Dancing with Learning: Ghosts and Shadows

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Abstract

The paper begins with the concept of community curriculum. The term, we realized, is an artefact of the western way of thinking about education and community learning. It is important in that it places learning in the center of a community but the critical question is, "how does a community learn?" We consider the subtleties of how First Peoples are recovering from the disruptions in their community life by exploring the importance of traditional values to their identity. The main concept is culture language, its role and how it helps to recover the past in order to reverse the effects of the residential school learnings. We explore the relationship between language and culture and conclude that the "and" is a disruptive conjunctive that allows western governments to effectively deny the relationship between language and culture. Secondly, we explore the concept of cultural pneumonics as a way of understanding what occurs as cultural knowledge is passed from one generation to another.

What is it to stand and stare at something that you don't understand and have it speak back to you? How are the people around us dancing together? How is the knowledge of the people around us woven in a respectful and complementary environment? The dance of First People's occurs on their territories where location and environment stimulate the learning path. We chose the metaphor of "dance" to free ourselves from the confines of other terms that describe the relationship of First peoples to their territory. We originally coined the term "community curriculum" to describe the ways in which community learning and knowledge unfold. Community curriculum does not envelop the dynamic changes that happen but identifies to us the importance of the relationship between people, education, culture and their territories.

What is community curriculum? Community, in a pre-colonial sense, recognizes the fabric that wove First peoples' family and house groups together in their nation. It describes the cultural strands that connect the daily life of living in the village: food preparation, hunting, gathering berries, collecting firewood, and raising children. Language and stories tell the histories of the people, defines their territory and supports communication between villages and nations. Curriculum, on the other hand, is part of the colonial era.[1] It is a term that supported the fragmentation and destruction of First peoples. (Alfred, Taiaiake. Peace, Power, Righteousness. Oxford, 2009, Toronto, page 70.) In a western educational context, it illustrates the concept that knowledge can be fragmented into artificial boundaries, which is like a dog marking its territory. It addresses the European desire to break up knowledge into smaller and smaller units.[2] (Alberta Curriculum as an example.)(Pinar, W. (1975) pgs21,29; Shubert, W. (1984) pg 4,5). In the history of Canada, school curriculum has been a tool to break First peoples' way of life and re-educate "them" in a Western manner. Community curriculum is a hybrid term which recognizes the existence of the two worlds First peoples are forced to live in today: their world and the Western world. At the same time it is a term which emphasizes the divisions between these worlds. In order to further understand the term, we need to review its two constituent parts. Community is derived from the Latin word "communis", which means common and is combined with the Latin term "unitas", which means one.

In the western sense community is about sharing similar beliefs while residing in the same place and respecting differences in values and ways of life. (Carlson, Keith Thor. The Power of Place, the Problem of Time: Aboriginal Identity and Historical Consciousness in the Cauldron of Colonialism (2010) University of Toronto Press). The second part of the term is curriculum. Curriculum also has its origins from the Latin and is described as the action of running, course of action, race (competition). (http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/curriculum). Typically the term is associated with schools and their programs of study. Kerr defines curriculum as, 'all the learning that is planned and guided by the school, whether it is carried on in groups or individually inside or outside the school.' (Kelly, A.V. (1983; 1999.) The curriculum. Theory and Practise, 4e, London; Paul Chapman) (http://www.infed.org\biblio\b.curric.htm). As Aoki states, it is truly a tool for managing schools and ensures that what the government decides is going to be taught is taught.

These two terms, community and curriculum, however, are at odds with each other. While community implies the existence of conflict and differences, acceptance and balance of differences allows us to work together. Curriculum, on the other hand, suggests the concept of competition which requires a winner and a loser. It is a term that is ideally adapted to western colonial beliefs around capitalism.

Seeing curriculum used in this way has and continues to be a useful tool for destroying First people's culture. [3] This works against the recognition of differences and marginalizes those who don't accept it. Beyond that, learning does not necessarily occur in formal settings like schools. In western society, "real learning`` is still valued more in school settings than in everyday life. You need one week certificates for chain saw operation, food safe and babysitting. What this covers over is the wealth of knowledge learned through direct experience such as how to track an animal on the territory; how to locate berries and to understand how they may be preserved for the winter; how to identify the cedar tree that may be used for a new pole and how to survive in the bush. These are the ways of learning that are overtly acknowledged but covertly are not clearly understood. For example, the slogan often used to refer to that kind of learning is ``life-long learning``[4]. Such a slogan does not in any way reflect the depth of learning or recognize the accumulation of knowledge involved. In building on the term "community curriculum", how then can we describe the dance of learning?

