Moral Landscape of Indigenous Knowledge in Learning, Initial Thoughts for Primary and Secondary Education

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Synonyms

Indigenous education; Indigenous morality; Seven teachings

This entry explores how moral and character education programming in primary and secondary education has begun to recognize, affirm, and adduce indigenous knowledge and traditions and its potential contributions to curricula. In many instances, such developments have incorporated indigenous perspectives that are intended to inform how children and youth interface with one another – perspectives that are, ostensibly, religious in nature. Employing W.D. Ross's (1930) Intuitionism, the manner in which indigenous perspectives on morality, faith, and reconciliation are explored. This entry will conclude with some discussion on the implications for teaching and learning.

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Introduction

In recent decades, indigenous histories, experiences, and perspectives have become increasingly more important to educational programming in primary, secondary, and post-secondary education. Many teachers, academics, and policy developers have begun to focus effort toward exploring indigenous peoples, histories, and issues. In many provincial and community contexts, the content and pedagogies used to provide learning opportunities for primary and secondary students have begun to employ aspects of the Canadian indigenous experience that have direct relevance to language, literacy, mathematics, and other curricular areas where emphasis is placed on a variety of the unique manifestations of indigenous knowledge, heritage, consciousness, and tradition. School and district leaders responsible for governing and empowering educators to account for the emergent educational imperatives associated with contemporary indigenous education are becoming more responsive to the notion that indigenous content should be shared, celebrated, and inform the development of a balanced perspective on the Canadian indigenous experience that is appreciative (Deer 2014).

Education leaders in Canada have a public responsibility to facilitate the provision of appropriate, respectful, and balanced learning opportunities that will support citizenship and character development that is relevant to the Canadian context. Recognizing and affirming that the Canadian

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indigenous experience embodies emotive, cultural, spiritual, traditional, and language-based dimensions may be a crucial step for school and classroom leaders in the provision of such learning opportunities. As school principals, district superintendents, and others in positions of authority venture into the area of indigenous education as a means of realizing reconciliation, it may be important to consider those dimensions of indigenous life that will facilitate the development of empathy among all peoples. It is toward harmonious coexistence among all that empathy may lead and is, in many ways that matter, the collective vision of our educational systems.

In initiating explorations of the Canadian indigenous experience, educators have invoked numerous topics and issues that are viewed as informative points of entry. For example, one of those topics is one that is frequently adduced as a means of framing the relationships between indigenous and nonindigenous peoples – that of treaties. The exploration of treaties between colonial governments and indigenous peoples may be useful for fostering education-based inquiry because of the opportunities for historical and social exploration that treaties necessitate. As a result, provincial departments, university academics, and others have developed resources for teachers and students to explore this topic (Deer 2014). The frequency for which treaties are the subject of school and university-based learning has made this topic, directly and indirectly, a proxy for understanding the Canadian indigenous experience (Newhouse and Belanger 2011). Just as a nonindigenous person in Canada may be initially understood as a descendent from another country or region of the world (and thus initial thoughts regarding that person may be situated in the context of the histories or political issues of that country or region), indigenous peoples in Canada are frequently understood through what treaties and/or legislative mechanisms are relevant to them. How often is, for instance, a person of First Nations background considered in terms of his or her particular treaty, which may offer inferential information about what region of Canada he/she is from as well as their respective language (s)? Such points of inquiry can shape the manner in which people understand indigenous peoples and may provide useful discussion points.

Another topic that has become a reoccurring exploration for many classrooms in Canada, and is the principal focus of this entry, is that of morality. Although not nominally marked as discussions of a moral nature with the exception of faith-based primary and secondary schools, many teachers have begun exploring morality through the perspectives of indigenous knowledge and consciousness. Similar to how treaties and litigation may be employed as a framework for understanding histories, experiences, and cultures, morality may offer a framework for initial understandings of indigenous peoples because of its frequent association with religious observances. The inclusion of moral frameworks that reflect the religious perspectives of indigenous peoples has become more frequent as educational institutions attempt to be responsive to what has been popularly regarded as "indigenization." One of the more widely known and frequently invoked sources for understanding the religious dimensions of indigenous identity is the work of Vine Deloria Jr. (1999) who wrote:

> The real interest in the old Indians was not to discover the abstract structure of physical reality but rather to find the proper road along which, for the duration of a person's life, individuals were supposed to walk. This colorful image of the road suggests that the universe is a moral universe. That is to say, there is a proper way to live in the universe. There is a content to every action, behavior, and belief. . ..There is direction to the universe. . ..Nothing has incidental meaning and there are no coincidences. (p. 46)

