

RESPECTING ABORIGINAL KNOWING IN THE ACADEMY

*Ross Hoffman**

Abstract

Over the last decade, I have articulated what I have termed “A Conceptual Framework of Aboriginal Knowing.” The understanding that I bring to this originates out of my lived experience with traditional knowledge holders, and an examination of the literature pertaining to the ontology and epistemology of Aboriginal knowing, Aboriginal ethics or guiding principles, and the characteristics of Aboriginal knowledge transmission. This descriptive analysis gathers together a range of conceptualizations to build a comprehensive graphic for understanding how the literature describes Aboriginal knowledge. I believe this conceptual framework can be utilized to broaden our understanding of how we can develop and maintain respectful relationships and processes as we incorporate Aboriginal knowledge within our work in the academy.

Keywords

Aboriginal knowledge, Aboriginal epistemology, Aboriginal ethics, Indigenous knowledge

Introduction

Over the last decade, within my work in the discipline of Native Studies, I have articulated what I have termed “A Conceptual Framework of Aboriginal Knowing.” This conceptual framework has been developed through a discussion of the ontology and epistemology

of Aboriginal knowing, Aboriginal ethics or guiding principles, and the characteristics of Aboriginal knowledge transmission. In its initial conception, it was intended to provide others with the opportunity to more fully understand the nature of my research, which exists within an Aboriginal context in Canada. This descriptive analysis gathers together a range of

* Associate Professor, First Nations Studies Department, University of Northern British Columbia, Prince George, British Columbia, Canada. Email: Ross.Hoffman@unbc.ca

conceptualizations to build a comprehensive graphic for understanding how the literature describes Aboriginal knowledge. I believe it can be utilized to broaden our understanding of how to develop and maintain a respectful relationship between Aboriginal knowledge and the academy.

The academy is a contested site for the production and transmission of knowledge and understanding about Aboriginal people. Therefore the integration of Aboriginal knowledge into the academy is often accompanied by numerous tensions and challenges. This article does not delve into that discussion. A wide ranging discussion of these challenges can be found in Mihesuah and Wilson (2004). The intention of this article is to provide a framework that can be adapted and applied in ways that respect the readers' specific cultural and institutional environments. Therefore, within the context of this paper, I do not provide specific examples of the application of the concepts presented nor how they might be incorporated into one's own teaching and research. An extensive account of how I have incorporated these concepts into my own research can be found in Hoffman (2010).

My overall understanding of Aboriginal ontology, epistemology, ethics, and methodology is a reflection of two broad sources of knowledge: traditional and academic. I am a Canadian of mixed heritage. My great-grandparents on my father's side immigrated to Canada from Germany in the 1880s and my mother was born and raised in England. I have been fortunate to have the opportunity to understand an Aboriginal way of knowing and being in the world through my relationship with the late Joe P. Cardinal and his wife, Jenny—highly respected Cree Elders from the Saddle Lake First Nation in Alberta. My primary source of understanding originates out of my lived experience within the spiritual community that formed around Joe's ceremonial leadership. This has spanned over 20 years and it involved more than a decade of apprenticeship under Joe's guidance.

I have also followed academic trails that were blazed and later established by many other scholars. These scholars are primarily Indigenous people, the majority being from Aboriginal nations whose traditional territories lie within the boundaries of what is now known as Canada.

The ontology and epistemology of Aboriginal knowing

The nature of the world and ways of knowing

Aboriginal ontologies and epistemologies are rooted in worldviews that are inclusive of both the sacred and the secular. The fundamental ontological principle is that the world exists in one reality composed of an inseparable weave of secular and sacred dimensions.

Stemming from this is the epistemological principle that knowledge is gained through interaction with the physical as well as the spiritual aspects of the world (Battiste, 1988; Beck, Walters, & Francisco 1990; Bopp, Bopp, Brown, & Lane, 1984; Brant-Castellano, 2000; Cajete, 2000; Colorado, 1988; Couture, 1989, 1991, 1996; Dumont, 1976; Ermine, 1995; Fixico, 2003; Meyer, 2003, 2012; Irwin, 1994; Kawagley, n.d.; Simpson, 1999). Dumont (1976) described this way of seeing the world as "primal vision." According to Dumont, "This way of seeing recognizes two different realities which though separated by a seemingly tremendous gulf, are concurrent and simultaneous as well as impinging upon one another constantly" (p. 39).

Couture (1991) refers to physical and spiritual reality in terms of "inseparable realities" and "multidimensional knowing." According to him, "The mode of indigenous knowing is a non-dualistic process—it transcends the usual oppositions between rational knowledge and intuition, spiritual insight and physical behavior. It is inclusive of all reality" (p. 57).

