

Embracing Sacredness in Education: Indigenous Psychology and the Seven Daily Walks

Arthur W. Blume

E-mail: art.blume@wsu.edu

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Abstract

Indigenous American Psychology believes that the universe (“Creation”) is sacred and that its entities share in that sacredness. Learning from the sacred universe, a lifelong process necessary to becoming a healthy human being, is viewed as a sacred activity. Viewing Creation as sacred, along with the assumptions of interdependence and egalitarianism of Creation’s sacred entities, suggests important implications for educational processes and content. The paper that follows introduces how these concepts and values may help to transform and decolonize education, altering how, what, and why we educate. Although it may take generations to transform societies into equitable and just social systems, it is posited that Indigenizing learning may provide an effective method to educate toward a more just society.

Keywords: *colonial education, daily educational walks, spiritual centeredness, decolonization, decolonizing education*

Introduction

Education has been idealistically viewed as a virtuous opportunity to advance class mobility and social progress in colonial nations. However, the reality of colonial education has been much less virtuous, since it has been used to oppress and assimilate Indigenous and other marginalized peoples. In addition, the myths of meritocracy and the American dream have distorted the inequitable realities of inequitable educational resources and opportunities. In fact, class mobility has worsened over the last few decades (Chetty et al. 2017, 3-8; Connor and Storper 2020, 30310-30316), suggesting that very few have been able to leverage education to advance or prosper as suggested by the myth of the American dream (Blume 2022a, 87-89).

Education in colonial nations has been infused with colonial cultural assumptions. Colonial interpretations of the sciences and humanities are taught. Instruction often focuses on reductionistic perspectives of knowledge that

have contributed to compartmentalized and siloed disciplines, artificial boundaries between the human world and the natural world, and artificial distinctions between material and spiritual such that the invisible has been dismissed as less relevant than the visible, measurable world.

Colonial education has perpetuated hierarchical and anthropocentric assumptions about the natural world and the place of humans in it (Blume 2022b, 544). Colonial hierarchies have been used to disempower and minoritize people by defining group superiority and inferiority, justifying colonial privilege and social inequities. Colonial hierarchies have fueled racism and other forms of bias and discrimination that have contributed to separate and unequal educational systems. Hierarchical assumptions in education have contributed to disparities, inequities, and injustices in colonial nations (Blume 2020, 50-52; Blume 2022a, 88).

Colonial education methods have not weathered the COVID-19 pandemic well. The lockdowns and limitations exposed great disparities in educational resources, educational computing and wifi capabilities, educational and mental health capabilities, and safe educational spaces. Furthermore, political divisiveness victimized both students and faculty, resulting in confusing, contradictory, and even risky practices to the health and well-being of staff and students. As a result of these pandemic challenges, educational disparities will likely worsen with time (Blume 2022a, 89-97). Hierarchical and self-oriented education methods have been insufficient to address the educational challenges. However, it has not been a surprise that educational institutions immersed with cultural values favoring hierarchy, privilege, supremacy, and exceptionalism would contribute to inequitable outcomes, especially during a global crisis. What has been curious, though, is that the colonial educational model founded on assumptions of individualism, autonomy, and self-improvement would fail to prepare students to meet the challenges during a prolonged period of isolation, likely exposing inherent flaws in a self-oriented educational model geared towards autonomy.

An Indigenous worldview does not accept hierarchical assumptions or recognize artificially constructed boundaries that contribute to reductionist views or compartmentalize the spiritual from the material. An Indigenous American perspective acknowledges the centrality and necessity of Creation to its entities, including human creatures, and respects the sacredness and beauty of that Creation and its entities (Blume 2020, 7-12; Blume 2021, 104-105; Blume 2022a, 184). An Indigenous worldview emphasizes holism and collectivism —interdependence and kinship rather than independence and autonomy – focusing on the importance of healthy relationships to psychological wellness (Blume 2020, 88-94). Because of the centrality of Creation over self, an Indigenous American paradigm of psychology assumes that egalitarianism, rather than hierarchies and interdependence, and rather than independence and autonomy, are natural states of being (Blume 2020, 56). Indigenous education begins with an acceptance of the centrality of Creation as the giver of life and life's lessons, suggesting that instruction begins with the assumption that all entities in Creation are equally sacred, interdependent, and important.

