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Aboriginal Educational Teaching Experiences: Foregrounding Aboriginal/Indigenous Knowledges and Processes

Abstract

Aboriginal studies in education is a relatively new phenomenon for many sites of learning in Canadian educational institutions from kindergarten to post-secondary settings, and adult education. This paper deals with how I developed my own academic work (teaching, research, and community service) to advance Aboriginal knowledges¹ and perspectives in education for teachers, university students, and other professionals interested in Aboriginal studies in education as a form of academic and professional development. The ways that Aboriginal/Indigenous knowledges and processes are foregrounded in my teaching is a particular focus of this writing. I contend that students go through a transformative experience as they learn (new knowledge for them) about another aspect of Canadian living (often ignored or misrepresented in curriculum): Aboriginal peoples' contemporary lived and contextualized experiences; socio-historic experiences with treaty making, oppressive policies, colonialism, and assimilation; needs and aspirations for safeguarding and advancing culturally relevant education, Aboriginal languages, cultures and spiritualities, philosophies, and more. Students learn to integrate this knowledge into their teaching responsibilities and they learn to value this knowledge as a critical aspect of Canadian living.

¹ The term 'Knowledges' in the plural form is used to denote the diversity of Aboriginal peoples, experiences, thoughts, ways of knowing and being that exist.

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Aboriginal Educators and Elders have envisioned an education for their children that strengthens and inspires by focusing on traditional wisdom. They have envisioned an education where the young people of today are helped in creating a peaceful balance within themselves using Aboriginal "laws" as a guide. The "laws" which govern life, are not laws in the literal and mechanistic sense. They are perspectives that can help young people to orient themselves positively as Aboriginal people while establishing or strengthening their personal identities. They are perspectives that enable Aboriginal people to live with integrity, regardless of the environment or circumstances in which they find themselves (The Common Curriculum, 2000:10).

In this paper I share my experiences and learning about researching, developing, designing, and teaching Aboriginal studies in education as a focused activity of my academic work over the last seven years. Although, Aboriginal education has been the main focus of my study interest, it is important to note that previous to these seven years my academic service was situated within university access programs, teaching and working in/for adult education, and teaching and working with undergraduate and graduate university students. Furthermore, I have conducted workshops and seminars for educators/professionals, supported and engaged in activism work with community groups and/or committees to advance Aboriginal culture/education and anti-racism education based on my bi-cultural embodied experiences. Throughout my career, I have worked at bringing to the minds and hearts of Canadians and Aboriginal peoples the value of Aboriginal knowledges (sometimes referred to as 'laws'), experiences and perspectives. In many ways these experiences inform how I work today.

Although, the emergence of Aboriginal epistemological voices in post secondary institutions are few in number, students who take our courses hear our voices strong and clear (Antone, 2000) . A cursory analysis of conversations I have had with my colleagues in the field point to the challenges faced, opportunities presented, and the personal transformation students experience when taking/studying Aboriginal education, grounded in Aboriginal knowings and processes. The conclusive thoughts we shared is that students tend to talk about their transformative experiences in these courses and that these courses ought to be required in their academic programs. The students further declare that all Canadian content must include Aboriginal studies as core offerings of their programs (beginning in kindergarten). We lament that too few universities are willing to offer more courses like these or embed them as core course offerings in undergraduate education or graduate work. I laud the few instances where programs have included such courses, although they are offered only as electives. I am aware of courses at the University of Manitoba, University of Toronto, University of British Columbia, First Nations University, and University of Alberta.

In this paper I also hope to provide an answer to the common question I get asked by my colleagues: Why Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum?

