

American Education from a Tribal Perspective

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Abstract

In this article, Dr. Cajete offers the holistic context in which Indigenous-based learning exists. He contrasts this approach with the relatively disconnected approach typical in American educational approaches. He calls for Indian voices to collaboratively bring forth a return to this holistic orientation, closing with 24 elements which characterize Indigenous education processes.

Keywords: *tribal education, learning, Indigenous teaching, curriculum development*

Learning is always a creative act. We are continuously engaged in the art of making meaning and creating our world through the unique processes of human learning. Learning for humans is instinctual, continuous, and simultaneously, the most complex of our natural traits. Learning is also key to our ability to survive in the environments that we create and that create us.

Throughout history human societies have attempted to guide, facilitate, and even coerce the human instinct for learning toward socially defined ends. The complex of activities for “forming” human learning is what we call “education” today. To this end, human societies have evolved a multitude of educational forms to maintain their survival and as vehicles for expressing their unique cultural mythos. This cultural mythos also forms the foundation for each culture’s “guiding vision,” that is, a culture’s story of itself and its perceived relationship to the world. In its guiding vision, a culture sets forth a set of “ideals” which guide and form the learning processes inherent in its educational systems. In turn, these ideals reflect what that culture values as the most important qualities, behaviors, and value structures to instill in its members. Generally, this set of values is predicated on those things it considers central to its survival.

Traditional American Indian education historically occurred in a holistic social context which developed a sense of the importance of each individual as a contributing member of the social group. Essentially, Tribally-context education worked at sustaining a life process. It was a process of education which unfolded through mutual, reciprocal relationships between one’s social group and the natural world. This relationship involved all dimensions of one’s being while providing both personal development and technical skills through *participation* in the life of the community. It was essentially an integrated expression of environmental education.

Understanding the depth of relationships and the significance of participation in all aspects of life are the keys to traditional American Indian education. “*Mitakuye Oyasin*” (we are all related) is a Lakota phrase which captures an essence of Tribal education because it reflects the understanding that our lives are truly and profoundly connected to other people and the physical world. Likewise, in Tribal education, knowledge is gained from first-hand experience in the world and then transmitted or explored through ritual, ceremony, art, and appropriate technology. Knowledge gained through these vehicles is then used in the context of everyday living. Education, in this context, becomes education for “life’s sake.” Education is, at its very

essence, learning about life through participation and relationship to community, including not only people, but plants, animals, and the whole of Nature.

This ideal of education directly contrasts with the predominant orientation of American education which continues to emphasize “objective” content and experience detached from primary sources and community. This conditioning for being a marginal participant and perpetual observer, involved with only objective content, is a foundational element of the crisis of American education and the alienation of modern man from his own being and the natural world.

Traditional American Indian forms of education must be given serious consideration as conceptual wellsprings for the “new” kinds of educational thought capable of addressing the tremendous challenges of the 21st Century. Tribal education presents examples of models and universal foundations for the transformation of American education and the development of a “new” paradigm for curricula which will make a difference for “life’s sake” in the world of 21st Century.

American Indians have struggled to adapt to an educational process that is not their own with its inherent social, political, and cultural baggage. Yet American Indian cultural forms of education contain seeds for new models of educating which can enliven American education, as well as allow American Indians to evolve contemporary expressions of education tied to their cultural roots.

For American Indians, a new “Circle” of education must begin which is founded on the roots of Tribal education and reflective of the needs, values, and socio/political issues as Indian people themselves perceive them.

Such a new circle must encompass the importance Indian people place on the continuance of their ancestral traditions; emphasize a respect for individual uniqueness in the diversity of expressions of spirituality; facilitate a strong and well-contexted understanding of history and culture; develop a strong sense of place and service to community; and forge a commitment to educational and social transformation which recognizes and further empowers the inherent strength of Indian people and their respective cultures.

To understand how to accomplish this, Indian people must begin to exploit all avenues of communication open to them

and establish a reflective dialogue about a contemporary theory for Indian education that evolves from *them* and *their* collective experience. In the past, Indian education has been defined largely by non-Indian educators, politicians, and institutions through a huge volume of legislative acts at the state and federal levels, which for decades have entangled Indian leaders, educators, and whole communities in the morass of the federal government’s social/political bureaucracy.

Indeed, Indian education stems more from the U.S. Government’s self-serving political/bureaucratic relationship with Indian tribes than any truly culturally-contexted process rooted in Tribal philosophies and social values. In fact, no contemporary theory of Indian education exists which can be said to guide the implementation or direction of educational curriculum development. Instead, what is called “Indian education” today is really a “compendium of models, methodologies and techniques gleaned from various sources in mainstream American education and adapted to American Indian circumstances, usually with the underlying aim of cultural assimilation” (Cajete 2012, 41).

It is time for Indian people to define Indian education in their own voice and in their own terms. It is time for Indian people to allow themselves to explore and express the richness of their collective history in education. Among American Indians, education has always included a visionary expression of life. Education has been, and continues to be, a grand story, a search for meaning, an essential food for the soul.