Time in the Western colonial perspective is viewed as linear with a beginning and ending and clear boundaries between past, present, and future (Blume 2020, 40-42), whereas an

Indigenous perspective of time is viewed as cyclical, such that the present has connectivity in the moment with past and future (Blume 2020, 15-18). Education for human creatures is a life-long cyclical process of becoming – rather than a linear achievement bound to self or siloed from others and the rest of Creation (Blume 2020, 19-20, 132-133). Education is a holistic and collective enterprise of learning about the sacredness of Creation and its entities—it is destined to be shared with all rather than hoarded by the privileged few for personal gain or profit.

Embracing sacredness is essential for transforming education to benefit all. Imagine how different education would be if participants embraced their collective sacredness and the sacred task of learning from Creation. Imagine how different education would look if egalitarian assumptions regarding curricula, learning, and participants were embraced. Imagine how different an interdependent model of education might look than the current model.

Embracing the sacredness of education may help to overcome the colonial history of exclusion. Colonialism has made educating others seem like a Sisyphean task at times, given colonial inequities of opportunity and resources, colonial linear time demands of deadlines, urgency, and immediacy; and the consequences of years of social inequity and injustice on student preparation. However, an Indigenous conception of cyclical time permits innumerable second chances, which generates patience and hope in the process of intergenerational decolonization and transformation of the social order (Blume 2020, 96, 101, 171, 227).

Seven daily activities (walks) have been proposed to promote sustainable healing and reconciliation that embraces the sacredness of Creation and its entities (Blume 2021, 102-108). The seven walks help us think differently about how we educate, develop curricula, generate resources, about the environment in which we educate, and about re-envisioning the relationships of students and teachers. The walks include: 1. the daily educational walk to restore harmony in relationships, 2. the daily educational walk to restore personal balance, 3. the daily educational walk to seek collective beauty, 4. the daily educational walk to advance peace, 5. the daily educational walk to seek humility, 6. the daily educational walk for spiritual centeredness, and 7. the daily educational walk exercising courage.

The Daily Educational Walks to Restore Harmony in Relationships and Balance in Selves

Teaching harmony and balance as a way of thinking and being embraces collective sacredness. An interdependent and egalitarian existence requires harmony and balance among Creation's entities to thrive. Since colonialism has encouraged hierarchical division, competition, and conflict that has disrupted harmony between human creatures and between the human species and Creation, restoration of harmony with others is essential to psychological wellness, and therefore essential to education. Teaching the importance of harmonious relationships with others in an interdependent egalitarian planetary system would help to embrace sacredness in education.

Seeking moderation is an essential element to restoring personal balance. Moderation requires people to treat oneself with the dignity and respect warranted for a sacred creature. Seeking moderation requires respecting one's physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being, learning to manage time rather than allowing time to manage your existence, and overcoming the imbalances of consumerism and materialism. Embracing personal sacredness restores personal balance from within. Living in a sustainable way restores balances with Creation and with others. Embracing sacredness provides educational clarity on how to tread gently through life, balancing your personal needs with the needs of others across space and time. Embracing sacredness elevates the importance of educating others on seeking both harmony and balance in relationships.