The Dance of Learning

The dance is comprised of the belief that everything in life is' inter-woven where all are interdependent on each other to retain their cultural identity. Every aspect of life needs to have balance in order to move forward. The ancient Gitxsan term for learning is "Gan wii'ho'osxw" (wisdom of the past). This wisdom is often passed on from generation to generation in gatherings and feasts. This transfer of knowledge can occur in the galts'ap which is a safe place for people to gather and share.

Galts'ap encompasses both the social and physical environment of territory.[5] Emery captures the spirit of galts'ap, an experience based relationship with family, spirits, animals, plants and the land, an understanding and wisdom gained through generations of observing and teaching that used indirect signals from nature or culture to predict future events or impact. [6] For instance, when going out to pick soapberries (is) in the beginning of summer, a group of Gitxsan will plan an outing to harvest by preparing rides, food, and buckets for the day. In the ride to the site, stories of past and news about family members are told including the methods for harvesting and preservation of the berries. These discussions continue throughout the day. [7] Language and culture are inseparable and are fused to life by the actions of the people involved. A western understanding of this activity would separate language and culture into two discreet parts for study. An anthropologist, for instance, would look at the language throughout the day while a sociologist may look at the social relationships that emerge during the activities. Separating culture and language from the western perspective is typical practise[8]. Taking for granted, however, that language and culture can be separated is an act of travesty against First Peoples.

Culture and Language

When discussing the learning needs of First peoples language and culture are often the first categories identified.

In British Columbia, for example, the Shared Learning document often refers to "culture and language" while at other times uses them separately. The question to ask is, "how is this possible?" The answer lies in the use of the term "and". Consider Ted Aoki's thoughts regarding the word "and". (Aoki, 2005).

Aoki wrote:"Delueuze urges us to displace ourselves from our fondness of noun-oriented, thing oriented entities that give us a thing-oriented view of curricular simplicity, to decenter ourselves from such an established modernist view and to place ourselves in the midst between and amongst the curricular entities. Where are we? We are at a place where the *ands* are not mere conjunctives … And I wonder if *and* might be a place where we can think differently." In portraying "culture and language" as a noun (or as a thing) allows the term to be divided into two parts as if they have no connection at all. Viewed as nouns the '*and'* divides the two concepts 'language' 'culture'. It allows the entities to be treated as if they were indeed separate. Aoki suggests a new place occurs if the 'and' is viewed differently. Assume for a moment that culture and language are on-going concepts related to everyday life. First peoples' pre-contact regalia were made using sinew and hides from animals but today we use synthetic material, thread and sewing machines. In terms of language there is the pre contact language and post contact language: Language is constantly evolving. In this context language and culture are viewed as verbs, active, not passive concepts. "And "still allows the separation to continue. We can still think of language and culture as nouns as well as verbs. By removing the "and", the two are activated and directly portray the intertwining of concepts that cannot be separated.

"language…linked to the survival of Indigenous people. When our languages are threatened the health and well-being of our peoples, a maintained connection to the land, and an ability to pass on and carry out traditional ways of life and maintain a worldview unlike any other is at stake. Children must learn the language in order for it to survive.

*The language used to be passed down naturally in homes, on the laps of our grandmothers and on the land, at the foot of the grandfathers on the trap-lines. Indigenous languages are at such a state of critical endangerment that we must create artificial ways to pass on the language. However, whatever strategies are taken must work towards reinstating Indigenous languages into common, everyday use in order that they become viable. We need to come full circle, back to speaking our languages to the babes in the cradle swings and on the streets of our communities. .....returning to natural uses of language transmission is the solution."(McIvor, 2006)(*McIvor, O. (2006). *Building the Nests: Early Childhood Indigenous Immersion Programs In BC.* [9]

Viewing language culture together takes the reader to an unfamiliar place. We are not used to thinking about the concepts together without the "and". Linguistically the "and" is always present when referring to both concepts in English but in reality the First peoples communities don't separate one from the other. A community's culture enfolds language culture, which is entwined as a fundamental way of life, as their foundation.