Most of the history of modern Aboriginal education has been characterized as colonialist, hegemonic, assimilative, and institutionalized. The psychological harm of imposing a Eurocentric curriculum on Aboriginal students has proven to be problematic for Aboriginal students. The Eurocentric curricula prescribed pedagogical methodologies and knowledge that were not meaningful or productive for Aboriginal students [nor for minority students]. These Eurocentric pedagogical methodologies and knowledge devalued Aboriginal values, goals and knowledge. (Smith, M., 2001:77)

Dr. Smith's words call for teaching Aboriginal education in a way that is different and that does not repeat the same mistakes as implied in his statement. Teaching Aboriginal studies in education that is respectful and decolonizing while advancing Aboriginal perspectives is a relatively new experience in most Canadian schooling and post secondary educational contexts

(Castellano, Davis, & Lahache 2000; CAAS, 2002; RCAP, 1996). Castellano et al, further acknowledge how "Aboriginal education has always been practiced on a terrain of intense political negotiations" (252) before anything can flourish. Although there have been several Aboriginal studies courses offered by Native Studies departments in Faculties of Arts since the late 60's (Couture, 2000), the focus of study and approach differs in a professional faculty such as education wherein students prepare to become teachers.

Students (albeit, still predominantly, white and middle class) enroll into our faculties to learn to become teachers or to pursue graduate studies in education. However, these students typically come into the Canadian faculties of education have little or no opportunity to study Aboriginal education. Whether the focus of Aboriginal studies in education could be included in specific courses or in the content of general courses – it is largely void. This begs the questions. What do the students learn? What are the prevailing assumptions that frame their learning while they are students in our faculties? The following points allude to part of the answer. One, curriculum is still mainly Eurocentric (Battiste, 1998; Castellano et al, 2002; Smith, 2001) in its content and pedagogical approaches (education grounded by dominant cultural theories using western frameworks for teaching), thus the need to "challenge the culture of dominance of mainstream, hetero-patriarchal educational institutions" (Dei, 1996:15) become critical in ensuring inclusivity, equity and diversity including Aboriginal perspectives are honored. Furthermore, "racial and ethnic diversity have characterized Canada's population from its beginning [inclusive note – the beginning for Aboriginal peoples began way before European contact or Canada was born as a country]...it has only been in recent years that...we have begun to pay attention to the ways in which our political, educational, cultural and social systems are meeting the needs of [racial and ethnic minority population], and addressing their issues" (James, 1995: xi).

I applaud both Dei and James for highlighting the importance of recognizing and dealing with the challenges of diversity and equity in education and social systems. However, their call is focused primarily on the multicultural immigrant diversity of Canada with limited reference and acknowledgement to the addressing the unique educational needs and aspirations of the First Peoples of Canada. This void calls upon both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and educators to take a more active stance to include Aboriginal perspectives in education, a fact that is slowly becoming more evident in Canadian education:

Today, curriculum developers are searching for ways to incorporate nonlinear or holistic thinking patterns consistent with Aboriginal knowledge into the curriculum. The purpose of this new curriculum is to strengthen Aboriginal worldview and increase educational opportunities for Aboriginal students. Strengthening Aboriginal worldview may strengthen Aboriginal cultural knowledge. These new curricula proposes a plan to incorporate Aboriginal knowledge in the form of myth, metaphor, spirituality, time and place, etc., into the curriculum and give credence to the past experiences and knowledge that may be held by Aboriginal students.(Smith, M., 2001:77).

I maintain that this notion of strengthening an Aboriginal worldview, and increasing educational opportunities for Aboriginal students is just a small part of the whole picture of Aboriginal education principles. All Canadians need to know and learn about Aboriginal education. In their November 2002 report, the Coalition for the Advancement of Aboriginal studies (CAAS) stated:

Canadians and Canadian educators must develop an overall understanding of Aboriginal value systems and how integral this understanding is to all aspects of our traditions, cultures, and worldviews. In Aboriginal communities, schools are striving to create Aboriginal-perspective curriculum, developed by Aboriginal educators. Aboriginal Peoples' insistence that this new, accurate, valid curriculum be offered to all students in Canada is not a question of right or wrong. It is simply a call to have Aboriginal voices and perspectives presented as part of the total education program in this country (18)

