


Athabasca University  Master of Arts - Integrated Studies

**THE CONCEPT OF COGNITIVE JUSTICE: IMPROVING THE
COLLEGE ENVIRONMENT FOR INDIGENOUS LEARNERS**

By

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ABSTRACT

This essay was initiated to further explore Lambton College`s goal of improving the environment for Indigenous learners. Using a qualitative approach, the essay explores the link between cognitive justice and Indigenous knowledge and considers the political, cultural, and social perspectives regarding Indigenous education. The common theme found within the perspectives was the goal of increasing the participation of Indigenous learners, which cognitive justice principles have the potential to achieve. Employing cognitive justice can help realize the treaty right to education, which promised education for Indigenous people that prepares them for the Canadian economy while maintaining and respecting Indigenous knowledge. It has the potential to increase integration and reduce racism; a serious barrier to successful participation. Lastly, it can alter the educational relationship between Indigenous learners and mainstream Canadian education institutions by replacing assimilation goals with a goal of valuing Indigenous ways of knowing and knowledge alongside Western ways of knowing and knowledge.

The Concept of Cognitive Justice: Improving the College Environment for Indigenous Learners?

Lambton College is located in the small city of Sarnia that sits on the shores of Lake Huron in Southwestern Ontario, Canada. Residing just south of city is the First Nation community of Aamjiwnaang. Recognizing the importance of the relationship with the Aamjiwnaang community and the need to improve the environment for its Indigenous learners¹ Lambton's 2013-2018 Strategic Plan committed to "...improve the environment for Aboriginal students through enhanced outreach and recruitment, student success supports, an Aboriginal student Centre, and arts and culture initiatives across campus...develop and implement an Aboriginal Strategy (2013-2018 Lambton College Strategic Plan, 10). Arguably, as an educational institution committed to teaching and learning excellence consideration of the delivery and content of program curricula is a critical component to improving the environment for Indigenous learners (2013-2018 Lambton College Strategic Plan, 6). In a 2011, virtual summit on Indigenous education conducted by the Assembly of First Nations and the Canadian Associations of Colleges and Universities, Indigenous students were asked about the role universities and by extension colleges could play in their academic success, one participant indicated,

“...there needs to be more recognition of Aboriginal peoples in the curriculum and in overall university life.... we are forced to learn different migrant languages, but yet there is little to no history being taught about our people...and not only history, but present-day issues of native people...I no longer want to feel separated

¹ Indigenous learner in this paper refers to Aboriginal students, who have been defined by the Canadian government as First Nation, Inuit, and Metis, as well as, any student who self identifies as having Canadian Indigenous heritage.

from other university populations and I think that in order to feel more unified, there needs to be more recognition of our people” (Indigenous student participant, Virtual Summit on Indigenous Post-Secondary Education, 2011,11).

Although, Aboriginal student completion of non-university post-secondary education training programs has increased since 1996 from 21% to 25% in 2001 with the general population at 28% (Mendelson, 2006, p. 14); 87% of Indigenous students responded that “First Nations languages, cultures, histories and knowledge are important to them within post-secondary education” (The Assembly of First Nation, 2011, 3). One way to provide more recognition of Indigenous learners is by recognizing Indigenous ways of knowing and including Indigenous knowledge as valued and as legitimate within the classroom. This type of recognition is referred to as cognitive justice. Cognitive Justice “...recognises the right of different forms of knowledge to co-exist, but adds that this plurality needs to go beyond tolerance or liberalism to an active recognition of the need for diversity” (Visvanathan, 1999, 6). Importantly, it should be noted that “cognitive justice does not imply that all Western forms of knowledge are of no use and that all indigenous forms of science need privileging...on the contrary, dialogic standards...must continue to judge between what is beneficial and what is evil in both western and indigenous knowledges” (Kraak, 1999, 3). Critical to this topic is using an interdisciplinary approach as the topic of Indigenous knowledge and Aboriginal Education is complex with political, cultural, and social aspects. Using an interdisciplinary approach by employing political, cultural, and social perspectives this essay will explore if adopting principles of cognitive justice can assist in improving the learning environment of Indigenous learners at Lambton College.