Meyer (2003) uses the term causal (spirit) to describe this “level of consciousness” that is inclusive of what she sees as the two other ways of knowing—gross (physical) and subtle (mental). Similar to Couture, Meyer says that at this level of consciousness “all dualities merge” (p. 253). Similarly, Battiste (1988) uses the expression “complementary modes of knowing” in order to describe the nature of the world and how it is known:

Fundamental to Aboriginal knowledge is the awareness that beyond the immediate sense world of perception, memory, imagination, and feeling lies another world from which knowledge, power, or medicine is derived, from which the Aboriginal peoples will survive and flourish. The complementary modes of knowing in the tribal world form the essence of tribal epistemology ... (p. 18)

Speaking directly about the practice of research, Dumont (1976) informs us that it is only through this “fuller way of viewing the world” that we as researchers, especially non-Aboriginal researchers, are ever to “understand and sensibly appreciate” Aboriginal ways of knowing. In Dumont’s words, if we are not able to do this “we limit ourselves critically.” Vine Deloria Jr. (1994) also addresses this paradigmatic necessity in the foreword to Irwin’s study of the visionary traditions of the Plains:

The greatest difficulty in exploring the religious world of the Plains Indians is getting the reader and/or scholar to take the material seriously. What do we make of a vision account wherein a person experiences the transformation of a bird or animal into one of several forms in sequence, offers them a plant, root, or claw, and the dreamer, coming down from the hill, holds in his possession *the actual physical thing* granted him? It is not, of course, very believable in western intellectual circles, yet it happens, and if the scholar is going to understand the experience, he or she must

grant that an event far out of the paradigm of western materialistic science has occurred. (Deloria Jr., 1994, viii)

The nature of time

Within an Aboriginal ontological perspective, the concept of time is not linear (Meyer, 2003). The past and the future co-exist with the present. The awareness of the sacred nature of the world “collapses time and space” (Colorado, 1988, p. 54). Dumont (1976) describes myth as not being “historical in the sense that it happened in the past (mythical past). It can and does re-occur continually as long as we recognize the sacred” (p. 38). This is what Doxtator (2001) refers to as “continually moving continuities” when she describes the nature of time and history in Native oral traditions. It is within the realm of the sacred that gifted individuals are able to access the past and the future through ceremony, dreams and visions.

The nature of the individual and ways of knowing

Another fundamental tenet contained within this Aboriginal paradigm is that humans are composed of a body, a mind, a heart and a spirit. Humans are physical, mental, emotional and spiritual beings (Absolon, 2011; Archibald, 1997; Bopp et al., 1984; Couture, 1989; Lightning, 1992). Couture (1989) refers to these aspects of the self as “levels or dimensions” (p. 25), whereas Lightning (1992) refers to these aspects of the self as “domains” (p. 232). It is through each of these inter-related dimensions or domains that one acquires knowledge. Within this holistic understanding of the nature of the individual is the belief that the more these aspects of the self are in balance or harmony with each other, the greater the potential is for a person to access the various sources of knowledge. The human senses are the primary means of acquiring knowledge of

oneself and the surrounding world. Physically and mentally, knowledge is gained empirically through observation and experience (Colorado, 1988; Kawagley, n.d.; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Through the heart, the emotional part of the self, individuals have the opportunity to acquire a higher level of knowledge and understanding. According to Kawagley (n.d.), all thoughts and actions need to be tempered “with the ‘heart,’ which is on a higher plane than knowledge of the mind.” Not accessing and applying emotional knowledge, whether by ignorance or by choice, creates a potential imbalance at the individual and societal level. Hampton (1995b) says, “Feeling is connected to our intellect and we ignore, hide from, disguise, and suppress that feeling at our peril and at the peril of those around us” (p. 52).

Joe P. Cardinal shared his understanding of the importance of the heart in the following way:

The heart is one of the first things that is developed in the fetus after life begins. Everything else comes later, is formed around it; revolves around it. ... We have lost touch with our heart. ... For many people their mind is in control. ... The journey from the heart to the mind can be a long one. (Personal communication, 17 May 2000)

Aboriginal theory also acknowledges the spiritual nature of the self and the spiritual dimension of knowledge (Absolon, 2011; Battiste, 1988; Beck et al., 1990; Bopp et al., 1984; Brant-Castellano, 2000; Cajete, 2000; Colorado, 1988; Couture, 1989, 1991, 1996; Dumont, 1976; Ermine, 1995; Hoffman, 2010; Irwin, 1994; Kawagley, n.d.; Kovatch, 2009; Meyer, 2003, 2012; Simpson, 1999). Spiritual knowledge is revealed through a variety of means such as prayer, meditation, intuition, dreams, visions, and ceremonies. Simpson (1999) refers to spiritual knowledge as the “foundation of Indigenous knowledge.” According to her, “It is at once context, content and process” (p. 60).