It was further reported that "this cry for balance is beginning to be heard outside Aboriginal communities as well..." (18), fortunately, educators of Aboriginal education, and I add antiracism educators, are creating spaces in certain sectors of Canadian education and society, albeit far and few between. CAAS report supports this thought:

First Nations communities and Aboriginal and antiracism educators across the land are working to address the obvious shortfalls [of curriculum]: developing improved curriculum, identifying classroom resources, promoting certification of more Aboriginal teachers, improving related education policies, finding ways to support students, increasing cross-cultural awareness among educators and students. However, too few Canadian schools have taken up the challenge of finding successful ways to implement these new policies, guidelines, and curricula. Few, as well, have prioritized developments of materials and resources that will serve their own student populations. Much remains to be done (15).

The success in making Aboriginal Canada's voice heard in various educational contexts is largely due to our own struggles and perseverance to assert our self-determination, self-governance, and Indigenous-centred and diverse ways of knowing in theory and practice. These calls to be heard and self-determining came from the political, advocacy and lobby efforts of Aboriginal leaders, educators, spiritual leaders (Elders), politicians, community people, and non-Aboriginal supporters. This call has resulted in the move to engage educational partners to pay attention to Aboriginal Canada as a critical, yet distinct, part of Canadian society (Binda, K.P. & Calliou, S., 2001; CAAS, 2001; Castellano et al, 2000; RCAP; 1996).

What is evident about the common themes from the literature in the field regarding the status of Aboriginal Peoples' educational/economic/cultural aspirations and needs? I submit, these are: recognition of the historic wrongs visited about Aboriginal peoples; the need for culturally relevant and culturally-based Aboriginal education; and education for all Canadians about our true history (legacies of colonization impacts, understanding and challenging assimilation policies and practices, becoming aware of the residential schools fiasco and cultural genocide, and learning about ways to honour and celebrate Aboriginal perspectives in curriculum, and more.); an increase in the number of Aboriginal peoples in post secondary education; and the need for educational institutions to take responsibility to make Aboriginal education a priority.

While I point to the need for more visibility of Aboriginal education programming, it is important to note that a few universities have taken up the challenge to develop and deliver specific academic programs with reference to Aboriginal teacher education (Binda & Calliou, 2001; Castellano et al, 2000; RCAP, 1996). However, this does not mean that the students in these programs necessarily enroll in Aboriginal Education courses (although there are few instances of these courses), nor do they necessarily experience curriculum that includes Aboriginal perspectives, histories, experiences, knowledge, contributions, and educators and leadership. Furthermore, merely having a cohort of students who are Aboriginal and enrolled in a mainstream academic program does not make that program 'Aboriginal' per se. Many of these programs simply access the regular mainstream courses, and perhaps inadvertently, they simply mirror the earlier assimilative efforts of Canadian policies. Clearly then, teaching courses in Aboriginal education has to move beyond the "bows and arrow" approach (Momaday, 1978), living in the past, and dwelling on stereotyped notions of Aboriginal peoples (Battiste, 1998; CAAS, 2002; Castellano, 2000; Cajete, 1994; Couture, 2000; Hampton, 1994;) and move into more humane, inclusive, critical, and respectful ways of teaching.

In this next section I share my thoughts about the importance of one's positionality (Taylor, Tisdell & Hanley, 2000) as an important part of educating students, and particularly those involved in Aboriginal education courses/curriculum. The notion of one's frame of reference or positionality is one that is highly supported and advocated by the various Elders who challenge the limited vision of contemporary education. Our Elders tell us that we each must know who we are and how we engage and interconnect with our surroundings. Furthermore, Taylor, et al argue that "as...educators we do represent different social locations and positionality (race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ableness), and thus tend to implement...theoretical orientations...frames *in practice* in quite different ways" (1). I agree

that understanding our personal and professional mapping of social positioning within our societies is critical to understanding how engaging in critical consciousness and thinking about social change can positively benefit the education of Aboriginal peoples, and/or the educating of Canadians about Aboriginal education.