The British colonizers used the English language to control First people in order to eliminate their language cultures.[10] Government policies, used education as a form of control which has been well documented. In India, for example, the English used the school system in the following manner: "The aim of colonial education was to transform natives into colonial intermediaries, turning schools into civil-service training institutions intended to support the administration of the empire." (Willinsky, John. Learning to divide the world: Education at Empire's End, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1998, page 99.)

In other parts of the British Empire, education was used in a similar fashion, only there, its purpose was to mold First people into the image of the colonizer. Historian Mary-Ellen Kelm described the Canadian assimilation practise as: "… the Federal Government commissioned the Davin Report … Davin strongly recommended residential schooling for, in such institutions, Aboriginal children could be best educated while physically separated from their parents. …his recommendation was to seize the minds and bodies of Aboriginal youth by forcing them into residential schools where the values, language and culture of Euro-Canadians would predominate." (Barman, Jean and Mona Gleason. Children, Teachers and Schools. Detseling Enterprises Ltd., Calgary, 2003. Pg 83.)

The primary aim was to destroy First peoples by separating the children from their language culture. "Can language and culture be truly separated?" that is the essential question. Teaching languages in isolation, for example, may make sense to the colonizers but it doesn't make sense to separate them in the case of First Nations peoples.

Policies that continue to separate the language and the culture only continue the work of destroying the people. It is without a doubt a form of cultural genocide. In order to redress this situation it is only reasonable to consistently refer to the two terms as a unit: culture language. Educational curricula / curriculums and policy and resultant funding should always be written against a backdrop of recognizing that you cannot teach one without the other. While colonizers think that they have many reasons for looking at language as being separate, doing so permits the writers of government policy to forget that First Peoples have a culture. Policies will also be constructed with a view to encouraging the instruction of First Peoples` culture without any reference to the language. These policies will be very powerful since they would be directed in supporting First Nations people to feel that they are a part of the educational system. In reality, they become the shadows.

Aboriginal ways of learning and transferring knowledge to the next generation is very interactive and builds on the environment that you are in when the learning occurs. For example, when you are in the Gitxsan feast hall, their traditional governance structure, one is partnered with a person who has traditional knowledge and is training you in the correct processes, behaviors, and rules for helping in the feast. This allows for teaching and learning opportunities about what is happening, the name for the activity and the correct order of serving. The young person will be experiencing what they are learning and it will be repeated by many educators as they attend more feasts. It is important to recognize that learning is happening even though it is not openly acknowledged. There are subtleties that are continually being presented throughout the times spent in the feast hall. This encourages learning by having continuous repetition throughout their life.[11] As they gain more experience they are then transformed into the educator.

Based on this process, it raises the question: what is education? Why do we need structured education as valued by government? In the past, grandparents, aunts and uncles were responsible for teaching children about our way of life and what we needed to know on order to survive on the territories. [12] Knowledge is known as "gan wii hoo'osxw" by the Gitxsan people and they pass down the knowledge that has been taught to them to the next generation and this is the "gwalxyee'nst". This is life knowledge: laws, territories, history, governance, way of life, harvesting, food and plants, survival, creativity, clothing, responsibility, values, imagination, spirituality and identity. This knowledge has been passed down by our grandparents, ancestors and the creator for the First Nations people to follow and pass on to future generations. Its life thrives on the social interaction and transfer of "gan wii hoo'osxw".

In First Nations communities, it is crucial for children to be aware of the world around them but not in exclusion to their way of life. It is essential that we retain our identities, our laws, our way of life and values in addition to being aware of the worldviews of western society. We cannot lose sight of who we are and where we come from but we do not have to remain dormant and oblivious to the outside world and exclude what is happening around us. (Sterritt, 2016) Life is ever changing and we need to learn to live in both worlds[13] to support our success and growth as individuals while maintaining our identities as First Nations people.