The four aspects of the self and four ways of knowing are inter-related parts that compose a whole individual and the ways in which they are able to acquire knowledge. Through his work with the late Cree Elder Louis Sunchild, Lightning (1992) learned that in order for a person to achieve balance and harmony, he/she must achieve a state of being which Sunchild referred to as “compassionate mind.” In order for compassionate mind to be achieved,

... we have to rely for learning on our total self, our whole self, our mental capacities as well as our emotional capacities. ... the unity of the process is not just cognitive and emotional, but physical and spiritual; the total, the unity, includes all of those. (p. 244)

Weber-Pillwax (2001b) refers to this way of knowing as full understanding. “By full understanding is meant a capacity, an ability, and a willingness to immerse oneself totally in the event as it is enacted or unfolds” (p. 156). One way in which this way of knowing is experienced is through participation in traditional ceremonies. Couture (1991) refers to ceremonies as “primary oral literature” (p. 58). He explains that, “It is true that the whole Cosmos teaches, but it is through oft-repeated ceremonial participation that one enters the root experiences, concepts, and teachings” (Couture, 1989, p. 148).

In Figure 1, I have graphically illustrated “The Nature of the Individual and Ways of Knowing.” The illustration is circular because a circle is the best way to represent the holistic qualities of balance, equality, and inter-relatedness that I wish to convey. It is also intended to respect the circular nature of native philosophy in which “the concept of the circle is fundamental to understanding knowledge” (Fixico, 2003, p. 45). This illustration, and the ones that follow in Figures 2 to 4, are not intended to represent, or be an example of, the Aboriginal paradigm and teaching tool known as a Medicine Wheel.

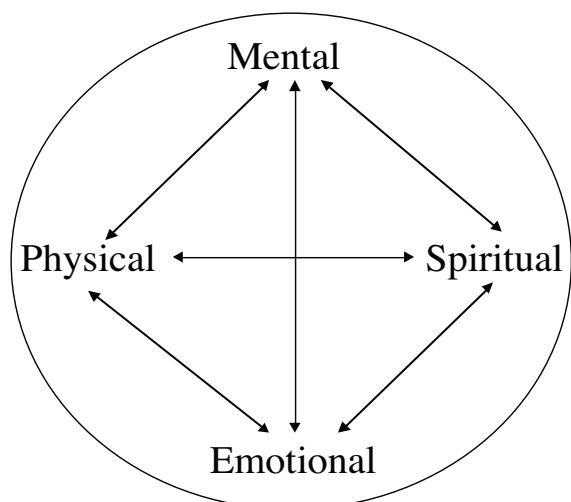


FIGURE 1 The Nature of the Individual and Ways of Knowing

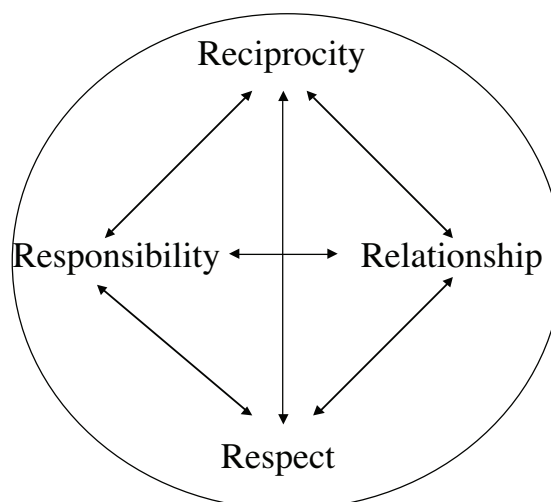


FIGURE 2 Aboriginal Ethics: Guiding Principles

Aboriginal ontologies and epistemologies in the academy

In order to respect Aboriginal knowing in the academy we must be willing and able to fully accept both the secular and the spiritual nature of reality. That is the ontological basis of Aboriginal knowing. We must also be willing to accept the Aboriginal perspective that time is not strictly a linear construct as it is framed in the Western academic tradition. Further to that, we must acknowledge that the spiritual and emotional aspects of human beings are of equal importance to their physical and mental natures. We must also be willing to understand that the spiritual and emotional domains are ways in which individuals come to know.