Also, understanding our social identity and positioning can strongly influence our perspective of Aboriginal Canada and consequently any action we might wish to take or not take in regards to supporting the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal peoples. Revealing how we are parts of a larger system of imposed power and hierarchy is critical to our understanding of the relationships between Aboriginal peoples and Canadians. The willingness for students to examine these relationships, I contend will affect our personal assumptions and wider political, economic, and cultural realities. During classroom discussions with students and when it is appropriate to the class topic, experience, or theme I expand upon the discussion of race, class, and gender. I reveal how power relations have informed Canadian culture and politics since the beginning of colonial Canada and how Aboriginal peoples have been implicated in the relations of making Canada a place to co-exist unequally. We learn to relearn and question what we were taught as taken for granted knowledge- (there are things that we are trained not to see) and we learn to unlearn that "other", as in Aboriginal/Indigenous knowledges are not valid. Students learn to understand that we are all part of a larger picture, and life is much more complex than that which we are led to believe through our own respective schooling and educational experiences. Students learn to examine that part of their education and learning is; knowing where we come from and who we are with regards our personal frames of references (positionality) so that we can see what we need to be free from and move toward what values, perspectives, and principles we ought to grow. Furthermore, understanding Aboriginal spirituality is a large part of this journey. One of the tenets of Aboriginal spirituality teaching is

that the individual must take personal responsibility to know him/herself before s/he can relate in a holistic way (materially, spiritually, physically, and emotionally) to the outer world of family, community, society and other bio-diverse ecologies inclusive of the plant, and animal life:

...the notion of taking personal responsibility for one's "inner environment" is an essential requirement of working within the greater whole. This concept connects with being responsible in a reciprocal way. ...each individual must first learn to live life from within a healthy inner environment in mind, body, spirit before s/he can understand one's imperfections and working toward a greater whole where conscious learning, relearning and healing, both for the person and for the community, takes place in mind, body and spirit....the emphasis is on learning, relearning and living the teachings, where much thought is given to developing critical thinking, to conscious working through of the [Aboriginal traditional] principles, to building a conscience and ethics about a way of living and a way of looking at the world that is reflective of responsible knowledge, and of caring, giving, healing, and honoring the Creator in each and every one of our relations (Fitznor, 1996:29)

After many years of teaching about Aboriginal education, I found that when students learned or heard something new, such as the true history of Canada, historic Aboriginal-Canadian relations, Aboriginal teachings and the responsibilities therein, they were often shocked and angered at what they did not know. There were times too when they expressed excitement about this new knowledge. I try to encourage an open and critical examination of this 'newness', to see how it fits within the Canadian-Aboriginal relational context and where it 'bumps' into possible walls of silence, denials, incredibility of the new knowledge, and guilt. I work to facilitate an openness to realize, accept, adapt, and integrate this new information into their already existing knowledge base, and often one that needs reexamining and shifting of socialized paradigms.

When I teach my students and stress the importance that we "must know how we are situated in our world...and in so doing, we name who we are and acknowledge our history" (Fitznor, 2002), to which I share my family story with them to demonstrate that I am a

microcosm of the larger picture of what has happened to Aboriginal peoples and our experiences with colonialism, oppressive policies (Indian Act), assimilation, patriarchal ideologies that came with European policy/colonial imports, and struggles to maintain, safeguard our culture and language. Because I do this primarily within weaving familial historic experiences through a story, I emphasize the importance of storytelling as pedagogy. Storytelling has been a large part of my upbringing where I heard my mother and father tell stories of life, our trickster characters, and our cultural lives.