Much of the knowledge and wisdom that we have learned and practised in our life as First Nations people is proving to be advantageous to making changes today. "You have wandered away from your teachings. You must concentrate on your spiritual teachings...Don't be sidetracked. Why do our Elders always tell us to know the culture and listen to the teachings? When we go off track, why do the Elders say, return to the teachings? The teachings tell us how to live in harmony with the laws and principles of the Great Spirit. Living means life – a good life, a happy life. Many of us have grown up without the teachings and the culture and that is why we don't know how to live. To improve on relationships, to treat our children with honor, and to respect our Elders, we need to live by the old teachings again."

Henry Quick Bear, LAKOTA (http://www/experienceproject.com/stories/Want-You-To-Know-About-Elders-Mediation/95790)

The statement by Quick Bear is forward thinking. It doesn't suggest that First Peoples' return to the old ways of life but rather incorporate the traditional teachings in a new way. Life is always changing and never remains static but core values remain the same and are carried forward. Each new situation requires a deep understanding of the core values and how they may be applied to a particular situation. In a community context this means that it is possible to understand the western way of describing a situation and at the same time the traditional way of understanding the same situation.

For example those entrenched in a western culture may become stressed and frustrated with a particular situation and try to find the perfect solution while First Peoples will do whatever has to be done based on their cultural values and way of life. In First Peoples culture when there is a death there is a specific process that comes into effect. Upon the passing of an individual there is a family meeting to discuss the plans of the family, the costs to be incurred and the financial viability of their plans based on the immediate family's resources to cover the expenses. If the family does not have the financial resources then other options for reducing the costs of the funeral and settlement feast are discussed until consensus is reached by the family and extended family members.

The core values that are being practiced, for example, by the Anishinabek are as follows:[14]

Reciprocity
Respect
Love
Equality
Responsibility
Survival and protection
Spirit and integrity

Backman Medick suggests the following:

"Conceptual alternatives to such positions are only thinkable along- side a dynamic and open understanding of culture, above all with an understanding of culture as translation and negotiation... (Newman and Nunning) (pg.111).

Western values can be significantly different from First Peoples' values. Charles Lipson, for example, teaches a course entitled Core Values of the West in which he identifies the following as core western values[15]:

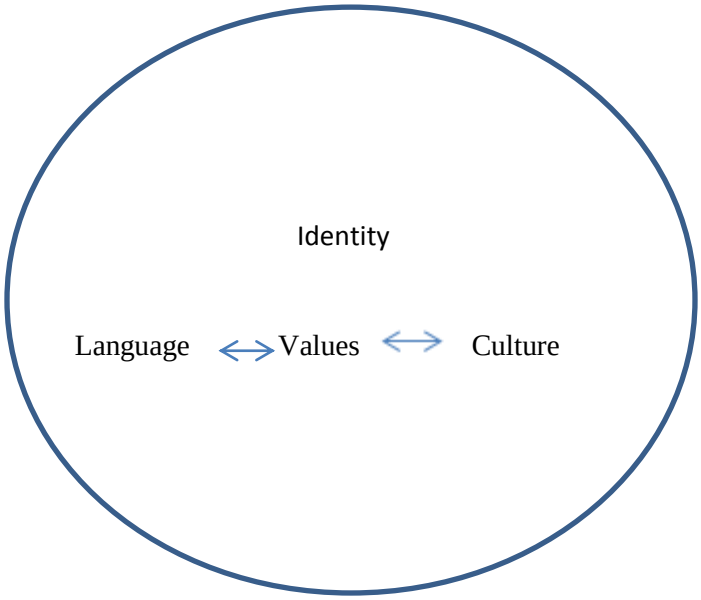
- Religious freedom, religious toleration
- Free speech
- Property rights and market competition
- Self-government, or government by consent
- Equal treatment under law
- Liberty and human autonomy (or human independence)
- Scientific inquiry

It is important to recognize values since they are the fabric with which people weave various everyday lives together. They provide the foundation for the way people think and do things in their lives. The values fill the space that exists between the words culture language. This space would look like the following:

