

From a Much Deeper Place: ‘Indigenous Worlding’ as Next Step in Holistic Education

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Abstract

This chapter introduces ways to deepen implementation and future research relating to a holistic education that can help us find ways to truly regain balance in our world. Because holistic education has largely been ‘worlded’ into dominant Eurocentric ways of being in the world, it calls for “Indigenous Worlding” as a way to restore the original Indigenous foundation for holistic education.

“Holistic education, grounded in a fundamentally different worldview, reflects very different assumptions about education and school.”—**Ron Miller** (Miller 1997, 5)

“Indigenous education embodies these principles more deeply ... When Indigenous people speak about our relationship to earth and the universe, it does not come from the head but from a much deeper place.”—**John (Jack) Miller** (Four Arrows and Miller 2012, 3)

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Jack Miller refers to holistic education as being about “holding a sense of the sacred, valuing the web of life, and educating the whole human being” (Four Arrows and Miller 2012, 9). He writes elsewhere: “The holistic ideal can be traced back to Indigenous cultures. In general, the Aboriginal or Indigenous person sees the earth and the universe as infused with meaning and purpose and not as cold and impersonal as in the modern worldview” (Miller 2009, 291). Miller’s words reflect the recognition that Indigenous worldview is the ultimate foundation for holistic education. Unfortunately, holistic education has been held back by post-colonial worlding, defined as the result of colonizing hegemony being intrinsic to most educational systems in dominant cultural schooling. As a result, implementation of this holistic ideal has fallen short of what we need to achieve in education.

One way I feel holistic education does not go deep enough relates to degrees of anthropocentrism. I have noted that

holistic education publications focus on body, mind, family, social community, art, pluralism, and health without an authentic and consistent engagement with the other-than-human relations. When “web of life” concepts are mentioned, authors seem limited by hegemonic assumptions relating to financial and technological considerations for human benefit. Kopnina (2014) critiques this problem, writing, “Mainstream neoliberal discourse tends to maintain instrumental and essentially anthropocentric attitudes toward environment, subordinating ‘natural resources’ to economic and social objectives” (6).

However, even Kopnina’s critical pedagogy does not go deep enough. His scholarship sees anthropocentrism as ethically wrong and a bad way to do environmental work, but it does not understand how other-than-humans offer solutions as sentient beings. It misses the spiritual interconnectedness dimension (Jacobs 1997). O’Sullivan (2005) complains about

this when he writes, “My major criticism of critical pedagogy is the pre-eminent emphasis on inter-human problems frequently to the detriment of the relations of humans to the wider biotic community and the natural world” (411). Gustavo, Stuchul, and Prakash (2005) are equally explicit about this problem when they say that critical pedagogy-oriented interventions into Indigenous cultures often lack a deep understanding of their nature-based, holistic worldview.

Although a number of holistic educators tend to have a human-centered perspective, others come closer to the nature-centered Indigenous worldview on this. I have wondered if embracing Indigeneity is a reason why it seems that there are relatively few holistic education programs being implemented in the world. I could not find statistics to verify this assumption, but I did call Jerry Mintz, long-time director of the Alternative Education Resource Organization, to find out. I asked him how many alternative schools actually do holistic education. After a long description of statistics, he concluded: “I might say that maybe 5–10% could be called holistic.” An extensive study on interdisciplinary research in higher education (Van Noorden 2015, 306) shows a similar lack of integrated or holistic perspective when he writes that, worldwide, 9–13% of all the scholarly publications reviewed showed any reference to a journal outside of the particular field of study targeted. Interdisciplinary curriculum is an aspect of holistic education because it encourages students to make connections between disciplines.

Thus, I contend that to move holistic education to its intended “deeper” orientation, we must return to our original non-anthropocentric worldview and begin to think and speak accordingly in the classroom. This would be a primary way to reworld Indigeneity into holistic education. Mika (2017), a senior lecturer at the University of Waikato and author of a new book on Indigenous metaphysics and “worlding,” also refers to the unfulfilled Indigenous realization of holistic education rhetoric. Mika is supportive of holistic education as a twenty-first-century paradigm, and he pushes it further toward the deeper goals expressed in the opening quotes using Indigenous Nature-centered perspectives.

