

Two-Eyed Seeing

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Creating a new liminal space in education



In this article, we, as educators of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal university students, reflect upon our experiences in the classroom and in the communities to ponder Mi'kmaq Elder Albert Marshall's guiding principle of Two-Eyed Seeing and his words about success. At a time when we are finally seeing movement towards positive change in Aboriginal education, we recognize the need to simultaneously

educate both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. This requires we build bridges to understanding the ways of knowing and learning that enable Aboriginal academic success, such that doors of access to post-secondary education, and the opportunities that education affords, are opened in a more equitable way. In listening to and respecting each other's stories, ways of knowing and coming to know, we open the door to a third space, a liminal space in which we build a sharing relationship while maintaining the integrity of each identity and voice.

My (Michelle's) grandmother would always tell me, "Rome wasn't built in a day" when I was impatient about the slowness of change, when it seemed so obvious in my inexperience of youth "what needed to happen." I would refute with, "But look how long it took to build Rome." Her reply was always, "Yes... but it *was* built, wasn't it, and it has stood the test of time." Some three decades later, I often think back to those words, when I am frustrated with the slow progress I have been witness to in enabling Aboriginal success in education. How can something so obvious be so slow?

This year I had the opportunity to be part of two key announcements at Kainai High School on the Blood Reserve in Southern Alberta: former Prime Minister Paul Martin's *Aboriginal Youth Entrepreneurship Program* (part of the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative) on January 21st, 2014; and the February 7th, 2014 unveiling of an agreement towards the proposed *First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act*. These two long overdue initiatives made me reflect that perhaps my grandmother is right; while slow, Rome is finally being built, and hopefully in a different and better way than the atrocious legacy of Aboriginal education. In light of historical education practices, both these initiatives can be deemed as progress, creating a new educational space for Aboriginal learners.[1] But where do we start and how do we do this?

Both Paul Martin and Prime Minister Stephen Harper acknowledge that Aboriginal education is best developed and implemented by Aboriginal people themselves. While indisputable, this understanding needs to extend even broader and deeper. Is it only Aboriginal people who need to be educated? If we truly want a population that can live together with respect and understanding

in the 21st century, if we truly want to rectify the inequity at all levels, do we not need to simultaneously educate both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples? In listening to and respecting each other's stories, ways of knowing and coming to know, can we create a third space, a liminal space, in which we build a sharing relationship while maintaining the integrity of each identity and voice?

Two-Eyed Seeing

“The foundational basis for any relationship is an exchange of stories,” says Mi'kmaq Elder Albert Marshall. He and his wife Murdena are working at the kitchen table with Cheryl in their home in Eskasoni First Nation in Unama'ki (Cape Breton, N.S). It's winter 2014 and once again we are pondering how best to convey the message of *Two-Eyed Seeing* to a new audience; this time for Aboriginal fishers and managers involved in the commercial fisheries in Atlantic Canada. Albert coined the phrase as a guiding principle years ago and it has now been picked up across Canada by organizations and individuals interested in transcultural collaboration, many of whom are asking to hear more. Two-Eyed Seeing refers to a traditional Mi'kmaq understanding about the gift of multiple perspectives – a gift treasured by many Indigenous peoples. In Mi'kmaq, this is called “Etuaptmuk.”

For our current times, Elder Albert explains that “Two-Eyed Seeing refers to learning to see from one eye with the strengths of, or the best in, the Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye learning to see with the strengths of, or the best in, the Western (mainstream) knowledges and ways of knowing, but, most importantly, learning to use both these eyes together, for the benefit of all.” Two-Eyed Seeing implies responsibilities for reciprocity, mutual accountability, and co-learning. It is key to the First Nations' lifelong learning philosophy, and the concept (albeit not by the name Two-Eyed Seeing) features prominently in the key educational documents recently produced by the Assembly of First Nations (AFN).[2] As former AFN National Chief Shawn Atleo said in his address after the Prime Minister's announcement of the *First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act*, “What was done in the past was wrong and we need to make it right and we need to do it in partnership. It requires we attend to the seven teachings: truth, honesty, courage, love, wisdom, humility and respect.”

So, what might we as educators contribute to the discussion for success of Aboriginal students in light of historical patterns, the latest announcements, and our own experience? As a non-aboriginal university professor, Cheryl (now retired) has taught over 100 Mi'kmaq First Nations students in first-year science, as well as some thousands of non-aboriginal students in a BSc-Biology program. Michelle, a Métis professor, has taught an equal number of Aboriginal, largely Blackfoot, and non-Aboriginal students in chemistry and biochemistry. We both agree wholeheartedly on the importance of First Nations' control for K-12, while recognizing the challenge it represents for non-indigenous, post-secondary educational institutions. We both strongly support the creation of semi-to-fully autonomous First Nations entities within post-secondary institutions. We fully endorse the suggestions and insights of Elder Albert and embrace Two-Eyed Seeing for all students and educators, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, alike.

However, the implementation of these principles is going to require many changes in the development and delivery of curriculum, courses and programs. The government has moved towards putting Aboriginal education back into the hands of Aboriginal peoples on-reserve. However, if we are to do this right – and it is critical we get it right this time – we must put mechanisms in place and encourage the requisite transcultural consciousness to provide for the meaningful, participatory, and sustainable engagement of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stakeholders. This can't be an abdication of responsibility on the part of the government, but rather must be a concerted effort of all educators and policymakers at all levels. We must build bridges to understanding the ways of knowing and learning that enable Aboriginal academic success, such that doors of access to post-secondary education, and the opportunities that education affords, are opened in a more equitable way. While Prime Minister Harper in his announcement said that putting Aboriginal education back into the hands of Aboriginal peoples “is the right thing to do,” it is incumbent upon all to become educated in the “Other”[3] in order to grow and move forward together.