The Daily Educational Walks to Seek Collective Beauty and Advance Peace

Seeking collective beauty places one in touch with how sacredness is expressed through Creation's entities. Appreciating the beauty in Creation generates respect for its inherent sacredness—a reminder to treat others with the respect and dignity due to sacred entities. Beauty and awe often go hand in hand when relationships are healthy. Anger, fear, and distrust tend to dim the ability to see beauty, because these emotions interfere with connectivity to the sacredness of Creation (Blume 2020, 97-98; Blume 2022a, 11, 76-77). Facing the anger, fear, and distrust as an intrapersonal conflict rather than an interpersonal threat will restore one's ability to see the beauty of relationships, but toxic, longstanding externalized anger, fear, and distrust may

lead to a dark and lonely place without healing or beauty. It is important to seek restoration from the toxicity by observing daily the collective beauty within us all. Utilizing the beauty of Creation to educate is an important connection to the sacredness of all things.

Every day is an opportunity to seek reconciliation, equity, and advance social and environmental justice in ways that will reduce conflict and promote peace. Hierarchies promote conflict, oppression, violence, and wars in colonial societies. Beliefs in superiority inevitably disrupt the harmony and balances between interdependent and egalitarian creatures. Decolonization involves breaking down the myths of these hierarchies such that they no longer promote inequities and injustices. Teach how hierarchies promote conflict and hinder efforts toward peace in an interdependent and egalitarian planetary order. Teach how seeking healthy relations with others reduces the potential for conflicts and violence.

The Daily Education Walks to Seek Humility and Spiritual Centeredness (Creation-centrism)

Human beings are very small entities in a very large and essentially timeless universe. However, the human capacity for broad and cumulative impact across time is very real, as witnessed by the consequences of climate change (Pörtner et al. 2022, 3-33). Although that impact can result in potentially tragic consequences, it also has the capacity for sustainable and positive outcomes when humans act with the humility required to preserve and advance healthy relationships. The first act of humility, therefore, is acceptance of the reality of an interdependent egalitarian existence. The second act of humility is to develop a keen appreciation for the broad view across space and time of what living in an interdependent and egalitarian existence means—to move beyond colonial hierarchical selfism that has contributed to beliefs that prioritize the needs of this generation and of privileged humans over the rest of Creation. Fully embracing the sacredness of Creation and all of its entities brings about natural humility—one realizes that “us” thinking and “us” behavior is the only logical pathway to harmony, balance, and peace – to find collective beauty in the meaning of one's life.

The daily education walk for spiritual centeredness begins with daily Creation-centric activities to enhance relationships. For Indigenous Peoples, Creation-centrism often is inextricably linked to contact with the natural world.

Indigenous people understand the power of restoration and healing available from immersion in nature – a much different perspective than the one that contributes to constructing artificial home, work, and education environments apart from nature. Interestingly, scientists noted that nature was a considerable source of stress relief and healing during the shutdowns of the pandemic (Stock et al. 2022, 7), and that buildings well ventilated by outside air were safer than the others (US Environmental Protection Agency, 2022). Schools created in vivo (in nature) will provide higher quality education and promote health and wellness more effectively than the current educational model of constructing artificial environments for learning.

Creation-centric behaviors involve thinking and acting with the big picture in mind, accounting for the impact of one's activities across both space and time. Creation-centrism involves intergenerational thinking and planning—what I have referred to as seven generational living (Blume et al., 2021, 111-112) that simultaneously honors the ancestors and their advances on our behalf and protects those who are yet to come. Seven generational living fosters Creation-centric values, attitudes, beliefs, and actions toward advancing environmental and social justice every day. It involves seeing oneself as part of a larger, evolving whole, and working to honor and learn from the past in order to restore a sustainable future. Creation-centrism accesses the sacred wisdom of the whole to advance collective wellness. Educating people to think collectively across geographic boundaries and generations—to think and problem solve beyond themselves and their cohort—embraces the sacredness of Creation.

Spiritual centeredness helps to foster patience in the unfolding of time in our lives and in our relationships with others, that we are all simultaneously being and becoming throughout our lives until we draw our last breaths. Spiritual centeredness teaches us that we are not in this alone – that there is strength in our collective nature and that time is an ally for change rather than an enemy to be feared. Educating and modeling patience and optimism that trusts in collective sacredness may help to transform lives by changing expectations.

