

Naturalizing Indigenous Knowledge

Aboriginal Language Learning Animation Theme Bundle

Keynote Paper Draft

Introduction/Definitions/Approaches

The interaction between the education of Indigenous students and ‘Western’ or ‘European’ educational systems has, for the most part, been one of unequal relationships and the imposition of foreign pedagogies and epistemologies in the name of civilization, assimilation or development. The imposition of foreign systems has had the greatest impact upon the retention of Indigenous languages and the use, recognition, and respect for Indigenous knowledge in our communities. This paper will explore the links between Indigenous language – our language – and its’ relationship to one of the many different systems of knowledge commonly referred to as Indigenous knowledge; as well as the work of the Blue Quills First Nations College as the lead organization of the Aboriginal Language Learning Animation Theme Bundle. One of the key processes that has been identified in the work of the Animation Theme Bundles (ATB) in the collaborative work with the Aboriginal Knowledge Learning Centre (ABKLC) of the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) is naturalizing Indigenous knowledge. In short, naturalizing Indigenous knowledge is the recognition that these knowledges are vital, vibrant, and valid systems of information, data, wisdom, analysis, as well as, mental, community, spiritual, and social development. This is of particular importance to the reclamation, protection, and promotion of our languages and how the recognition and respect for Indigenous knowledge is a prerequisite of, and requirement for, our success in the battle for our very identity and existence as Indigenous Peoples.

The initial step in naturalizing Indigenous knowledge needs to be the recognition that there is no such thing as Indigenous knowledge. That is to say that there is no monolithic body or cannon of knowledge into which all of the many and diverse worldviews, philosophies and languages of Indigenous Peoples can be properly categorized. The utility, usefulness, and meaning of Indigenous knowledge is hollowed out by the very

processes that give ‘western’ or ‘scientific’ thought its perceptions of power and primacy. Abstraction, objectivity (in name if not in application), subduction, definition and generalization have all been used throughout the development of the ‘scientific method’ and in the parallel process of attempting to devalue, denigrate and destroy Indigenous ways of knowing. The power of these ways of knowing comes from the specificity inherent in their development. Cree knowledge and the Cree language spring from the Peoples connection to their lands and territories and to the Creator. Just as these relationships guide the development of Anishinaabe, Lakota, or Innu knowledge and languages in their own specific ways. For the sake of this discussion, examples of Cree language and Cree thought will be provided in order to properly explore these specific details.

Our languages guide us in our relationships, so we see that the chaos that is presently engulfing our communities is primarily due to the suppression of our language. The ability to speak an indigenous language is an indispensable part of our indigenous identity, as these languages convey a sense of identity, a sense of responsibility, and a sense of spiritual relationship to the universe: plants, animals, Mother Earth, rocks, and people. For example, “iyiniw” means an indigenous person; it is a term Cree people use to refer to themselves to distinguish themselves from others (all life forms) to convey a sense of identity and purpose. The root word iyi means original of the land, a first, a proto-type while “niw” means of being.

In my research dissertation “Teachings from Cree Elders: A Grounded Theory Study of Indigenous Leadership”, Skywoman, one of my participants expressed the interconnectedness and responsibility of self and the natural environment by showing how the Cree language is constructed. She said:

We are called iyiniwak. This is the foundation of who we are, our identity. We are supposed to heal ourselves and others. Iyiniwaskamikaw, refers to our relationship to our land, that is our connection here. Iyiniwaskamkohk, means it is a healing land; the land itself is referred to as Turtle Island, and the turtle is a part of healing. The turtle is called miskanahk, and our path/road means meskanahk.

Our languages connect us to our healing journey on our lands.

Our spiritual relationship to the land is of utmost importance. We acknowledge our bonds to Nature, and our interdependence with the plants and animals, all part of Creation. In my study Bernie stated “We are a part of the land, we are Mother Earth” This is confirmed by Skywoman’s comments that “Our forefathers, this was their land, they were given this land, the Creator created us to this land so we could live in harmony with the land. That was their connectedness. It was their value system.” This connectedness to the spiritual realm and responsibility is entrenched in ceremonies and according to another participant Mike are “life giving.”

Our elders repeatedly tell us that our language is a spiritual language. For example, “miskîsik” means an eye.” Mis refers to a body part, and the root word kîsik means the heavens; it reminds us that our ability to see is a spiritual gift, that we are related to the Creator, and every relationship carries responsibilities.

Defined in our language was the relationship, roles and responsibilities of the extended family. Another example is the word mother: nikawiy means “mother” and “auntie” in Cree is nikawîs literally translated means “my little mother.” The role of the auntie, the mother’s sister was to take the place of the mother; she would take over the mother’s responsibility of training the child like her own in the absence of the child’s mother.” And nohtawiy is father, nocawîs is my father’s brothers, my uncles, my little fathers with the responsibility of the father. Nicaikos, my sister in law or my female cross cousin, - the root word is acaikos, which means spirit or star, so it is a spiritual relationship with protocols responsibilities.

Our language also teaches us about other peoples in this world. Iyiniwak, as I have explained, is a reference to ourselves as indigenous people. Another term, “ayisiniw” represents other people like Europeans (French, English) etc. Ayi means “trying to be like” “copying” and niw means being. Ayisinakes means monkey and it gets the name from their need to be like someone else or copies the actions of other. We understand the world in terms of relationships, so when others came to share our lands we treated them

like relatives: respectful, kind, generous and thoughtful. We are still kind, honest, caring and respectful in our relationship with them.