For the purpose of deepening the understandings in this paper, I share a part of my story (as Aboriginal, Cree mixed heritage, First Nations, Woman, Aboriginal scholar, Mother, Daughter, Sister, Auntie, Great Auntie, Sister Colleague, Cultural broker, and more) to show how I came into this critical work of Aboriginal education. I believe it informs why I am in my current space and time with my own development as a human being, and in my role as a university instructor who selected to teach from a unique standpoint of blending Canadian education with Aboriginal knowings and processes. Stories are used in Aboriginal country to illustrate, to learn, to highlight, to share traditional nuances, to bring new knowledge, and to understand the world and contexts in which we live. Cajete (1994) stated:

Each teacher and student involved in Indian [Aboriginal] education must relearn and practice contextualizing information in culturally sensitive and holistic ways. Making story the basis of teaching and learning provides one of the best ways to accomplish this contexting and enhancing of meaning in all areas of content. It is possible to teach all content from the basis of story. We can again allow teachers to truly become storytellers and storymakers. Teaching is essentially a communicative art form based on the ancient Tribal craft of storytelling. We must once again nourish our stories properly!

I share the highlights of my story, in italicized fonts.

My colonial/English name is Laara Fitznor and I carry two other Cree names (Mississak and Wapiski Meskinahk Iskwew). The significance for sharing all my names is to demonstrate

the interconnection of my growth, and my community and culture. When I was a toddler, I was given the name 'mississak' (Horse-fly) by my paternal Oji-Cree/Scots grandfather who bestowed the name upon me in an act that reflects our Aboriginal ways of being. Almost 45 years later, and walking within an Aboriginal traditional pathway, I was given the name 'Wapiski Meskinahk Iskwew,' (White Turtle Woman) in a sweat lodge ceremony. The contradictions and complexities of my being are immediately evident from my bio-social-cultural story. I embody the bloodlines of Cree First Nations (from Cree and Oji-Cree peoples), and German and Scottish ancestry from European immigrants who came to Canada to work and live. In this sense, it makes for a uniquely interesting mix of having bi-culturally European-Canadian and Aboriginal heritages. While that biological mixing may hint that I am bi-cultural with my German and Scottish backgrounds – that is not the case. I would closely approximate the bi-cultural experience of the European ancestry to dominant Canadian colonial (Dei, 1996) culture influenced in lifestyle and manner socially conditioned through my experiences in the schooling (Eurocentric based) and church (Anglican) systems. As an aside, there was also be no opportunity to celebrate (if I could) the German ancestry since my paternal grandfather was disowned by his family because he married my Cree grandmother. I have no knowledge of the story behind the Scottish connection, other than the Scottish connection is a great, great grandfather and as far as I know we do not practice Scottish ways.

Before I entered grade school, I was raised in the boreal forests bio-terrain in Northern Manitoba in a traditional Cree economic and cultural lifestyle. My first language is Cree and I spoke little English when I entered grade one (at the age of six-in a one-room school house). An interesting anecdote here is that now my dominant language is English and I speak my Cree language with little fluency, although I can understand it proficiently. At my grade school, I soon recognized the different mindset and structures that governed the teachers and school

system – nothing supported our Aboriginal Cree culture and values. Euro Canadian values were the norm and the rule. English was the spoken language imposed on us and we were forbidden to speak our language, and if we were found to speak our language we were punished.

My father, who was first generation Cree/German offspring and who already experienced extreme racism and discrimination due to his bi-racial and bi-cultural heritage, made us aware of the struggles of being bi-racial during his time especially when one part of his ancestry was not valued. He was aware of the dominant forces that negated our Aboriginal heritage and he made special attempts through his telling of personal stories to be proud of and honour our Cree heritage because that was the part of our ancestry that would/could/was and will be called into question. On the other hand my mother simply lived and demonstrated our cultural ways through our language and living ways. Further to our parent's 'teachings' I was able to return home everyday to a Cree speaking and cultural family that through our family-collective actions we made Cree our dominant way of being in the world. I was fortunate that I did not have to endure Indian residential school experiences that might have threatened my embodied connection to my Cree culture and family.