Identity
Language values culture
Territory

Culture (values) Language

Values are the mesh that supports the relationship between the two, culture language. Without values, a culture could drift in randomness. There is no context for evaluating the actions that take place. The residential schools, for instance, had the objective of destroying First Peoples' language culture. The extent to which this was successful may be measured by the actions of the federal government in the past decade.[16] Once the First Peoples' cultural values were destroyed, the western values were imposed. This form of cultural genocide was successful to the extent that it created division amongst First Peoples' groups over which value system should prevail. The saving grace was the fact that older children who were sent to residential schools had already entrenched their cultural identities in their lives and continued to carry their traditional values with them. The success of attempts at assimilation was with the younger children who did not have the entrenchment of their culture deeply instilled when they were sent away from their family and home[17]. This disrupted First Peoples' communities to the extent today that we have a clash of values between those who follow western values and those that follow First Peoples' values. For example, the urban First Peoples' who have no connection to their traditional roots generally follow the western value system placing the traditional values associated with territories versus property rights and market competition as their dominant value system. In the first instance traditional territories are communal and the second is viewed as personal objects that can be bought and sold.



The importance of identifying what lies within the space between the words language culture is the foundation of their "gan dadiltst" (way of life). The gan dadiltst is dependent upon the collective memory of the community involved. "…concepts of memory are also shaped in and through the cultural practises and performances of memory cultures - be it in literature, painting…" (Newman and Nunning, p.13)

This means that stories, art, totem poles, regalia and history all carry the collective memory of the people that can be called forth into the present and be used when needed such as with the feasts which do not happen daily but the knowledge and process are stored in the people's collective memory[18] for using when required. Traditional house regalia, for example, are worn only when house business is conducted and completed. It is a sign that the house has completed the task based on cultural protocols and it is left to the witness Chiefs in attendance at the feast to acknowledge that the work was done correctly or incorrectly. Dance regalia are used specifically for performances that are not attached to house business but rather for a public display.

"Memory culture is the way a society ensures cultural continuity by preserving, with the help of cultural mnemonics, its collective knowledge from one generation to the next, rendering it possible for later generations to (*capture the spirit of)*[19] their cultural identity."[20]

These memories are like shadows and ghosts. They are elusive but always present. Cultural memory, while not perfectly preserving the past, carries with it the core values of the people.

It is not random but is dependent on an individual's cultural experience and knowledge from their specific nation. As an example of cultural memory, Ken Mowatt describes his work as a Gitxsan artist in the following way: "Ken, as he would say, is still pursuing the magical mysteries of the old Gitxsan art".(Smith, J.p.29)

In Ken`s case, Gitxsan art becomes the pneumonic through which the past will reveal itself. It shows the relationships between the visual and the human being who created it in a specific cultural time. Depending on what an individual brings to the table when looking at the art, their teachings and prior knowledge, along with their frame of mind at the moment will provide opportunities for a relationship to be established between the viewer and the viewed. Inclusion of the story as well as the visual provides in-depth knowledge of the artist and their creation of the art in order to be understood from the artist`s vision to the viewer. Bal suggests that the look is much deeper than superficial structural elements. She considers Lacan`s gaze to be a more limiting factor of understanding of the object. She seeks to understand the fuller relationship between the person looking at the art and the way in which the artist communicates with the focalizer, the person viewing the art. There is movement of concepts between the focalizer, the art and the artist. (Bal, M. p 38-39). For example, if we look at a picture of a unicorn decorated with Northwest Coast Art forms, a western viewer will see two cultures melded together, the Greek mythological unicorn and northwest coast art forms but a Gitxsan viewer would relate the image as being a one horned goat with the art form and inclusion of the raven which identifies the art as being from the Frog clan. The artist and the focalizer, in this instance, enter into a much more dynamic and culturally driven relationship. The culture of the Gitxsan viewer begins to be called forward. The art is moved beyond its edges: It begins to expand itself into the spaces beyond itself. (McLennan and Duffek, p.9).

Final Thoughts:

First Peoples' learning is dramatically different from the structured learning desired by western governments. There are no curriculum guides, formal tests, marks and grades. The learning is very discreet in nature. No one ever states, "Come to our school and we will teach you to become …". The learning surrounds the individual and the community in such a way that learning happens in a natural and non-structured way. The feast hall, the art, berry picking and the continuous learning of language culture are all venues where knowledge is transmitted. The colonial disruption of these ways has altered the perceptions of how learning is transferred to the newer generation. Formal schooling has been valued over the learning that a community naturally provides to the individual. The school demands attendance and grades to ensure that learning has occurred. In First Nations communities learning is demonstrated over a long period of time until Elders validate or acknowledge that they are capable of carrying on a name and its responsibilities. The dance between the two worlds is not one of equal partners but rather like a shadow which comes and goes like the progression of the sun.