Challenges

However, colonization, coupled with the government's intent to assimilate the indigenous population contributed to the suppression of indigenous languages – the loss of our moral compass and its inherent teachings of how to live in harmony with the universe. Loss of language is equivalent to the loss of spirit; without our sense of spirit we become vulnerable to illnesses such as the addiction and violence epidemics currently engulfing many indigenous communities.

The colonial process is coming back to haunt us. e ki-ocinehikawiyahk. The impact of somebody's actions on us over the years has now caused us to be people we are not. The colonial process tried to make us change into something we are not, and we suffer when we try to become someone we are not. During the residential school period, our connection to our language was nearly destroyed, and with it, our connection to the teachings about who we are and how we are to be in this world. To restore our balance, our health, we need to restore our connection to the language. Our lives are informed by the knowledge carried in these indigenous languages.

This restoration will require:

- the recognition of Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous language as valid and possessing utility; as well as
- the commitment to their protection, promotion and utilization.

The first requirement is a shared responsibility between government, educational authorities and institutions, and Indigenous institutions and communities. The second requirement is primarily the responsibility of Indigenous Peoples. In this context, Blue Quills First Nations College has sought to work with, and through, the Animation Theme Bundle process toward the identification of activities, processes and projects which seek

to assist non-Indigenous structures to fulfill the first requirement as well as the identification of practices and tools which will assist Indigenous structures to fulfill the second.

Assets

In its strategic plan created, October 2006, the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre (ABLKC) of the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) created six theme bundles to conduct the work of identifying the current state of Aboriginal learning in Canada. The Animation Theme Bundles (ATB) include: Learning from Place; Nurturing the Learning Spirit; Aboriginal Language and Learning; Pedagogy of Aboriginal Professionals and Practitioners; Diverse Aboriginal Learning Systems; and Technology and Aboriginal Learning.

Blue Quills First Nations College (BQFNC), located in St. Paul, Alberta, is the lead organization on the Aboriginal Language and Learning Animation Theme Bundle. As an independent Indigenous institution owned, governed and operated by seven First Nations in the Treaty Six Territory, the college advances and protects Indigenous knowledge and thought through education, research and community service. Over the course of the last 35 years BQFNC has grown from an institution offering programs brokered from other mainstream institutions to the present development of its own unique programming, grounded in Indigenous philosophy and epistemology, taught by Elders and Aboriginal academics. The college has been awarded accreditation by the First Nations Accreditation Board (1999) and is directly accountable to the people in the surrounding communities. It is a founding member of the First Nations Adult and Higher Education Consortium, and partners with other Indigenous institutions and programs to advance programming and educational opportunities for adults ensuring an Indigenous learning environment and content.

One of the initial actions outlined in the ABLKC strategic plan was the completion of a literature review to assist Bundles in outlining the current state of research and literature

in their respective areas. The Aboriginal Language and Learning Animation Theme Bundle completed a document which sought to fulfill this need in the following way.

This literature review sets out to synthesize what is known of Indigenous knowledge ownership related to Aboriginal languages, past and current approaches used in school-based Aboriginal language programming, and community-based learner initiatives. Community voices will ground the literature review. The second section will look at the correlation between Aboriginal languages and individual and community health. Finally, theoretical and practical language models are critically assessed for cultural relevance and applicability in language maintenance and revitalization.

(Blue Quills First Nations College, 2008, Pg 5)

This foundational document also begins the process of naturalizing Indigenous knowledge through the identification of guiding principles that attempt to recognize and reposition Indigenous systems and ways of knowing as central to the literature review as well as this particular Animation Theme Bundle process.

As researchers, it is important to bring forward a critical orientation throughout the development of this literature review. Six research principles adopted from Nga Whiringa Muku: Adult Literacy and Employment Whanagui Iwi Research Project Literature Review and Annotated Bibliography guide this paper. These principles, eloquently adapted by Âneta Râwiri (2003) are expanded below, and include:

1. Elders mentor and guide the research project;
2. Indigenous cultural and spiritual ways of knowing and understanding are brought from the margins into the centre;
3. Indigenous cultural and spiritual ways of knowing and understandings are celebrated and affirmed;
4. Indigenous cultural and spiritual ways of knowing and understandings are respected as not being open knowledge;
5. Interconnection and reconnection are emphasized;
6. Research theory, praxis and method are simplified and demystified (particularly language), and shared openly and generously.

(Blue Quills First Nations College, 2008, Pg 9)

Other projects and activities of BQFNC have also been undertaken to fulfill the work of the ATB and the ongoing work of the College as a centre for Cree language revitalization. These include:

- Ongoing collaboration with the Learning From Place Animation Theme Bundle headed by Red Crow Community College in particular with respect to the links between land, sacred sites, oral histories and languages.
- Work in partnership with the First Nations Adult and Higher Education Consortium (FNAHEC) on the development of an Indigenous Languages Instructors Certification program to be established, provided and accredited by Indigenous educational institutions serving a number of different communities and language groups.
- The development and delivery of a pilot project called the oskawasis wacistwan or language nest. This project will examine the requirements and identify barriers to developing community controlled language acquisition and utilization spaces for Indigenous children and young families.

In each of these cases as well as in the other activities of the Aboriginal Language and Learning Animation Theme Bundle, naturalizing Indigenous knowledge continues to be a guiding principle for implementation.

Conclusion

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