When I think back upon my youth, I did not think to question why we did not have our own teachers who spoke in our own language. Now I realize it is because the 'cast was set' when I noticed that it was the 'white' people who held the critical town jobs, of nurse, missionary, storeowners etc., in other words, this became 'normal'.

With regards to my schooling, I went, as mandated by the government, to my community school until grade eight. My community did not have a high school so when I entered grade 9, I had to go to one that was located 250 kilometres away. I stayed at the high school for two academic terms and chose not to return. My choice not to return was something I learned to understand years later was my anxiety due to the emerging issues surrounding

Indian Residential schools. I was fearful of the stories that my relatives who went to Indian Residential schools told about the mistreatment from those in positions of power (teachers, priests, nuns etc), and I was constantly afraid that these experiences will also happen at this school. Of course they never materialized in actuality; only in my imagination.

When I was 27 years old, I entered the University of Manitoba as a mature student. I did not have a complete high school diploma and the university had an admission policy to admit mature students (over 21 years of age and older) who did not have the high school credits. Once admitted students then could 'prove' that they are capable of doing academic work. Once there I worked hard to meet the graduating requirements. I obtained a Bachelor's of Arts and Master's in Education degree. In 1982, I obtained a university position as an Academic counselor serving primarily Aboriginal students. Around this time I began to participate in and discover the values to advance, assert, celebrate and live an Aboriginal existence that was grounded in Aboriginal ceremonies such as sweat lodge ceremonies, medicine wheel talking/learning circles, Elder teachings, and more. I made a deliberate choice that Christianity was not my religion, nor spirituality: it was to be and still is Aboriginal spirituality – for me this was a process of becoming more decolonized and engaging in Aboriginal lifeways.

At the university level, too, I found that most discussion and discourse about Aboriginal peoples were in negative connotations.. I was adamant that the ways in which we were discussed, taken-up, examined, misunderstood etc., had to be different – I believed that we needed to be recognized as people who are 'real', here in the present as well as the past, complete with our own determinations of our cultures, languages, knowledges, and that we are valid and important contributors to Canadian society. In addition, we need to bring to the minds of all Canadians that we have been wrung through many colonial imposed paradigms and

structures that left their legacies of oppression including: defiant peoples, pain, scars, wounded spirits, and cultural and social fractures. I would be remiss if I did not mention that we have been, and continue to be a resilient people that maintained philosophies, values and ways of being that withstood the test of time. I have been on a life-long quest for cultural relevancy in my life.

Throughout my academic and educational experiences, I became acutely aware of how our Canadian institutions of learning were so mainstream and exclusive, and they biased Aboriginal peoples at many levels of misrepresentation. There were many times when I revisited the knowledge that my father shared about the difficulties Aboriginal peoples faced in Canadian society, and the need to stand up for our ways of knowing and our culture. Consequently, early in my career, I promised myself that I would work to serve our needs and aspirations as Aboriginal peoples. In so doing, I understand that as an Aboriginal scholar grounded in Aboriginal epistemologies that I work for the next seven generations despite the many obstacles I may face.

Once I recognized that our Canadian schooling was so mainstream and flawed with little or no accurate nor authentic content about Aboriginal histories, cultures, or experiences, I sought to work with initially from the vantage point of cross-cultural education then moved to include and advance Aboriginal knowledges, histories, spirituality and culture, understanding of colonial processes and decolonizing methodologies in my own teaching and educational experiences. Also, developing confidence in my own voice, capacity, and scholarship to work from my frame of reference was uplifting. Recently, I read Linda Smith's (1999) book "Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples" that highlighted similar themes, issues, and models in research. Her work validated that what I was doing was on the right track. Therefore, I integrated these important knowledges and processes through my

involvement in the following activities: family/community; conducting research; writing essays and research papers; serving on community, organization, or institutional boards, circles, councils, and committees; teaching and/or speaking at or attending academic and community venues and various Aboriginal traditional ceremonial settings and teachings; and designing, developing curriculum.