[1] Ted Aoki, emergence of the term of curriculum. (Global language book -Curriculum in a New Key, 2005)

[2] (Alberta Curriculum as an example.)URL & to note fragmentation of subjects (social studies, English, math) as presented in curriculum

[3] In Canada the history of the residential schools rested upon the teaching of western curriculum in order to destroy First People's culture. (Audrey – 100 years). Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

[4] Werner, Walter. Defining Curriculum Policy through slogans. Journal of Education Policy, 1991, Volume 6, No. 2

[5] Blommaert states (p.221), "the importance of space and spatial references as organizing motifs in narratives, emphasizing how space provides a framework in which meaningful social relationships and events can be anchored".

[6] Allan Emery guidelines: integrating indigenous knowledge in project planning and implementation. Indigenous Knowledge for Development Program. http://www.worldbank.org/afr/ik/guidelines/index.htm.

[7] Commentary on the concept of "community development"? Do we need it. If not the footnote numbers need to be changed.

[8] There are 3 possible variants in western thought where people talk about culture and language; just culture or just language.

[9] Basil Johnston (p.129) states, "As long as men and women can say "I have a different understanding," and are allowed to practice and exercise their political and religious beliefs, so long will knowledge and understanding grow. But the tendency has always been for institutions, governments and churches to wax larger and larger, and for its rulership and members, fearing loss of authority, power, influence, priviliege and even monopoly, to suppress criticism, opposition, disagreement, news, fact and even truth."

[10] Florencia Mallon, (p.3) states, "… as a matter related to issues of language and power, we talked about some of the ways in which colonialism had marked orality as inferior to textuality, and thus considered societies with different record systems as "primitive" or "prehistorical".

[11] A parallel situation is described by McLennan and Duffek in The Transforming Image. (p111) (2000). Often described in terms of rules, its formal structure is less rigid and prescriptive system than a kind of visual grammar, comprising a set of established principles essential to the mastery of painting, yet supple enough to allow infinite inflections.

Understanding the formal language of Northwest Coast painting has long defied the uninitiated observer. Early European explorers and traders were often able to identify human and animal representations in the painted works they saw but their sketches and engravings of these images little recognition of the compositional structures.

[12]Education needs to be enfolded into the community's way of life. What is relevant in one community may not be relevant in another. The definition of education by the First peoples and the non-native people is not the same. Education as defined by First peoples is knowledge and life experiences.

[13] It is often assumed that when the term "both worlds" is used that it implies an equality but in actual fact that is not the intent. Our intent is to point out that the FN culture, in the context that we are using it, is more important to the individual using it than the western way. (see Bloomaert, Jan. (2005) Discourse: Key Topics In Social Linquistics Cambridge University Press, New York. P. 40)

[14] Toulouse, P. (2008) Integrating Aboriginal Teaching and Values into the Classroom. Ontario Ministry of Education. Core values exist amongst many First Peoples. Toulouse identifies others among them Ojibwe: respect, love, bravery,wisdom, humility, truth, honesty. http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/toulouse.pdf

[15]Bloomaert, Jan. (2005) Discourse: Key Topics In Social Linquistics Cambridge University Press, New York. P. 212. There is an orientation to English as a code associated with core values of capitalist ideas of success: Entrepreneurship, mobility, luxury, female beauty.

[16] *www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100015644*

[17] Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *www.trc.ca/*

[18] An Wilaayasxw): Knowledge keeper of cultural knowledge for the Nation.

[19] The author's removed the word "reconstruct" since that may remove the essence of the cultural foundation because it suggests that it has been destroyed and needs to be rebuilt. The words, "capture the spirit", suggests that the cultural understandings are present in the collective memory of the people and wait unseen until they are required.

[20] Assmann 1992: 30-34; see also 1996: 26f, 31.

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