The moral and ontological stance that was advanced by Deloria explicitly adduces a dichotomy between the moral frameworks of indigenous peoples in America and their nonindigenous counterparts. While invoking reference to the "protect(ion) of property. . .coercive power, or a shadow of government" that may be affiliated with the American societal fabric, Deloria identifies a specific role of America's indigenous peoples: "[American Indians'] role has been to change the American conception of a society. . .to one in which liberty is. . .characterized by manners and a moral sense of right and wrong" (1999,

p. 221). According to Cajete (1994), the value of indigenous moral and religious perspectives is best appreciated by observing it not as a codified set of imperatives in bible-like documents that are invoked in ceremony, but rather as a process for understanding right and wrong and acting upon that understanding. Friesen (2000), in referring to the work of Cajete, described the sources of morality for indigenous peoples thusly:

> The traditional First Nations' metaphysical belief system did not adhere to an overall, organized description. It was a way of life, not carefully catalogued delineation of major and minor doctrines, subdoctrines, and corollary beliefs. Theology, to the Aboriginal, was a process rather than an intellectual structure. (p. 12)

Description of indigenous approaches to morality such as this are partially reflected in some aspects of curricula in primary and secondary schools. In many schools in Canada, frameworks for morality are invoked that may have as a source for their importance, this notion of process – the act of relationship-making and/or restoration is reflected in this. However, these frameworks have also become, perhaps for the purposes of consumption by nonindigenous peoples, reduced to imperatives that are, for better or worse, delineated and/or codified. One example of such moral frameworks that will be explored in this entry will be the *Seven Sacred Teachings* – a set of teachings that offer insight into how we should interface with one another. The Seven Teachings have become ubiquitous within public school programming and resources, and professional development exercises have been developed to support such programming.

Indigenous Morality Framework: The Seven Teachings

Most school districts that have made a commitment toward exploring indigenous perspectives in their respective educational programming have used the seven teachings in some manner, especially, in primary schools. Frequently a topic that is dealt with by teachers and community elders, the seven teachings are most usually affiliated with the Anishinaabe peoples but are also cited in the contexts of other indigenous groups as well.

There are two principles that may merit observance when considering the seven teachings. Firstly, associated with a point made early in this entry, is the concept of process. The seven teachings may appear as a framework for which its constituent elements represent discernable concepts – and they may be used in this way. However, their utility may be best understood as a process – particularly in relation to other people, creatures, and objects. Secondly, the manner in which the constituent elements of the seven teachings are conceptualized is not necessarily fixed and therefore not necessarily consistent from context to context, although the general spirit of the teachings is retained.

Sources from which the seven teachings may be invoked are numerous and varied. The number of teacher resources, children's books, and other nonacademic texts is considerable and commensurate with the growth in interest in this topic. In order to offer a cogent and representative example of the seven teachings from an academic source, Baskin et al.'s (2012) use of the framework as part of a study into the experiences of indigenous mothers has some potential:

– **Respect**: showing honor to someone or something; considering the well-being of everything; and treating everything with deference or courtesy.
– **Wisdom**: the practice of balance in all things.
– **Love**: treating people with special care and kindness.
– **Honesty**: being sincere, open, and trustworthy.
– **Humility**: place the needs of others first and avoid criticizing others.
– **Courage**: personal bravery in the face of fear; doing what needs to be done even when it is difficult or frightening.
– **Truth**: coming to know, and trying to understand the previous six teachings. Truth also focuses on the overarching picture as we try to understand both the past and the present.

The general affirmation among indigenous peoples is that the seven teachings are an

appropriate means of reflecting indigenous consciousness and an alleged alternative to other moral frameworks such as those found in biblical sources. This general affirmation on these two fronts may be one of the reasons why it is of interest as a framework in school and academic contexts. Blackstock (2016), in discussing the relevance of the seven teachings to social sciences research asserts that, "they are simple – by design to ensure commitment and accountability. The whole community in which we exist as Aboriginal peoples know the seven principles we must live. . .by" (p. 6). Raven and Bjarnadottir (2013) described the seven teachings as similarly generalizable:

> The seven teachings were our gifts. They are very powerful, and we have to know them by heart. They are teachings for the entire world, but hardly anyone makes use of them. . ..These teachings don't come in order, they are all equal, no teaching is superior to another. (p. 49)

Many school authorities have embraced the spirit of the seven teachings as being for everyone and have followed suit. The contemporary use of this framework in schools has raised some questions among some for the religious undertones that are perceived. Although some may not doubt its use for understanding a perspective on morality, the religious dimensions that may be associated with this framework may be of interest.