As I share my story, I realized that I developed a teaching style that was eclectically infused with 'Aboriginal friendly' western theoretical frameworks while grounded in Aboriginal knowings and processes. I did not receive any formal 'teacher training', only that which followed from my personal passion, my academic and scholarly interests and lived experiences with knowledge from working with Elders and traditional "laws". Consequently, I developed designs and processes that included scholarly works that understandably problematizes (Dei, 1996), western-imposed educational frameworks (for example, I draw from theories in Critical theory, anti-racism and anti-colonial thought, post-structural, and principles in adult education) and those Indigenous theories that advance Aboriginal/Indigenous knowings and processes as legitimate knowledge (Battiste, 1998; Cajete, 1994; Fitznor, 2002; Hampton, 1995; Smith, 1999). This is what I assert is a uniquely Aboriginal influenced way of teaching that is both decolonizing and transformational. When I teach I work from a number of objectives and concepts that guide my teaching. During my work in universities, community and professional workshops, I have designed and developed Aboriginal infused courses that include the following titles: *Interpersonal and Group Communication-Aboriginal Perspectives; Integrating Aboriginal Perspectives into the Curriculum; Aboriginal Leadership in Education; Aboriginal/Indigenous Education: Themes, Issues, and Models; Aboriginal Worldviews in Education; Aboriginal/Indigenous Perspectives on Research; Anishinabe Research Methodologies; Aboriginal Education Foundations: Cross-cultural Education – Aboriginal Perspectives; and*

Research Ethics in Aboriginal Education. It is important to note that even though each of these courses has a unique content and focus, the processes and analytical frameworks I infuse are similar in my teaching methodology. I share a few objectives that I take up in my classes:

1. Students begin to understand Aboriginal self-determination in all aspects of life recognize and further acknowledge the impacts of colonization processes (including for example acknowledging residential schools' impacts, enforced Christianity, forced assimilative policies; enforced citizenship, stolen languages and cultures);
2. I advance Aboriginal philosophies, knowledges and practices as valuable tools for learning and living that holds us all responsible not only for ourselves but for All our Relations (inclusive of Mother Earth, plant life, animal life, rock life, water life etc), students can examine how this 'teaching' connects to their Canadian identity;
3. I facilitate students' examination of positionalities (frames of references) as a way of linking to Aboriginal studies in education and to their own areas of research and student development, and as it relates to the specific course content;
4. Students learn to undertake their own research and understand their own reflections and responses to Aboriginal studies in education, and acknowledge the range of positive, negative and/or seized emotions provoked by such critical examination;
5. Students learn to identify, critique and challenge the various colonial and/or state/church imposed terms and naming processes that have been applied to our peoples, further they identify their psychological impacts on people;
6. Students identify the various movements in the history of education that contributed to Aboriginal education moving from assimilative intents and practices to self-determined pathways of Aboriginal knowings and processes as central to the education of Aboriginal peoples;
7. I create opportunities for students to develop an awareness and appreciation of, and in some cases, a commitment to understanding and acting positively on Aboriginal issues, needs and aspirations and the learn strategies for bridging between cultures;
8. I connect students to the prolific literature in the field through engaging them to develop an interactive interest in reading/critiquing books, essays, articles, and thesis (print or internet) written from the standpoint of understanding Aboriginal/Indigenous theorists, and Indigenous epistemologies and decolonizing methodologies. We read, and critique the works of local and international Aboriginal/Indigenous scholars;
9. I introduce students to the Works of Indigenous Elder Scholars from across Canada, the United States and internationally. When students are introduced to these works they are framed in Aboriginal teachings and worldviews where they are introduced to Aboriginal pedagogies and Medicine Wheel teachings as another way to look at the world.