The Daily Educational Walk Exercising Courage

Living in harmony, balance, beauty, peace, humility, and spiritual centeredness takes courage, but walking the other six daily educational walks will access the strengths of

Creation to do so. Courage is needed to oppose hierarchies on a daily basis. People of privilege who benefit from those hierarchies may be reluctant to give away the privilege they hold. Courage will be needed to oppose the self-orientation that contributes to the temptations of relational psychopathology (i.e., pursuing self-interests at the expense of others; Blume 2020, 162-165; 175-178). Self-orientation throws up barriers to healthy relationships and disrupts the daily walks for harmony, balance, beauty, peace, humility, and spiritual-centeredness. Courage is needed to commit daily to the interpersonal activities to remain decolonized. Courage is also necessary to stand against colonial institutions and systems—to call out colonial inequities and injustices that remain infused into hierarchical social systems. Truth to power is needed as the first step to educate for social transformation to prevent future inequities and injustices and to fight the inequities and injustices of the past and present.

The role of warriors in Indigenous societies have been misinterpreted and stereotyped as roles of aggression. In reality, the role of warriors is to defend the peace and protect the vulnerable. Opposing hierarchies, relational psychopathology, selfism, colonialism and its institutions, and standing up for the most vulnerable takes courage. An Indigenous warrior is a defender rather than an offender, operating in a Creation-centric manner (Blume 2020, 234-235). The role of Indigenous warriors has evolved during colonialism to be agents of decolonization—to challenge privileged self-interests or beliefs of superiority or exceptionalism, and to defend against the violations of Creation-centrism by others.

Decolonizing social systems and institutions takes courage. On a daily basis, those who speak truth to the power of colonization are attacked, berated, blamed, deceived, divided, exploited, manipulated, and even murdered today, just as they have been since the first wave of colonization. Courage is needed to simultaneously stand against these threats and to stand for equity and justice and remain steadfast as a transformative presence. Warrior-educators are needed to encourage others to become allies of decolonization (Blume 2020, 239). Warrior-educators can ensure that sacredness is respected and the vulnerable are provided for and shielded from colonial consequences that hinder learning.

The Seven Walks Provide an Indigenous Holistic Vision for Education

The seven walks help to align our individual and collective activities to pro-Creation impact across time and space in order to enhance the psychological wellness of us. Seven generational living reminds educators to be initiators and contributors to transformative processes that will likely remain unfinished in our lifetimes— that in becoming we patiently respect and trust in how the flow of time through its cycles will nourish the seeds of change that educators have planted even if change is invisible to us in the moment of instruction.

Decolonizing education by embracing the sacredness of Creation ensures a legacy of a cadre of students poised to structurally transform societies across the generations. Change may be slow—maybe invisible to us in the moment, with steps forward and sometimes backward, but the cyclical nature of time ensures multiple opportunities for change and provides for patience and hope in the intergenerational process of educating (Blume 2022b, 549). Whole lives will be changed by our instruction, colonial structures will eventually be transformed, and colonial assumptions overturned for an equitable and just future for all.

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Author Bio

Arthur (Art) Blume, Ph.D., is an American Indian psychologist and Professor of Clinical Psychology at Washington State University USA. He has been honored with the Trimble and Horvat Award for Distinguished Contributions to Native and Indigenous Psychology, a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship, and an appointment as President's Professor to the University of Alaska Fairbanks Center for Alaska Native Health Research. He has served as president of American Psychological Association's (APA) Division 45 (2020) and of the Society of Indian Psychologists (2016-17), on the 2021 APA Presidential Task Force on Psychology and Health Equity, and most recently as an Indigenous consultant for the World Health Organization. He has been published extensively in the areas of multicultural psychology, including 10 authored and edited books. A recent book, *A new psychology based on community, equality, and care of the Earth: An Indigenous American perspective*, was awarded an American Library Association Choice Award for an Outstanding Academic Title in 2021.