Intuition and Morality

The fundamental issues that appear to buoy current interest in the seven teachings are their relevance to the Canadian indigenous experience. Although the seven teachings may be invoked as a moral framework, the struggle for many may be the need to define morality, in denotative and/or designative terms, for the purposes of discussion, learning, and, at times, adherence. Attempts at discussing, defining, and codifying morality across religions and spiritual traditions have sometimes been undertaken with a view of adducing religious sources as evidenced in such delineated imperatives as the "golden rule" (Matthew, 7:12) and the Islamic values for charitable acts (e.g., Surah Al-Baqarah 2:274). The relationship between moral understandings and their frequently adduced sources is recurring and has shaped much of our views on morality, even for the nonbeliever.

In the case of indigenous spiritual precepts, there does appear to be a desire among indigenous peoples to disassociate such precepts from religion. The introduction of such practices as the "smudge" (an indigenous ceremony where flora such as sage and cedar are burned; the smoke that emanates is believed to cleanse people and places) has led to discussion regarding indigenous ceremonies that are viewed as religious in nature and therefore should not have a privileged place in school activities when the activities of other faiths do not receive such privilege. The issue of religious content or ceremonies of different sorts in schools is an important discussion that has been debated not only due to the religious differences among members of a particular school community that are made discernible when certain faiths are represented and others are not, but also because of how faith (i.e., committed belief in the absence of theoretical and/or empirical evidence) is viewed as inappropriate for curricular and non-curricular school programming in diverse multi-faith (including non-faith) primary and secondary institutions.

Indigenous practices and worldviews may be regarded as religious in nature, but in regard to the inclination to derive direction of a moral sort from such worldviews, there is an aspect of indigenous religious observance compared to that of the main monotheisms that merits consideration. As cited earlier, Gregory Cajete pointed out that indigenous religious worldviews are not delineated down to specific doctrines or reduced to codified precepts that are not subject to amendment – they represent a way of life. The fluidity of such worldviews and the interpretive dimension of the seven teachings allow for the intuition of individuals to manage our respective journeys toward moral truth. Intuition, in this context referring to the capacity to comprehend and/or believe something in an a priori manner, offers some philosophical support that is commensurate with Cajete's position.

William Ross's (1930) intuitionism takes aboard a prima facie duty approach that allows for a fluidity that follows from the non-delineated nature of the seven teachings. Ross's theory postulates that (1) human beings possess moral intuition, (2) this moral intuition leads to the establishment of intuitive moral duties, and (3) these intuitive duties are not absolute. In this theory, it is human beings themselves who are the sources of morality with no necessity for the invocation of faith as a source or justification for morality. Given that it is this intuition-based morality that informs ethical decisions and actions, it may be no surprise that conceptualizing ethics in a sort of framework, just as we see with the seven teachings, occurs. Ross conceptualized this with a set of intuitive duties (a departure from unified conceptualizations of ethics such as that of Immanuel Kant):

1. Promise keeping
2. Fidelity
3. Gratitude for favors
4. Beneficence
5. Justice
6. Self-improvement
7. Non-maleficence

Perhaps the most important dimension of Ross's theory, and one that allows for his duties to be subject to internal consideration, is that these seven duties need not be unconditionally addressed collectively. Instead, Ross emphasized that one must weigh these duties in whatever context that they are manifest: if, for instance, one duty conflicts with another, the duty that is judged to be more important will be acted upon – possibly at the expense of the other (Pojman and Fieser 2017).

The potential for understanding moral frameworks such as the seven teachings through the lens of Ross's intuitionism may merit consideration. With this lens of intuition comes a necessary emphasis upon our own capacities for thought, action, and social interface. One of the responsibilities of contemporary primary and secondary teachers is the provision of support for children and youth to develop into independent and informed citizens for whom a desirable state of well-being is enjoyed. Essential to this goal is the recognition of agency – the capacity human beings have for act in a conscious and deliberate manner – and how children and youth may exercise that agency in an appropriate manner. All of our responsibilities, to ourselves and to each other, must be understood through their correspondence with our beliefs and values and through the manner in which we act on those beliefs and values. If human agency is to be recognized and affirmed in observing this correspondence, then our abilities to discern moral issues and develop personal and collective moral positions are the sources from which topics of right and wrong emerge. And in the spirit of Ross's intuitionism, these are positions that must be navigated – a journey in which conflicting moral tenets must be managed.

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