Critical to understanding why cognitive justice is important to improving the environment of Indigenous learners at Lambton College is understanding the link between the

concepts of cognitive justice and recognizing and valuing Indigenous knowledge within a college. It should be noted that Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous ways of knowing are not monolithic and vary between Indigenous communities (Battiste, 2002, 14). However, certain features are often common, such as knowledge is often oral “transmitted through the structures of Indigenous languages and passed on through modelling, practice, and animation rather than the written word” (Battiste, 2002, 2). Indigenous knowledge “is a knowledge system in its own right with its own internal consistency and ways of knowing” (Battiste, 2002, 3). Indigenous knowledge is “just not the binary” to Western knowledge (Battiste, 2002, 5). Also, Indigenous knowledge has been thought of by some to be frozen in time and not applicable to the modern world, which is not the case (Battiste, 2002, 4). Proponents of cognitive justice witness “other sources of knowledge [as often] seen as ethno-science, superstition or more brutally, non-knowledge...pre-scientific is a word that is often used, along with savage or primitive” (Visvanathan, 2009, 4). Employing cognitive justice has the potential to unmask the effects these assumptions about Indigenous knowledge have had on the Indigenous system of knowledge and consequentially the effects on Indigenous learners. It can do this because it broadens and questions the Eurocentric academic perspective and reveals the value of knowledge systems beyond the western knowledge system, such as Indigenous knowledge. Cognitive justice principles as listed below acknowledge that Indigenous knowledge has been ghettoized and marginalized:

- all forms of knowledge are valid and should co-exist in a dialogic relationship to each other...cognitive justice implies the strengthening of the ‘voice’ of the defeated and marginalised.
- Traditional knowledges and technologies should not be ‘museumized’.
- Every citizen is a scientist. Each layperson is an expert.

- Science should help the common man/woman.
- All competing sciences should be brought together into a positive heuristic for dialogue (Kraak, 2009, 3)

Canadian Aboriginal Education Institutions have successfully applied cognitive justice principles by incorporating and offering college programs such as Office Administration or Police Foundations while respecting Indigenous knowledge systems (Six Nations Polytechnic, website). Striving to ‘un-museumize’ Indigenous knowledge and strengthen the voice of the marginalized Indigenous knowledge system these institutions have been created alongside provincially and federally funded post-secondary institutions. The “ownership of traditional knowledge and application of appropriate methodologies and appropriate content are significant issues, and have driven Aboriginal communities to develop their own post-secondary institutions” (Aboriginal Institutes’ Consortium, 2006, 2). This demonstrates how important respecting Indigenous knowledge is to Indigenous communities and how it has the potential to increase participation in mainstream colleges. Although, in Canada, the majority of Aboriginal Education Institutions do not qualify for government funding and cannot confer post-secondary provincial credentials without partnership with a provincially recognized post-secondary institution they continue to exist and provide culturally aware programming for Indigenous peoples. In Ontario, the Six Nations Polytechnic is a success by “offering culture-based options and solutions to research questions through the incorporation of traditional knowledge and concepts embedded in [Indigenous] language...incorporating traditional values into course content and delivery [while] validating our own [Indigenous] worldview as a collective while supporting the unique gifts of the individual” (Six Nation Polytechnic, 2013, website). Recognizing the need to ensure all forms of knowledge are valid and co-exist in a dialogic

relationship Six Nations Polytechnic endeavours to maintain the “Hodinohso:ni`/Rotinonhshonni world view of our universe...[however] endeavor [s] to keep up with the beat of the 21st century and at the same time offer the understanding inherent in our language and culture...in this way the people may receive an education that assists them to keep pace with both drums” (Six Nation Polytechnic Annual Report, 2013, 1).

Six Nations Polytechnic has had significant student success employing the cognitive justice principles by incorporating Indigenous knowledge in college programming as indicated by its Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The government of Ontario attempts to quantify post-secondary institutions’ success with Key Performance indicators (KPIs) in categories, such as, student, employer, and graduation satisfaction. Although, the KPIs are not a perfect measurement tool they do provide an idea of how successful an institution is in serving its students. Six Nations Polytechnic’s 2011-2012 Student Satisfaction KPI Performance for its Practical Nursing with Aboriginal Communities program was 89.3% compared to similar Ontario College mainstream programs of 75.5% (Six Nation Polytechnic Annual Report, 2011, 14). In response to the KPI Capstone Question fourteen 96.4 % of Six Nations student agreed that “overall, your program is giving you knowledge and skills that will be useful in your future career” compared to 89.8% of college students in a similar mainstream programs. Lastly, question twenty-six asks the critical question of how was the “overall quality of the learning experiences in this program. 96.4% of Six Nation students responded positively compared 77.8% students in similar mainstream programs (Six Nation Polytechnic Annual Report, 2012, 14). Arguably, the satisfaction of the learning experience of students is tied to participation level. In Ontario, “Aboriginal institutions have collectively educated over 27,000 students, experienced a 92% increase in enrolment over five years, and achieved 80% to

90% student success rates (Aboriginal Institutes' Consortium, 2004, 34). If Indigenous learners are participating in Aboriginal Education Institutions that have embraced cognitive justice principles, perhaps mainstream post-secondary institutions should consider how better to incorporate cognitive justice principles to enhance the learning environment for their Indigenous learners.

