constant motion or flux is value of wholeness or totality. The value of wholeness speaks to the totality of creation, the group as opposed to the individual, the forest as to the individual trees. It focuses on the totality of the constant flux rather than on individual patterns. This value is reflected in the customs and organization of Plains Indian tribes, where the locus of social organization is the extended family, not the immediate, biological family. Several extended families combine to form a band. Several bands combine to form a tribe or nation; several tribes or nations combine to form confederacies. The circle of kinship can be made up of one circle or a number of concentric circles. These kinship circles can be interconnected by other circles such as religious and social communities. This approach to Aboriginal organization can be viewed as a "spider web" of relations.

Wholeness is like a flower with four petals. When it opens, one discovers strength, sharing, honesty, and kindness. Together these four petals create balance, harmony, and beauty.



Wholeness works in the same interconnected way. The value strength speaks to the idea of sustaining balance. If a person is whole and balanced, then he or she is in a position to fulfill his or her individual responsibilities to the whole. If a person is not balanced, then he or she is sick and weak - physically, mentally, or both - and cannot fulfill his or her individual responsibilities. The value strength brings out other values such as independence and respect. Independence means being a generalist, which means knowing a little bit about everything. Independence manifests itself in many different ways. It may manifest itself in long absences from the group on the trapline, in not asking for assistance when in trouble, and in being a “jack of all trades.” The quest for balance manifests itself in what Rupert Ross calls the ethic of “noninterference.”² Noninterference is respect for others’ wholeness, totality, and knowledge.

The Aboriginal value of sharing manifests itself in relationships. Relationships result from interactions with the group and with all of creation. Sharing speaks not just to interchanging material goods but also, more importantly, to the strength to create and sustain “good feelings.” Maintaining good feelings is one reason why a sense of humour pervades Aboriginal societies. Sharing also brings about harmony, which sustains strength and balance.

Because the shared heritage is recorded in the minds of the members of a society, honesty is an important Aboriginal value. Honesty is closely related to strength and sharing and may be seen as a commitment to these values. It is based on being aware that every being is animate and has an awareness that seeks to understand the constant flux according to its own capabilities. Aboriginal people seek to use such understandings to maintain their balance and to sustain harmony and cooperation. Under the custom of noninterference, no being ought to impose on another’s understanding of the flux. Each being ought to have the strength to be tolerant of the beauty of cognitive diversity. Honesty allows Aboriginal people to accept that no one can ever know for certain what someone else knows. The only thing one can go on is what the other human being shares or says to you or others. And, in all of this, there is an underlying presumption that a person is reporting an event the way he or she experienced it. For the purposes of social control, there is a strong expectation that everyone will share his or her truth (actually, “truthing” is a better concept) because people depend on each other’s honesty to create a holistic understanding of the flux. Lies result in chaos and establish false understanding.

A reciprocal aspect to honesty exists. If people come to know another person as untruthful and a liar, they will eventually not use that person’s actions and talk as a basis for their relationships and interactions. In other words, the liar’s expectations will not be fulfilled. The message is, “If you want to be part of the spider web of relations, speak the truth.”

Kindness is a value that revolves around notions of love, easy-goingness, praise, and gratefulness. If love and good feelings pervade the group, then balance, harmony, and beauty result. This is a positive rather than a negative approach to social control. If individuals are appropriately and immediately given recognition for upholding strength, honesty, and kindness, then a “good” order will be maintained, and the good of the group will continue to be the goal of all the members of the Society.

Understanding the four interrelated petals of the flower demonstrates why collective decision making was and is such an important Aboriginal custom. It is important in all aspects of



Aboriginal life, including decisions governing external relations, the utilization of resources, movements within the Aboriginal territory, and the education of the younger generation. Customs with regard to external relations include peace and friendship with other tribes and nations; trade with outsiders; treatment of visitors and adoption of outsiders; and warfare and defence of territory. Customs about the utilization of resources include collective hunting and harvesting of game and plants and the equal sharing of these resources. Traditionally, the families within a tribal territory did not move around the territory randomly. In fact, extended families had responsibility for certain parts of the territory and moved within that particular part even though there may have been no strong demarcation between families and even though extended families may have joined and moved around the territory together. The fact that many families moved around certain parts of the tribal territory is reflected in the Sundance camp, where certain bands occupy certain parts of the camp circle. This was also reflected in the original occupation of reserves: certain bands occupied certain parts of the reserve and, in many cases, reflected the occupation pattern of the traditional territory.

It is not the intent of this chapter to describe in detail every Aboriginal custom; anthropologists have done enough of that. They have done a fairly decent job of describing the customs themselves, but they have failed miserably in finding and interpreting the meanings behind the customs. The function of Aboriginal values and customs is to maintain the relationships that hold creation together. If creation manifests itself in terms of cyclical patterns and repetitions, then the maintenance and renewal of those patterns is all-important. Values and customs are the participatory part that Aboriginal people play in the maintenance of creation.