Within educational arenas, the issue of “success” is constantly and appropriately invoked. With these new and desperately needed initiatives, there are many questions around measurement and standards. How are we to measure success? Who and what will define it? How can it be measured in a different system and how do we compare them? Who will set the standards? Moreover, how will we create a liminal space of possibility, one that is not perceived as a gap (because that is the risk if we don't work together) but one that is truly inclusive of Two-Eyed Seeing? True Two-Eyed Seeing requires that both parties commit to and continually partake in the conversation. It is not a linear beginning-to-end process, as is the Western paradigm of assessment, with targeted outcomes. Rather, it is process-oriented, much like the continual cyclical philosophy and teachings embedded in the Aboriginal medicine wheel. The Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) report, *Redefining How Success is Measured in First Nations, Inuit And Métis Learning*, points out that “current research and approaches to measuring Aboriginal learning in Canada often are orientated toward measuring learning deficits; do not account for social, economic and political factors; do not monitor progress across the full spectrum of lifelong learning; do not reflect the holistic nature of First Nations, Inuit and Métis learning; and do not reflect the importance of experiential learning.”[4] Aboriginal control of Aboriginal education provides a possibility to redefine success in terms of Aboriginal Ways of Knowing and Learning, encompassing the key attributes of Aboriginal learning as identified by the CCL[5] including also language and spirituality; and to develop tools and means of assessment that address the lifelong learning model of Aboriginal peoples. This is critical for engagement, retention and the success of Aboriginal learners in education. In Elder Albert's words: “Seeds germinate when the environment is appropriate.”

After the fisheries meeting was over, Cheryl said to Elder Albert, “I find this really awkward in that, as a white person, I am pushing hard for the communities to revitalize and embrace their own knowledge and ways for fisheries management. But the interest seems indifferent and tepid. Although I believe in it passionately, is there not something really weird about it being me pushing? Should it not be Mi'kmaq scholars doing this, or Mi'kmaq students, or the Mi'kmaq fishers?” Albert's response was: “Well, Cheryl, you know the Haudenosaunee two canoe statement? One with whites in it and one with Haudenosaunee, both going down the same river, side by side, with the understanding that you don't try to paddle my canoe, and I won't try to

paddle yours. But that does not reflect what we're doing here. It's a sled we've got – representing our passions for ensuring the ecological integrity of Mother Earth. We, the Elders, are dragging that sled with all our might, and you need to help us by pushing as hard as you can on the rear of the sled. But, it is we, the Elders, who will determine where it goes.” This metaphorically translates to education. While Aboriginal Ways of Knowing and Learning and Western Ways of Knowing and Learning are different, when it comes to the education of our children, Chief Atleo says, “We need to be in this together.”

Inclusivity and true relational understanding can only come from continual and cyclical commitment to Two-Eyed Seeing at all levels by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stakeholders: students, parents, community, government and Canada as a whole. And the time to undertake this work is now. As Kainai Chief Charlie Weasel Head said in this past announcement, “We cannot afford to lose another generation of children.”

E'kosi & Msit No'kmaq.

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Cheryl Bartlett is of newcomer heritage and a Professor Emeritus at Cape Breton University, having recently retired from her position as Tier 1 Canada Research Chair in Integrative Science and Professor of Biology. She is interested in the “working together” of indigenous knowledges and the mainstream natural sciences, and ways to encourage more Aboriginal youth to consider science careers.

[1] On May 2nd, 2014, Shawn Atleo stepped down as AFN National Chief in light of controversies surrounding the “process” of establishing Prime Minister Harper's new education bill. Prime Minister Harper, in response, has tabled the bill for the time being. There are both applauses from original critics and outcries from supporters. However, what remains is that Aboriginal people across Canada feel strongly about Aboriginal control of Aboriginal education and how that process should happen. While seemingly a step backwards, going forward in a cautionary (building-Rome-like) way to attend to all voices, might ensure we do it right this time in a way that truly attends to “Two-Eyed Seeing.”

[2] AFN (Assembly of First Nations), *First Nations Control of First Nations Education: It's our vision, it's our time* (2010), www.afn.ca/uploads/files/education/3_2010_july_afn_first_nations_control_of_first_nations_education_final_eng.pdf; AFN, *Taking Action for First Nations Post-secondary Education: Access, opportunity, and outcomes* (discussion paper, 2010), <http://indigenouspeoplesissues.com/attachments/article/5805/mfnps.pdf>; AFN, *Supporting First Nations Learners Transitioning to Post-Secondary* (2012), www.afn.ca/uploads/files/education2/postsecondarytransitionsreport.pdf

[3] P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. K. Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[4] Canadian Council on Learning – Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre, *Redefining How Success is Measured in First Nations, Inuit and Métis Learning*, Report on Learning in Canada (Ottawa: 2007), p. 8. www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/RedefiningSuccess/Redefining_How_Success_Is_Measured_EN.pdf

[5] Canadian Council on Learning, *Redefining How Success is Measured in First Nations*, p. 5.