Aboriginal ethics: Guiding principles

Within my lived experience as a learner in both traditional and academic contexts, I have identified four ethical or guiding principles—relationship, respect, responsibility, and reciprocity. These same principles have been identified by Archibald (1997): “I have to argue that three essential cultural principles; respect, responsibility, and reciprocity must have a

central place in First Nations story research” (p. 57); and by Weber-Pillwax (as cited in Steinhauer, 2002): “A researcher must make sure that the three R’s—Respect, Reciprocity and Relationality—are guiding the research” (p. 73).

In the process of working with Native Elders in order to understand the tradition of storytelling, Archibald (1997) identified “seven principles which provide the beginnings of a theoretical framework” (p. 16). The principles she identified are respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, wholism, inter-relatedness, and synergy. Archibald’s work stresses the importance of four of these: respect, reverence, responsibility, and reciprocity (pp. 91 & 157). In the conceptual framework that I am presenting, the discussion of reverence (spirituality) and wholism is placed within the context of the nature of the individual and the nature of knowing. Inter-relatedness is discussed within the principle of relationship. The four guiding principles of relationship, respect, responsibility, and reciprocity are identified in whole, or in part, in the literature pertaining to Aboriginal ways of knowing discussed by the following Aboriginal scholars: Battiste (1988); Brant-Castellano (2000, 2004); Cajete (2000); Couture (1987, 1989, 1991); Fixico (2003);

Hampton (1995a); Lightning (1992); Simpson (1999); Smith (1999); Steinhauer (2002); Struthers (2001); Weber-Pillwax (2001a); Wilson (2008). I will discuss each of the four guiding principles separately and then address their inter-relatedness.

In Figure 2, I have graphically illustrated the “Aboriginal Ethics: Guiding Principles.”

Relationship

Native American knowledge is based largely on the understanding of relationships—the interrelationship between human beings, animals, plants, societies, the cosmos, the spirit world ... (Holm, Pearson, & Chavis, 2003, pp. 17–18)

The principle of relationship is the essence of what comprises Aboriginal ontologies, epistemologies, ethics, and methodologies. It is central to an understanding of the nature of the world, what can be known, and how one goes about knowing. The principle of relationship embodies context, conduct and process. It is omnipresent. In fact it is the omnipresence of relationality that makes the task of attempting to discuss each of the guiding principles separately a challenge.

All of life is inter-related. People are related to all living things (Black Elk & Brown, 1953; Bopp et al., 1984; Fixico, 2003; Ladner, 2000). The relationships people have with the world around themselves are both secular and sacred and are inclusive of all living things. Knowledge stems from an understanding of these relationships (Cajete, 2004; Colorado, 1988; Fixico, 2003; Holm et al., 2003), as well as being derived from them (Meyer, 2003; Wilson, 2008). According to Shawn Wilson (2001), knowledge itself is relational and it “is shared with all of creation” (p. 176). Quality of life is a reflection of the relationships a person has with others and all aspects of the world around him/her (Weber-Pillwax, 2001a). This is why

the importance of place, territory, “the land,” clan, nation, and “the Ancestors,” is inherent in the words of Aboriginal people when they speak of Aboriginal life and ways of knowing.

The primacy of the principle of relationship within Aboriginal research has been voiced by Stan Wilson (2001) and Shawn Wilson (2001, 2003). Weber-Pillwax (2001a) and Shawn Wilson (2001) speak of relationality in terms of the accountability of researchers towards the individuals and the communities that they work with. It is through relationships that knowledge is shared between those who participate in the research and researchers; and between researchers and those who will hopefully benefit from the results. It is also within the context of relationships that one learns and demonstrates/actualizes the principles of respect, responsibility and reciprocity.

Respect

Respect means “to feel or show honor or esteem for someone or something; to consider the well-being of, or to treat someone or something with deference or courtesy.” Showing respect is a basic law of life. (Bopp et al., 1984, p. 76)

The principle of respect provides the context and describes the manner in which all positive relationships are established and maintained. This includes one’s relationship with self, others, and all living things. The importance of respect is stressed in most Aboriginal cultures. Within various cultural contexts it is referred to as a law (Bopp et al., 1984), a sacred gift, (Benton-Banai, 1979), a fundamental principle (Archibald, 1997) and a teaching (Michell, 1999). Respect is demonstrated to “all our relations” through the acknowledgement and honouring of all aspects of Creation that provide the gifts that sustain our lives.

Within the context of Aboriginal research, respect is a fundamental principle, which must guide researchers’ thoughts and actions.