As I work toward the objectives that I outlined above, I draw fromh eclectic pedagogical processes that engage students from the beginning to the end of my courses. We journey together, as a community, travelling through various interactive in-depth/breadth and scope of learning exercises that engage them to explore, reflect upon, to theorize, to practice, to voice, to share, to speak the unthinkable, to examine, and to understand the frameworks of certain analysis of the literature and readings that we study in class and with each other as knowledge producers and creators. I incorporate traditional sharing, learning and talking Circles reflective of Aboriginal methods of learning for healing, teaching, and decision-making. When it is appropriate, I integrate many of our sacred traditional symbols such as 'smudging' - purification/focusing ceremony in our classes, and working with a talking stone or feather. In this sense, I bring in the Aboriginal value that everything has a spirit and we are all spiritual beings as well as physical, emotional and intellectual – in this sense we work in a holistic way. When the situation calls for it, I nudge students' thinking and acting by using respectful yet challenging words and ask them to reflect upon the underlying assumptions behind our thinking. I maintain that this helps to move them into a greater understanding of the breadth/depths and scope of Aboriginal-Canadian relations. There are many cases that humourous situations emerge when we are engaging in learning through Aboriginal pedagogies – there is a saying in our communities that the 'trickster' comes and helps us out when we need to understand and move away from established comfort zones to see another side. I contend that there are times that students need this humour even just to jar us into another reality/understanding. I dare say that it also helps us move toward spaces where we could understand and admit to the ongoing oppressive interruptions of Indigenous lives. We need methodologies like this to help us explore how might move into transformative ways of freeing

ourselves from oppressive ideological traps. I constantly remind students of the ongoing contradictions and tensions that can emerge from doing critical educational work that is decolonizing (Smith, 1999) while advancing social justice (Dei, 1996) and Aboriginal knowings and processes (Fitznor, 2002). Dei (1996) makes this similar argument with regards to educators who engage in antiracism education: this is tough and challenging work, and often personally stressful due to resistance from people imbedded in Eurocentric status quo structures. Also, I understand that many non-Aboriginal students understandably experience feelings of guilt when the true history of colonization is revealed and they feel implicated. I try to get them past that point so that we could work on improved relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples and move to a place where we could work with reciprocity, responsibility, renewal, and engaging positive relationships (RCAP, 1996). Finally, I use words that help us reflect back to ourselves the ongoing principles that operate out of our ways of thinking and doing, so that it reaches a point when students begin to become conscious of these principles themselves, and chose the ways they might wish/chose to shift their paradigms and actions.

I have been fortunate that I get consistently high ratings for my teaching and the anecdotal comment that students write in my course evaluations or the ones that they personally share with me tell me that they have experienced many transformational moments in a class that has an Aboriginal focus and delivery. One graduate student who had taken a course in Aboriginal/Indigenous perspectives in research published an article from a paper he wrote in my course. He acknowledged that this course helped “find my voice and providing me with the courage to relate this personal narrative and raising the question of spirituality in the academy” (Shahjahan, 2004:92). There is so much more that happens in my classes that I have not taken up in this paper. I thank the readers of this paper for taking the time to read and listen and

hopefully the thoughts I share will help with your own work. Ekosani. Thank you for listening.

In closing I leave you with the following quote:

Aboriginal people need a new story. The old story – of how our lives have been – is now known, and Canadians can now perceive its demoralizing effects on Aboriginal people. But Aboriginal people recognize that we are in between stories. We do not trust the old story of government paternalism, and we are trying to get a clearer picture of our new story...about empowering Aboriginal worldviews, languages, knowledge, cultures, and most important, Aboriginal peoples and communities (Marie Battiste in Brant Castellano, Davis & Lahache, (2000) – Aboriginal Education: Fulfilling the Promise, pviii). Education is at the heart of the struggle of Aboriginal peoples to regain control over their[our] lives as communities and nations...[and] to transform Aboriginal education within the context of ongoing negotiations between peoples with widely disparate power bases,ppxi-xvii,.ibid)

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