Postcards from the Edge: 
Towards a Tribal, Postcolonial View of Adult Education

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to identify how Indigenous worldviews can contribute to several emergent and longstanding areas of interest within adult education. We argue that Indigenous worldviews can create space for deeper understanding of the limitations of Western Eurocentric rationalist views of learning, culture, liberation and progress.

Introduction

In this paper we offer up the beginnings of a tapestry woven from threads of a conversation which we have been engaged in for the past three years, although it has been disrupted and fragmented by the challenges of work, family and community. We are an Indigenous practitioner-scholar and a feminist adult education practitioner-scholar who have, through our conversations, discovered several nodes of mutual interest. Many of these concerns, which we outline below, are also common foci of attention in the study of adult education.

For example, there has existed longstanding concern within adult education with how learning is central to movements for social justice. We argue that much can be learned from the activities taking place within First Nations communities around the globe as they fight for self determination and for the conditions required for their survival. Lifelong learning has been another key notion for the field of adult education. Many critical adult educators have lamented the way neo-liberal policy and discourse has appropriated this concept and created a sense that lifelong learning now means individuals are ‘sentenced’ to lifelong schooling. Perhaps part of our efforts to re-imagine the power of lifelong learning can be enlivened by exploring the meaning of lifelong learning within Indigenous cultures where learning is not separated from community and family life, where the past and the future are living in the present. The centrality of story telling within Indigenous cultures and communities and the interest in story telling and narrative within adult education presents another opportunity to learn. In recent years we have also begun to discuss and understand better the role of spirituality and learning. This is another topic where dialogue between non-native and native adult educators should take place. There is much we can learn from understanding the holistic, experiential and place-based approach to adult education from Indigenous ways of knowing that value multiple aspects of human engagement and relational orientation.

In the remainder of this paper, we present each of our voices reflecting our different points of entry into this consideration of a tribal, postcolonial view of adult education. We have been engaged in a dialogic inquiry where we each occupy positions of learner and educator, sometimes simultaneously. Our dialogue has included others as well. Burbules (1993) emphasizes the relational quality of the interaction where there are aspects of dialogue “… that are beyond us, that we discover, that we are changed by” (p. xii). We suggest that dialogue be understood and practiced as the way for non-Indigenous and Indigenous adult educators to learn together. Our
conversations have required that we be patient, that we listen, and that we tolerate disagreement.

Michael: The Sacred and the Profane

In the last decade, a number of scholars, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, have illuminated the colliding nature of Western academic knowledge and traditional, Indigenous ways of knowing. These tensions reverberate not just around themes of orality vs text, colonial hegemony, or linguistic structures, but are embedded in counterpoised epistemic assumptions between the two worlds of Native and non-Native. Paulo Freire’s notion of cultural power has been applied as a way of framing a theory of Indigenous education that contains emancipatory possibilities, but Freire’s model has problems when applied to tribal approaches to culture and community. Freire’s dialectical and materialist assertions about individuals transforming culture through praxis is contrary to many Indigenous perspectives affirming the culture’s sacred power to transform individuals and create collective harmony and revelatory moments. For First Nations, the culture, when clarified apart from colonial hegemony, affirms sacred, traditional relationships between humans, animals, and plants. This mythic understanding of responsibility is in contradistinction to Freirean objectivity predicated on rights and freedoms that would remove individuals from the context of the sacredness of culture. I suggest that an exploration of the Indigenous resonances and conflicts with Freire’s concepts of culture, power, and liberation will be fruitful for both Indigenous studies as well as the field of adult education. I would like to draw attention to how oral tradition has acted as a uniquely Native form of critical pedagogy and how First Nations community sensibilities are linked to relationships with the landscape and the local sense of place. Knowledge and power are, from the Native perspective, not transportable from the sacred, and local, sense of place.

Sandy Grande (2000), in a Harvard Educational Review article, explores both the tensions and resonances with critical theorists. She point out that, “the particular history of imperialism enacted upon Indigenous peoples requires a reevaluation of dominant view of democracy and social justice, and of the universal validity of such emancipatory projects” (p. 468). One of the central problems of incorporating Aboriginal perspectives into a more generalizable discourse on social justice is that, too often, a liberal normalizing narrative on democratic individualism is asserted. The fundamental assumption of this narrative is that cultural forms are constructed by individuals within intersecting and colliding matrices of power relationships. For indigenous peoples, this is a problematic stance since it assumes that once culture can be modified sufficiently, both distributive and representative justice can be enacted. It is a modernist teleology that asserts progress as a meta-narrative.