How do Aboriginal peoples educate and inculcate the philosophy, values, and customs of their cultures? For the most part, education and socialization are achieved through praise, reward, recognition, and renewal ceremonies and by example, actual experience, and storytelling. Children are greatly valued and are considered gifts from the Creator. From the moment of birth, children are the objects of love and kindness from a large circle of relatives and friends. They are strictly trained but in a “sea” of love and kindness. As they grow, children are given praise and recognition for their achievements both by the extended family and by the group as a whole. Group recognition manifests itself in public ceremonies performed for a child, giveaways in a child’s honour, and songs created and sung in a child’s honour. Children are seldom physically punished, but they are sternly lectured about the implications of wrongful and unacceptable behaviour.

Teaching through actual experience is done by relatives: for example, aunts teaching girls and uncles teaching boys. One relative usually takes a young child under his or her wing, assuming responsibility for teaching the child all she or he knows about the culture and survival. This person makes ongoing progress reports to the group, friends, relatives, and parents, resulting in praise and recognition for the child. There are many people involved in the education and socialization of a child. Anyone can participate in educating a child because education is a collective responsibility.

Storytelling is a very important part of the educational process. It is through stories that customs and values are taught and shared. In most Aboriginal societies, there are hundreds of



stories of real-life experiences, spirits, creation, customs, and values. For instance, most Aboriginal cultures have a trickster figure. The trickster is about chaos, the unexpected, the “why” of creation, and the consequences of unacceptable behaviour. These stories are usually told by the loving grandmas and grandpas of the tribe.

The education a child receives and carries forward into adulthood transcends the boundary between the physical and the spiritual. For instance, the boundary between the state of being awake and the reality in dreamtime is almost nonexistent. Anthropomorphic form is not important; it is assumed that a being can readily go through metamorphosis. All of the knowledge is primarily transmitted from the older to the younger generation through language; consequently, language is of paramount importance.

Eurocentric Values

In contrast to Aboriginal value systems, one can summarize the value systems of Western Europeans as being linear and singular, static, and objective. The Western European concept of time is a good example of linearity. Time begins somewhere way back there and follows a linear progression from A to B to C to D. The linearity manifests itself in terms of a social organization that is hierarchical in terms of both structure and power. Socially, it manifests itself in terms of bigger, higher, newer, or faster being preferred over smaller, lower, older, or slower.

Singularity manifests itself in the thinking processes of Western Europeans in concepts such as one true god, one true answer, and one right way. This singularity results in a social structure consisting of specialists. Everyone in the society has to be some kind of specialist, whether it be doctor, lawyer, plumber, or mechanic. Specializations are ranked in terms of prestige. This, in turn, results in a social class structure. Some professions are higher up the ladder, and some are lower down it. In science, singularity manifests itself in terms of an expensive search for the ultimate truth, the ultimate particle out of which all matter is made. And so it goes.

The static way of thinking is probably best exemplified by the former CBS TV news anchor Walter Cronkite, who used to say at the end of his newscast “And that’s the way it is on ... X day, X year.” The static way of thinking is also exemplified by the experimental approach in science, in which an observation is attempted in isolation and in an artificial environment. What happens or is manifested during the experiment at a certain time and place brings about a conclusion that says “And that’s the way it is.”

Objectivity is a process that has its base in physical observation and measurement. Again, science is a good example. Even though observation and measurement are both necessary to science, measurement is stressed and emphasized. If something is not measurable, then it is not scientific. Observation by itself is not good enough. Of course, anything subjective is not measurable and, therefore, not scientific. This way of thinking leads one to conclude that only physical objects and processes are measurable. Of course, physical objects and processes are external to the person. Objectivity, in other words, is an externalization but also an appropriative process. Objectivity results in an emphasis on materialism. Objectivity concerns itself with quantity and not quality.



Every society has many deep-rooted and implicit assumptions about what life and reality are all about. These assumptions are the guidelines for interpreting laws, rules, customs, and actions. It is deep-rooted and implicit assumptions upon which attitudes are based and that make a person say “This is the way it is.” It is these assumptions that make it hard for a person to appreciate an alternative way of thinking and behaving. This is why I have gone to considerable lengths to illustrate the worldview of Western Europeans, which is linear and singular, static, and objective.

Aboriginal and Eurocentric Values Contrasted

Given the opportunity, Aboriginal cultures attempt to mould their members into ideal personalities. The ideal personality is one that shows strength both physically and spiritually. S/he is a person who is generous and shows kindness to all. S/he is a person who puts the group’s needs ahead of individual wants and desires. S/he is a person who, as a generalist, knows all the survival skills and has wisdom. S/he is a person steeped in spiritual and ritual knowledge. S/he is a person who, in view of all these expectations, goes about life and approaches “all his/her relations” in a sea of friendship, easy-goingness, humour, and good feelings. S/he is a person who attempts to suppress inner feelings, anger, and disagreement with the group. S/he is a person who is expected to display bravery, hardiness, and strength against enemies and outsiders. S/he is a person who is adaptable and takes the world as it comes, without complaint.