The ethical imperative of respect, and the importance of establishing respectful relationships within Aboriginal research, have been addressed by Archibald (1997), Haig-Brown & Archibald (1996), Michell (1999), Ridington (2000), Smith (1999), Weber-Pillwax (2003), and Shawn Wilson (2001, 2003). Through her work within the Native storytelling tradition, Archibald (1997) was able to articulate the ubiquitous nature of respect that ideally exists in a research relationship with an Elder. Archibald's description speaks to the mutual nature of respect that is evident in a respectful research relationship. She also addresses the fact that it is the responsibility of the researcher to be ready to receive cultural knowledge:

... respect must be an integral part of the relationship between the Elder and the researcher. Respect for each other as human beings, respect for the cultural knowledge, and respect for cultural protocol for honouring the authority and expertise of the Elder teacher. The principle of respect includes trust and being culturally worthy. [Footnote: Being worthy means being ready, intellectually, emotionally, physically, and spiritually to fully absorb cultural knowledge.] (Archibald, 1997, p. 69)

Responsibility

Our sole reason for being here as Indians; as whites, as any race, is to recognize our responsibilities to our Creator ... (Cardinal, 1977, p. 221)

Responsibility is the guiding principle that articulates the accountability that is inherent in our relationships with "all our relations." An individual's responsibilities begin with the self and extend outwards to family, community, nation, and the natural world (Archibald, 1997). This includes the Ancestors and the people who are yet to be born. Aboriginal peoples have also been given responsibilities to care for the land

and the life forms that their traditional territories contain. Balance and harmony at the individual and collective levels reflects how well people understand and actualize all their responsibilities.

Within the context of the transmission and internalization of knowledge, varied levels of responsibility exist. Those who possess knowledge (e.g., Elders) have the cultural responsibility to caretake the information (Rasmus, 2002) and also to share it (Archibald, 1997; Makokis, 2001). At the same time it is individuals who are responsible for their own learning (Couture, 1982) and the application of what has been learned (Couture, 1987). Over time, it is ideally a cyclical process (Archibald, 1997). Those that acquire knowledge and demonstrate responsibility through their actions are given the responsibility to pass that knowledge on to others.

In Aboriginal research, the principle of responsibility is viewed in terms of those actions that support the maintenance of personal, community and cultural integrity (Archibald, 1997; Haig-Brown & Archibald, 1996; Kovatch, 2009; Rasmus, 2002; Smith, 1999; Steinhauer, 2002; Weber-Pillwax, 2001a, 2003; Wilson, 2003). The onus of responsibility lies with the researcher to frame, conduct and disseminate the research in a manner that is conducive to the social and cultural values of the people involved.

Reciprocity

To be in harmony with oneself, others, members of the animal kingdom and other elements of nature requires that First Nations people respect the gifts of each entity and establish and maintain respectful reciprocal relations with each. (Archibald, 1997, p. 78)

In the Aboriginal world, these respectful, reciprocal relations are established and maintained through the use of protocols, ceremonies and other ritual acts (Michell, 1999). Prayer is one

means by which reverence is demonstrated towards all the gifts that sustain our lives. The act of making an offering to another person, a member of the spirits of the animal kingdom, an aspect of the natural world, or the spiritual world, is another means by which respectful, reciprocal relations are established and maintained. Reciprocity between people is often demonstrated through the act of giving. Giving back can take the form of material gifts, or the giving of one's time and effort to provide assistance to someone. Reciprocal relationships between Elders and members of younger generations that involve the giving of oneself are often the manner in which traditional knowledge is shared inter-generationally. Public acknowledgement of what one has received from someone else is another form of reciprocity in Aboriginal communities.

The importance of the application of the principle of reciprocity within Aboriginal research has been addressed by Archibald (1997); Atkinson (2001); Kovatch (2009); Michell (1999); Weber-Pillwax (as cited in Steinhauer, 2002); and Shawn Wilson (2001). The principle of reciprocity is practised in Aboriginal research in several ways. Michell (1999) sees the incorporation of the Cree cultural protocol of offering tobacco to an individual from whom you are seeking knowledge as an acknowledgement of the wider ethic of reciprocity. Archibald (1997) uses the term "reciprocal action" to describe the cyclical process of responsibility in the relationship between an Elder/teacher and a researcher/learner. She also describes the acknowledgement of cultural property—the act of stating the cultural, territorial and personal origin of a story, song, or dance—as a form of reciprocity. Another way in which a researcher can demonstrate the principle of reciprocity is to ensure that the results of the research are meaningful and useful to both insiders and outsiders (Haig-Brown & Archibald, 1996; Martin, 2003; Smith, 1999).