For Indigenous people, the concept of progress is suspect, at best; at worst, progress is a tandem to “democracy” which implies acquiescence and assimilation into the cognitive and economic imperialism of atomized individuals competing for rights and privileges. Feminism, including Maxist, Liberal, and Eco-Feminism has been viewed as disruptive to tribal values that assert sacred categories of gender relationships and oral traditions that affirm intricate patterns of responsibilities and identities. Human rights and social justice groups, along with some environmental groups, have been unwilling to respect First Nations’ claims to a sovereign collectivist sensibility that affirms the mythic sense of both identity and relationality embedded in oral tradition. In the Indigenous sense, this oral tradition is circumscribed by a sense of place.
That is, the land itself contains stories and knowledge about proper human conduct, relationships between men and women, and the structuring of society contiguous with the natural forces and laws of a bioregion. For tribal people, a critical theory that is abstracted from the concrete and mythopoetic sensibilities of the land, is a potentially dangerous reification.

I urge others to examine what is meant when the terms ideology and culture enter into our academic conversations. I have been thinking that culture is the agreement about what the debates are, and ideology is the debate. I would like to go back to my point about Freire’s problematic position regarding culture. It is not possible to consciously change culture in the sense that we can predict the effects of our choices and decisions. One of the questions I put to the teacher education students in my classes is “do cultures have the right to defend themselves or only individuals”. I also want them to think about what social justice means when you consider culture, because all cultures have healthy and pathological aspects. For Indigenous peoples, we have creation stories where the culture produces the people. A key to creating dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples is to tell each other stories. I think we need more stories from non-Indigenous authors who speak about the experience of their research and how it has disrupted their worldview.

Shauna: Being Apart and Coming Together

I will take up Michael’s invitation for non-Indigenous authors to speak about their experiences of disruption and enter into this conversation both eager and hesitant. The more I learn about Indigenous worldviews, the more I realize how much I do not know. I am struck with the deep and fundamental ontological and epistemological differences between Indigenous worldviews and the one I was born into, the one that I see, hear, think, and feel with. The simultaneity of knowing/not knowing is both exciting and troubling. The ground has shifted. Not knowing and knowing that I do not know at times creates space for learning, and at other times, the air is sucked out of the room.

I have argued with Michael about his perspective on Freire’s approach to culture and some feminist critiques of the gendered division of labour within Indigenous society. But his critiques have also drawn my attention to the profound differences in our worldviews and our own meaning making in relation to understanding culture and gender. One of the key outcomes for me in my conversations with Michael, has been a different understanding of culture. From the perspective of critical pedagogy, and key to many different feminisms, is a sense that culture is a ‘problem’. Culture (read patriarchal, capitalist) is implicated in the maintenance of oppression, particularly women’s oppression. A paradox has become clear. Many feminist strategies for change are based on the view that what needs to change and be transformed is culture because it reinforces certain kinds of oppressions. For Indigenous tribes, culture is what colonial and imperial forces have attempted, sometimes with success, to destroy. Culture in these struggles is what must be sustained; it is at the heart of resistance and survival.

I offer to this conversation some ideas that I have learned from other teachers and experiences. Engaging in dialogue with Indigenous peoples has only happened in my adult life. A turning point in my own education about Canada’s colonial legacy, particularly residential schools, came when, during my doctoral studies, I attended a summer institute on gender and development in Halifax. There I met women from around the world and several other Canadian
students, and two First Nations women. Nora was an Ojibway woman who worked in literacy and was well known for her efforts to maintain and teach Indigenous languages. Dilah was a medicine woman, was active in band politics and was from the Pegan reserve next to where I was born. It was an intense month-long residential learning experience where these women, with care and respect, confronted and challenged me. One particular conversation has remained in my memory. Nora was expressing frustration about how white women, although the minority in the program, were dominating the conversations in class. I agreed, reflecting that I needed to talk less myself. She reiterated her concern about domination, describing the problem of ‘talking heads’; I repeated my resolution to talk less. She turned to me and said “Shauna, it isn’t simply a matter of you not talking. I want you to listen, really listen. Do not equate an absence of talk with an ability to listen”. Then she took my hands and put them firmly over my ears pressing and massaging until my ears were almost burning. She then took my hands and placed them over my heart and with tears of frustration said, “… use you ears and your heart, they will teach you far more than you can imagine”.

Students in the classes I have taught have also been my teachers, particularly the First Nations students. As co-advisor, I just finished reading a graduating paper by N’kixw’stn James (2001) about her own journey of healing (and that of her community) from the ‘soul sickness of residential schools’ and have learned much about spirituality, dreaming and community rituals. I am learning from Dolores van der Wey, a PhD student in our department, about the possibilities and the conflicts between feminism and Indigenous worldviews. Dolores brings to my attention the need to work contextually, to consider women’s roles and activities within Indigenous cultures from a view of balance, complementarity and reciprocity (see Allen, 1986; Smith,1999; Anderson, 2000).