Building on Earlier Realities

The Mayan practice of building one pyramidal structure by encasing a previous one provides an appropriate metaphor for the developmental building process of Indigenous education. At the end of each Mayan dynasty, the nobles of the reigning dynasty would commemorate their “new order” by erecting a symbolic new reality. In establishing this new reality, the nobles would engage in the building of a new ceremonial pyramid by encasing an older one. Thereby, encasing an older reality by building upon a new one. The new structure became the visible symbolic expression through which they espoused the new reality. As is evident from current excavations, these successive facades of “new reality” were actualized by recycling many of the materials used previously in the structures. A constant building upon earlier realities is really a basic Indigenous characteristic of

process. The newest reality may seem different from earlier ones, but its essential essence and foundation remains tied to the earlier realities which it encases. The pyramids are restructured, enlarged, and remolded, but their ancient foundations remain.

Many of the temple pyramids served as tombs for the noble elite of each dynasty. The practice of burrowing into the heart of a pyramid to place a tomb metaphorically connected the deceased noble to the realities of both past and present. Building on the realities of past generations, expressing new realities with each dynasty while remaining true to basic principles and orientations, are reflective of the kind of structuring process to which the evolution of Indigenous education is naturally tied.

Extending the metaphor of the structuring of the Mayan pyramids to the “building” of a contemporary expression of Indigenous education, we have several images of structuring, of engineering the new reality built upon earlier ones, yet reflecting the needs and facing the sun of the times in which we now live. Education is always “in process” and essentially being built from the stones, and upon the foundations of, prior structures. Indigenous education has “prior structures,” i.e., stones and foundations from which it can once again be built.

Elemental Points about Indigenous Education

There are a number of elements which characterize Indigenous education and processes. These elements characterize the expression of Indigenous education wherever and however it has been expressed. These elements are like the “living stones,” the “*Inyan*” as the Lakota term it, which animate the expressions of Indigenous education. A few of these characteristics are included here to provide “landmarks” to assist the reader.

- The sacred view of Nature permeates and contexts the foundational process of teaching and learning.
- Integration and interconnectedness are universal traits.
- Relationships between elements and knowledge bases radiate in concentric rings of process and structure.
- Rites symbolize various elements of its processes and structures.
- Its processes adhere to the principle of mutual reciprocity between humans and all other things.
- It recognizes and incorporates the cycles within cycles, i.e., that there are always deeper levels of meaning to be found in every learning/teaching process.
- It presents something to learn for everyone, at every stage of life.
- It recognizes the levels of maturity and readiness to learn in the developmental process of both males and females. This recognition is incorporated into the designs and situations in which Indigenous teaching takes place.
- It recognizes language as a sacred expression of breath and incorporates this orientation in all its foundations.
- It recognizes that each person and each culture contain the “seeds” of all that are essential to their well being and positive development.
- Art is used as both a vehicle of utility and expression. Art is recognized as an expression of the soul.
- It recognizes and applies ordering through ceremony, ritual, and community activity.
- The ritual complex is used as both structure and process for teaching key principles and values.
- It recognizes that the true sources of knowledge are to be found within the individual *and* entities of nature.
- It recognizes that true learning occurs through participation and honoring relationships in both the human and natural communities.
- It honors the ebb and flow of learning as it moves back and forth through individuals, community, nature, and the cosmos.
- It recognizes that learning requires letting go, growing, and re-integration at successively higher levels of understanding.
- Its purpose is to teach “a way of life.”
- It occurs always within an authentic context of community and nature.
- It uses story as a way to root a perspective that unfolds through the special use of language.
- It recognizes the power of thought and language to create the worlds we live in.

- It creates “maps of the world” which assist us through our life’s journey.
- It resonates and builds learning through the Tribal structures of the home and community.

These essential points are reflected in multiple ways through the contexts, methods, and expressions of Indigenous education. They can provide the building stones for new structures, new foundations, and new realities in contemporary Indian education. The key lies in our own collective ability to create the contexts in which they may most appropriately be applied in erecting a new expression of Indian education in a 21st century world.

References

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Author Bio

Gregory Cajete is a Tewa Indian from Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico. He has lectured at colleges and universities around the world. He served as Dean of the Center for Research and Cultural Exchange, the Institute of American Indian Arts, and Director of Native American Studies and an emeritus Professor in the Division of Language, Literacy and Socio-cultural Studies in the College of Education at the University of New Mexico. He has authored 10 books, including *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education*; *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence and Critical Neurophilosophy and Indigenous Wisdom* (co-authored with Four Arrows and Jongmin Lee), and *Sacred Journeys: Personal Visions of Indigenous Education* (John Charlton Publishers Ltd.). Dr. Cajete also has written chapters in 37 other books along with numerous articles and has given over 300 national and international presentations.