The inter-relatedness of the guiding principles

Each principle has a separateness which is like a long flat piece of cedar bark used for weaving a basket. As each piece is woven together, it may lose its separateness ... (Archibald, 1997, p. 215)

As has been previously stated, it is difficult to speak of the guiding principles of relationship, respect, responsibility, and reciprocity separately. They are inter-related. The principles of respect, responsibility, and reciprocity exist in the context of a relationship. Respect, responsibility, and reciprocity are also functionally related. The qualities of one depend on the relative qualities of the others. A fully respectful, responsible or reciprocal relationship can only exist when the other two principles are being demonstrated as well.

In Aboriginal research, the actualization of these inter-related principles is an integral aspect of success. In her discussion around the successful collaborative work of Wickwire and Robinson (1989, 1992), and Cruikshank (1990), Archibald (1997) describes the four guiding principles of relationship, respect, responsibility and reciprocity, in practice:

The relationships between the Elder-teachers and academic researchers were developed over a long period of time and respect for each other was evident. Each eventually agreed upon their responsibility and their work with story—storywork—was reciprocal. The Elders were given knowledge through stories and had a cultural responsibility to pass it on to others. The academic researchers were given knowledge through the Elders and their stories and gained an appreciation of their ethical responsibility to represent the knowledge and stories in a respectful textual manner. (p. 63)

Aboriginal ethics in the academy

In order to respect Aboriginal knowing in the academy we must be able to internalize and actualize Aboriginal ethics in all aspects of our work: teaching, research, and service. In all that we do we must demonstrate respect towards all our relations—our colleagues, our students, the people in the communities we work with, and all other life forms. We must also demonstrate continually that we are capable of handling Aboriginal knowledge in a responsible manner as defined by the cultural context from which it arises. Taking the time necessary to learn what this responsibility entails is in fact a demonstration of respect and responsibility. In terms of reciprocity it is essential that we “give back” in a culturally appropriate manner to those individuals, communities, and Nations who share their knowledge with us. In terms of Aboriginal knowledge we must go beyond the ethic of “do no harm” and ask ourselves: How are my actions serving the individuals, communities, and Nations that I work with?

Primary characteristics of Aboriginal knowledge transmission

Aboriginal knowledge transmission can be characterized in the following manner. Firstly, within the cultural context that it originates, Aboriginal knowledge is primarily shared between people by means of oral transmission. Secondly, it is gained through experiential learning processes that facilitate understanding through, and within, the mind, body, heart and spirit. This includes knowledge that is gained empirically through observation, as well as that which is learned within the spiritual realm of ceremony and dreams. The other primary characteristic of Aboriginal knowledge acquisition is that it is a subjective experience occurring within a collective paradigm.

Aboriginal systems of knowledge are rooted in their respective oral traditions. It is through

these various oral traditions that knowledge has been continually transmitted from one generation to the next (Battiste, 1988; Brant-Castellano, 2000; Couture, 1991). Couture (1991) refers to the “traditional indigenous mind” as “an oral literature dependent mind as compared to a mind that is print literature dependent” (p. 58). The ever-increasing proliferation of literacy among Aboriginal peoples has not replaced what Weber-Pillwax (2001b) refers to as a “consciousness of primary orality” (p. 153). Oral literature includes all aspects of the oral tradition such as oral history, stories, teachings, song, dance and ceremony. Sarris (1993) broadens the parameters of what constitutes the oral tradition even further. Through his work with the Pomo Elder Mabel McKay, his understanding of oral texts became more inclusive.

Again, by talk I include all speech categories—responses to questions, gossip, idle chitchat, stories—that Mabel may use in conversation with others, since as I hope to demonstrate, the various categories engender the same effect. The talk establishes the premises on which an understanding of her world can begin ... (p. 18)

The oral transmission of knowledge takes place in a relationship that involves active participants—speaker(s)/listener(s), teacher(s)/learner(s), practitioners/observers, etc. It is an experiential learning process.

Experiential learning is the primary mode by which knowledge is gained within an Aboriginal system of knowledge (Couture, 1989, 1991, 1996). Ermine (1995) goes as far as to say that from an Aboriginal epistemological perspective, “experience is knowledge” (p. 104).

Within Aboriginal knowledge systems, subjective experience is considered an integral aspect of the learning process (Absolon, 2011; Brant-Castellano, 2000; Cajete, 2004; Colorado, 1988; Couture, 1989, 1991; Ermine, 1995; Wilson, 2008). It is through subjective

experiences that one is able to gain a fuller understanding of both the sacred and the secular nature of the world (Couture, 1991; Ermine, 1995).