Unless those points are made clear they run the risk of being interpreted as gender oppression; of impeding an Indigenous understanding. And yet, having said this, it must be added that First Nations communities are not static, nor is there a unified female identity or a single female perspective. One might consider a “critical” conception of gender as the ideologically project of a repressively patriarchal hegemony especially in view of earlier commentary on the gendered nature of colonialism. To do so, though, would be to assume that all Indigenous peoples suffered the consequences in the same way, to the same extent, and that the struggles are all about the same things. (Van der Wey, 2001, p. 12)

Many of my teachers have been other Indigenous scholars. Winona LaDuke (1997, p. 23) writes about the necessity of finding home. “It is a challenge that people of this society face in belonging to a settler culture. They have been raised in this land, but they do not know its ceremony, its song, or its naming.” She speaks about natural law and the state of balance as fundamental to Indigenous peoples. In this worldview most of the world is animate. She

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1 I have obtained permission from N’kixw’stn to reference her graduating paper.

2 I have obtained permission from Dolores to reference her paper.
compares this with “industrial thinking” which is based on the belief that “… humans are entitled
to dominion over nature” (p. 27). She also brings a fresh perspective on the notion of “skill” (a
concept which dominates current policy discourse). She speaks about what a belief in an animate
world means in relation to skill. “In our cultural practice … it is not because of skill that a hunter
can harvest a deer or a caribou; it is because he or she has been honorable and has given
asemah (tobacco). That is how you are able to harvest, not because you are a good hunter but because
the animal gives itself to you” (p. 26).

The writings of Fyre Jean Graveline (2000) have spoken powerfully about how her
cultural practices have been essential to her resistance to the racism and backlash she has
experienced as an instructor within the post-secondary system. “I am always unprepared for the
backlash of White authority” (p. 286). Her wisdom about voice and silence have shifted my
thinking about these key concepts that are central to feminist pedagogy. “Sometimes, giving
Voice, giving voice to my identity, my politics, my Aboriginal consciousness, paradoxically can be
a lesson in silencing of me or others” (p. 289).

Chrystos’ poetry has taught me much about racism, violence and survival. In her fifth
book of poetry “Fire Power” she says:

Telling the truth is powerful medicine. It is a fire that lights the way for others. Truth has
always been forbidden by government, whose purpose is to exploit. When we speak our “Fire
Power,” we join a long & honored line of warriors against injustice. Do not bother to feel
guilty if you life may seem less difficult than mine. Use your ease to make the lives of others
easier. As I have, as many women & men & children have, you can make your life a weapon
against exploitation. (Chrystos, 1995, p. 130)

Himani Bannerji (2000) has also helped me to understand the point that Michael is
she breaks into his smooth stylistics and what she calls his ‘sweet reasonableness’ to point out some
depribly troubling and dangerous perspectives. What I find particularly useful in Bannerji’s argument
is how Taylor cannot see how he is implicated in the politics of difference. She writes:

Because Taylor sees culture as separated from social relations, and discourses of power and
difference as a sort of cultural diversity, and also lacks any theory of ideology or hegemony,
he cannot see his own implication in the politics of difference. His ideological position and
knowledge location are obscure to him, submerged as they are in his philosophical or
metaphysical persona. By the same token he cannot identify what he considers as normal
western culture as a hegemonic form of anglo-European culture. (p. 133)

Bannerji calls my attention to how domination and hegemony works and operates to
create vision and hearing impairments in those members of the dominant anglo-European culture. She calls this “Eurocentric self-referentiality” and reminds us how easy it is to forget “… that there are differences which come as cultural legacies of the non-Europeans, and which are
negatively interpreted irrespective of their actual content when they enter into societies pre-
textured with colonial and imperialist relations and ideologies” (p. 147). She calls attention to
what is at stake in demands for cultural rights and freedoms. “It is not a plea for recognition that “they” put forward, but rather a struggle to end exploitation and injustice” (p. 147).

Endnote

We hope this paper fits well with the foci of the CASAE 2001 conference which calls for efforts to reclaim and honor our stories and explorations of how adult education can contribute to taking action on urgent questions of a suffering world. This paper explores some Indigenous resonances and some conflicts with dominant concepts of culture, power, and liberation as articulated in mainstream adult education academic discourse. It reflects how oral tradition has acted as a uniquely Native form of critical pedagogy and how First Nations community sensibilities are linked to relationships with the landscape and the local sense of place. Knowledge and power are, from the Native perspective, not transportable from the sacred, and local sense of place.

References:
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