Mika (2017) goes deeper with his own description:

Broadly I mean by *worlding* and its variations *worlded* and *worldedness* the following: one thing is never alone,

and all things actively construct and compose it. As one thing presents itself to me others within it may appear and hide, but even if I cannot perceive them (which I cannot) we can be assured that they are there. An object that I perceive is therefore fundamentally unknowable. I can speculate on it and give it a name, but all I can be certain of is that it is mysterious precisely because it is ‘worlded.’ (6–7)

Such worlding requires that we incorporate worldview reflection into our holistic education classrooms. We must investigate the wisdom of our dominant worldview and its human-superiority assumptions to determine where and how it may impede the optimal utilization of holistic education.

This is something that Greg Cajete, John Lee, and I did in looking at how the dominant worldview lens guides neuroscientific conclusions. We discovered that the dominant worldview deters even neuroscientists from realizing the truths of Indigenous wisdom via their “observations” and interpretations of laboratory experiments (Four Arrows, Cajete, and Jonmin 2010). Looking at fundamental Indigenous worldview beliefs, we found that much of Western science comes to faulty conclusions by looking at experiments through the Western lens. Such is the power of a worldview and why this worldview reflection is crucial for our holistic understanding of how we have managed to be on the verge of a mass extinction.

Although I continue to use it, the original word, ‘worldview,’ which comes from the German word “*Weltanschauung*” (“to see the world”), does not accurately describe the Indigenous worldview. It does not rely upon an understanding of the world by only what it can see. However, though ‘worldview’ does not align well with Indigenous ways of comprehending reality, it still works if we use it to explain fundamental ways we understand our place in the cosmos. It incorporates cultures, religions, and philosophies.

The concept of worldview may appear to be similar or even interchangeable with concepts such as ideology, paradigm, religion, and discourse, and they indeed possess some degree of referential overlap. However, worldviews can nonetheless be clearly distinguished from these concepts.
(Hedlund-de Witt 2013, 19)

Robert Redfield, the first social anthropologist and a specialist in worldview studies at the University of Chicago in the 1950s, also believed that worldview describes the totality of ideas that people within a culture share about self, human society, and natural and spiritual worlds (Redfield 1953). He considered that since the Asian worldview had been mostly taken over by the Western one, that there remain only two worldviews for us to study—the primal or Indigenous one and the dominant one that continues to overshadow and destroy the original one.

With these ideas about worldview in mind, I believe going deeper with holistic education starts with seeking to find complementarity and understanding imbalances between the two worldviews. Then, with new awareness, educators must begin *worlding* the Indigenous perspective. We do this by actually participating in the world emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually, as if we are mysteriously inseparable from it and obligated to take action according to our highest potential for complementarity. It is a way of being in the world where distinctions between self and other disappear. I think of this as living fearlessly and, in so doing, embracing the full force of all things. By living the Indigenous worldview again, we cannot help but teach holistically.

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Author Bio

Wahinkpe Topa (Four Arrows), aka Don Trent Jacobs, is an Oglala Lakota Pipe Carrier, made a relative through one of the Lakota's seven sacred ceremonies, *Huŋkápi* after completing his Sun Dance vows on Pine Ridge with Rick Two Dogs. Formerly Director of Education at Oglala Lakota College, he is currently a professor with Fielding Graduate University in the School of Leadership Studies. He has authored numerous books, chapters, papers and articles on Indigenous worldview and counter-hegemonic education. Recipient of the Martin Springer Institutes Moral Courage Award for his activism, his most recent co-authored book, *Restoring the Kinship Worldview: 28 Indigenous Voices Introduce Worldview Precepts for Rebalancing Life on Planet Earth* was selected by UC Berkeley's Science Center for the Greater Good as one of the top 15 "thought provoking, inspiring and practical" science books of 2022. He lives in Mexico and in Canada with his artist wife and numerous pets.