Within an Aboriginal social context these personal subjective experiences are valid in their own right. They become part of the collective knowledge of a people through a process of “collective analysis and consensus building” (Brant-Castellano, 2000, p. 26). This collective process is what Newhouse (2002) refers to as “sensemaking” (p. 6) and Battiste (1988) describes as a “collective cognitive experience” (p. 18). In the same manner that ceremonies provide an opportunity for individuals to come to knowledge through their whole self—physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually—ceremonies are also a means by which an individual can experience the collective thought (Lightning, 1992), the collective energy (Ermine, 1995), and the collective living history (Weber-Pillwax, 2001b) of the people.

Figure 3 is a graphic representation of the “Primary Characteristics of Aboriginal Knowledge Transmission.”

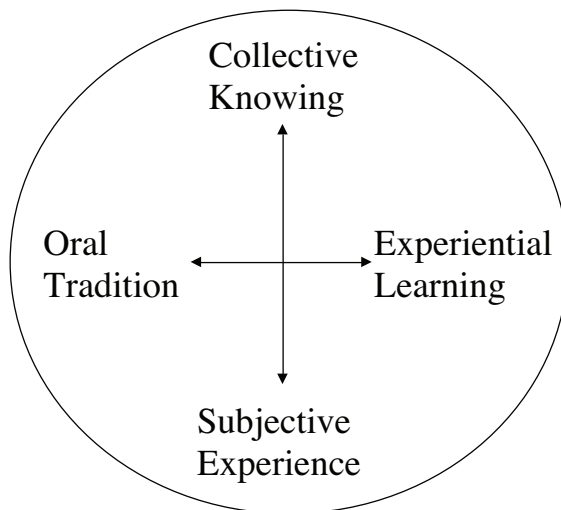


FIGURE 3 Primary Characteristics of Aboriginal Knowledge Transmission

Aboriginal knowledge transmission in the academy

The characteristics of Aboriginal knowledge transmission, orality, experiential learning, subjective experience, and collective knowing are factors that need to be considered in the process of bringing Aboriginal knowledge into the academy. Each of these characteristics needs to be addressed in our teaching and research. It is our responsibility to recognize, honour and facilitate their presence within our work and at the same time be cognizant of the limitations and potential risks of doing so.

As teachers we should find ways to responsibly and respectfully facilitate the inclusion of all aspects of the oral tradition such as oral history, stories, teachings, song, dance and ceremony into our courses. Where appropriate we must also implement opportunities for experiential learning into our teaching repertoire. Course evaluation can also include assessment strategies that allow students to express themselves through the oral tradition as well as those that respect the importance of the subjective nature of knowing.

The continued prominence of orality as the primary means of knowledge transmission also speaks to the importance of listening. There is an expression that I have heard given as advice within an Aboriginal learning context that speaks to this: The Creator gave each of us two eyes, two ears, and only one mouth. The same point, “Titiro, whakarongo ... kōrero (look, listen ... speak)” is articulated in Kaupapa Māori practices (Smith, 1999, p. 120). In the Western tradition, academics are considered “the experts” in their field of knowledge. In the context of Aboriginal knowledge, that is usually not the case, and therefore it is imperative that academics, especially those of us who are not Aboriginal, see ourselves as learners and act accordingly.

As academics we must be aware of the limitations and potential risks inherent in the written recording of knowledge that is based in an

oral tradition. Couture (1996) describes the complex challenge of such an undertaking and concludes that even if one is knowledgeable and adept enough to keep “in hand an immense oral ‘reference bibliography’” it is “virtually impossible” to capture the essential non-verbal aspects of the event (p. 43). When Aboriginal knowledge is written down, it is removed from the experiential context from which it was originally shared. In an experiential learning context, the knowledge holder gauges what is shared on his/her awareness of the cultural readiness of the learner(s) (Brant-Castellano, 2000; Lightning, 1992; Sarris, 1993). There is a potential risk that those that access Aboriginal knowledge in a written form will not be able to fully understand it, or will not be able to use it in a respectful and responsible manner.

There are other potential risks in removing Aboriginal knowledge from its oral and experiential contexts, and attempting to transmit it through written forms of expression. There is a potential for the loss of its collective nature. Brant-Castellano (2000) cautions that written forms may be removed from the necessary process of collective analysis that leads

to validation at the community level. Written forms of Aboriginal knowledge may also be misconstrued outside of the community of origin as a reflection of individual as opposed to collective ownership (Rasmus, 2002).

A conceptual framework of Aboriginal knowing

The components of Aboriginal ontologies, epistemologies, and ethics, as well as the characteristics of Aboriginal knowledge transmission form this “Conceptual Framework of Aboriginal Knowing.” This is graphically illustrated in Figure 4, which is a composite of Figures 1 to 3.