Every society, whether consciously or unconsciously, realizes that, given the nature of human beings, there will always be members of the society who will run afoul of the cultural values and customs. In Aboriginal societies, diversity is the norm, so deviation from acceptable behaviour is minimized. A number of different factors operate to create this value. One is that the philosophy, the values, and the customs in Aboriginal societies are also the law. Law is not something that is separate and unto itself. Law is the culture, and culture is the law.

Another factor that minimizes deviations and abrogation of the law is equality. Equality pervades Aboriginal societies because of values such as sharing and generosity, the importance of the group as opposed to the individual, and in general the concepts of wholeness and totality. These values and mechanisms neutralize disparity between individual members of the society and therefore reduce wants, desires, and aspirations that may result in the abrogation of the law. In other words, if no person has more than any other does, then no one has feelings of exclusion or being cheated or short-changed.

Internalization of knowledge is another major factor that minimizes deviation from socially acceptable behaviour. Internalization means everyone carries around the societal code, whereas in Western society everything is externalized. A police force is an externalization of social control. If there is a police force, then the only time I have to worry about legally incorrect behaviour is when I get caught. The only time I know something is wrong is when a police officer stops me. Police officers are the detectives of right and wrong behaviour - mainly wrong behaviour because you never get stopped by the police for proper behaviour. .

For the most part, Aboriginal societies do not have complex societal organizations such as police forces. Such organizations usually were not needed because traditional tribal society



collectively agreed on acceptable forms of behaviour. The “spider web” of relations ensures that the welfare of the group is the most important thing in Aboriginal societies. The value of wholeness tells the members that, if all do their parts, then social order will be the result. It is as though everybody is a “cop” and nobody is a “cop.” If the “whole” is maintained, then beauty, harmony, and balance result.

It is because of this underlying philosophy that “collective agreements” or ideal personalities were internalized by each member of an Aboriginal society. In other words, if I were a member of that society, then I would carry the behavioural code around in my mind. Knowledge is internalized, and once internalized it is forever with me. This knowledge tells me what is proper and what is improper behaviour. So if all members of the society carry the code around within them, then it is as though everybody were a police officer, and only minor mechanisms are needed for the purpose of social control, mechanisms such as gossip. Although modern society attempts to use gossip in this way, it does not do so very effectively. Splashing a criminal’s name around in the news media has little effect on controlling that person’s behaviour. That person is a criminal because he or she has not internalized any social-control mechanisms in the first place.

Jagged Worldviews

Colonization created a fragmentary worldview among Aboriginal peoples. By force, terror, and educational policy, it attempted to destroy the Aboriginal worldview - but failed. Instead, colonization left a heritage of jagged worldviews among Indigenous peoples. They no longer had an Aboriginal worldview, nor did they adopt a Eurocentric worldview. Their consciousness became a random puzzle, a jigsaw puzzle that each person has to attempt to understand. Many collective views of the world competed for control of their behaviour, and since none was dominant modern Aboriginal people had to make guesses or choices about everything. Aboriginal consciousness became a site of overlapping, contentious, fragmented, competing desires and values.

Such jagged worldviews minimize legitimate cultural and social control; thus, external force and law, relatives of terrorism, become the instruments of social control. The externalization of social control through things such as a police force brings with it the notion of objectivity. Is there any such thing as objective knowledge? The short answer is “no,” because anything you claim to know is your knowledge alone. In a context of jagged worldviews, I cannot take for granted that you see and know the same things that I see and know. If I were to point out to you my little dog over here, and if you didn’t see it, you would have no way of knowing if I was or was not really seeing a dog. When jagged worldviews collide, objectivity is an illusion. The only things I know for sure are the things I experience, see, feel, and so on. The rest of it is presumption and persuasion. I presume that you know what I know, what I see, what I feel. Because of this subjectivity, people discuss and persuade. This is why people talk so much attempting to explain to each other what they know. That is why we engage in conversation, so I can share my experiences with you and make you understand what I am feeling. When you respond, you are doing the same thing with me.



Yet all colonial people, both the colonizer and the colonized, have shared or collective views of the world embedded in their languages, stories, or narratives. It is collective because it is shared among a family or group. However, this shared worldview is always contested, and this paradox is part of what it means to be colonized. Everyone attempts to understand these different ways of viewing the world and to make choices about how to live his or her life. No one has a pure worldview that is 100 percent Indigenous or Eurocentric; rather, everyone has an integrated mind, a fluxing and ambidextrous consciousness, a precolonized consciousness that flows into a colonized consciousness and back again. It is this clash of worldviews that is at the heart of many current difficulties with effective means of social control in postcolonial North America. It is also this clash that suppresses diversity in choices and denies Aboriginal people harmony in their daily lives.

Notes

1. Percy BullChild, *The Sun Came Down* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985). This is a good collection of Blackfoot stories.
2. Rupert Ross, *Dancing with a Ghost: Exploring Indian Reality* (Markham, ON: Octopus Publishing Group, 1992), 12.