The placement of each of the concentric circles that make up this composite drawing reflects their conceptual significance within the overall framework. The framework is meant to be read from the centre outward. At the centre lie the primary ontological and epistemological understandings regarding “The Nature of the World and Ways of Knowing” and “The Nature of Time.” The second circle represents

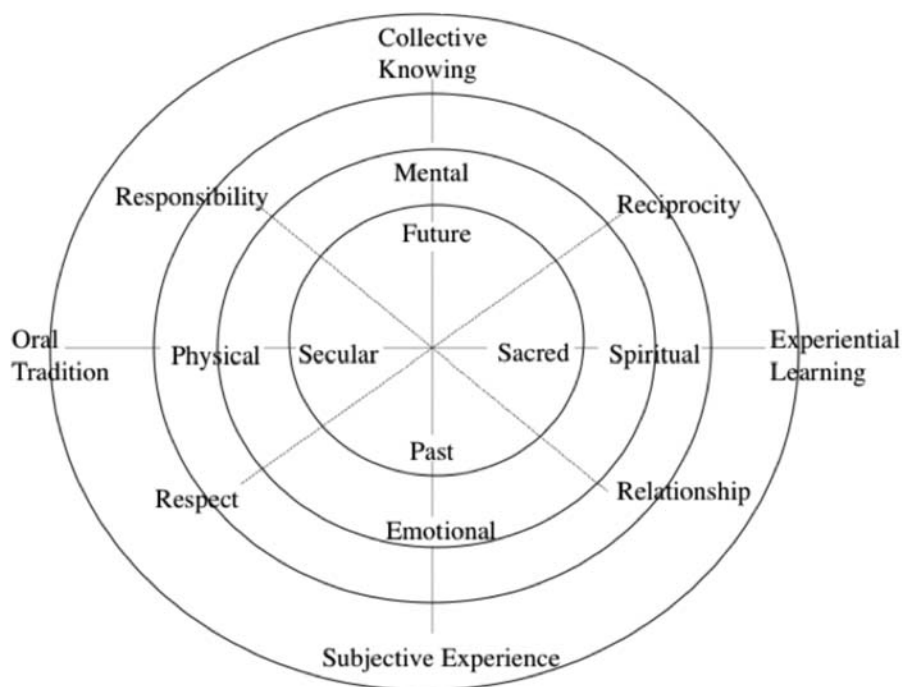


FIGURE 4 A Conceptual Framework of Aboriginal Knowing

the understandings regarding “The Nature of the Individual and Ways of Knowing.” This is followed by the third circle, which represents the understandings regarding “Aboriginal Ethics: Guiding Principles.” The outer circle represents the “Primary Characteristics of Aboriginal Knowledge Transmission.”

The six intersecting lines are placed within the framework to indicate inter-relationships at two levels. First, they exist within the framework in order to indicate the inter-relationships between the elements within each of the individual spheres that have been previously discussed: the secular and the sacred; the past, present, and future; the physical, the mental, the emotional, and the spiritual; relationship, respect, responsibility, and reciprocity; the oral tradition, experiential learning, subjective experience and collective knowing. Secondly, the intersecting lines are meant to indicate the inter-relationships between each of the spheres of understanding that compose “A Conceptual Framework of Aboriginal Knowing.” The intersecting lines have not been placed within the conceptual framework in order to indicate a relationship between individual elements within different spheres. Nor are they meant to divide the overall framework into quadrants or octants.

Respecting Aboriginal knowing in the academy

The following summarizes the key dimensions of Aboriginal ontologies, epistemologies, ethics, and the characteristics of Aboriginal knowledge transmission that make up this “Conceptual

Framework of Aboriginal Knowing.” I would suggest that the respectful inclusion of Aboriginal knowledge in the academy must be grounded in a lived understanding of the following statements:

- The world exists in one reality composed of an inseparable weave of secular and sacred dimensions.
- The nature of time is not linear. The past and the future coexist in the present.
- The individual is a physical, mental, emotional and spiritual being. Knowledge can be accessed through each of these modalities.
- All actions must be guided by the principles of relationship, respect, responsibility and reciprocity.
- Aboriginal knowledge transmission is characterized by the existence of an oral tradition, experiential learning, subjective experience and collective knowing.

The goal of those who wish to respectfully bring Aboriginal knowledge into the academy is to be able to be, and act from, the point of balance and harmony that is represented as the axis point at the centre of the concentric circles in Figure 4. To act from that place of balance is far greater than an academic exercise; it is a way of life. For those of us who work in the academy, our responsibility is to enhance the actualization of those things that complement and enhance this “way of life.” Naturally, we can be best guided in this complex endeavour by seeking out the wisdom of respected Elders and other traditional knowledge holders.

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