Lambton College's goal of improving the environment for Indigenous learners can be presupposed to be based on the assumption that increased participation in post-secondary education will improve life chances and empower learners. Cognitive justice principles view "knowledge [as] not something to be abstracted from a culture as a life form; [knowledge] is connected to livelihood, a life cycle, a lifestyle; it determines life chances" (Visvanathan, 2009, 6). Also, it believed that the "recognition and intellectual activation of Indigenous knowledge today is an act of empowerment" (Battiste, 2002, 4). Cognitive justice principles work to facilitate this empowerment by "...conversation, reciprocity, [and] translation [which] create knowledge not as an expert...but as a collaboration of memories, legacies, heritages, a manifold heuristics of problem solving, where a citizen takes both power and knowledge into his own hands" (Visvanathan, 2009, 9). Indigenous groups, governments, and post-secondary education institutions have studied and attempted to address the identified financial, social, cultural, educational, and geographical barriers to Indigenous students taking power and knowledge into their own hands. For example, the 2002 Canadian Minister of Education (CMEC) report on Aboriginal education notes for the Aboriginal student "...western education is hostile in its structure, its curriculum, its context, and its personnel (Hampton as cited in CMEC report, 2002, 21). In Australia, one study noted "Aboriginal students tend to pick courses that are relevant to their lives as Aboriginal people...a student commented that science education didn't talk about

how Indigenous people have knowledge of animals...students feel that current science education disregards more than 40,000 years of valuable Aboriginal knowledge” (Matthews, 2007, as cited Creative Spirits website). This essay is advocating in support of addressing this injustice and the feelings of hostility by employing cognitive justice principles, which have the potential to improve the learning environment for Indigenous learners. The political, cultural, and social perspectives will aid in understanding the multi-faceted issue of Indigenous education and the place of cognitive justice. An interdisciplinary approach in this essay means using the disciplines’ perspectives to add value as the different perspectives illuminate the dynamics at work in regard to Aboriginal education and by extension Indigenous knowledge.

Significant to the conversation regarding cognitive justice and Indigenous knowledge is the political perspective. It provides the foundation to understand why the concept of cognitive justice is important to recognizing Indigenous knowledge in colleges. The political perspective of Aboriginal education, Indigenous knowledge, and the barriers for Indigenous learners is characterized by a long and arduous relationship between Canada’s Indigenous people and the federal government. Struggles have existed in ensuring participation and curriculum that non-colonial and assimilationist. For most of the 20th century the goal of government in providing Indigenous education was assimilation to uphold the colonial relationship imposed in the late 19th century (Kirkness, 1995, 3). Indigenous leaders have struggled to enforce treaty agreements to change these goals and move to a post-colonial relationship. Treaty 7 Elders “believe[d] that the education rights negotiated at the treaties assured them free education at all levels and in perpetuity in return for the use of the land by the newcomers” (Treaty 7 Elders & Tribal Council, 1996, p. 302 as cited in Carr-Stewart, 2001, 127). In 1982, the power relations changed when the Aboriginal people of Canada became a Charter group with the repatriation of the Canadian

Constitution, which identified specific rights and freedoms protected by the Constitution.

Canada's Constitution Act ensured "the existing aboriginal and treaty rights of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed" (Isaac, 1995, 310 as cited as Carr-Stewart, 2002, 17). It is the position of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) that education at all levels is an inherent Aboriginal and treaty right as recognized by the Canadian Constitution (Assembly of First Nations (2000) Resolution 50/2000 of the Confederacy of Nations). Notably, the Federal agreement refuses acknowledgement this responsibility and funds Indigenous education only as a matter of social policy (LeBlanc quoted in Standing Committee Report, 2006, 3). Regardless, a Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP) in 1996 stated First Nations "want two things from education . . . the skills they need to participate fully in the economy . . . [along] with the knowledge of their languages and traditions necessary for cultural continuity" (RCAP, 1996a, p. 82 as cited in Carr-Stewart, 2002, 17). The RCAP recommended:

- educational reforms must be implemented immediately to remedy the gap between current educational attainment and community needs
- Education must reflect the structure, practices, and vision of First Nations communities. Education is a treaty and constitutional right to be treasured and a process that enables First Nations to blend traditional purposes of education, language, and culture with the skills necessary for collaboration in today's global society. (RCAP, 1996a, p. 82 as cited in Carr-Stewart, 2002, 17).

Arguably, these recommendations are achievable by employing cognitive justice principles as cognitive justice "revolves around the right of a plurality of knowledge structures to co-exist in a dialogic relationship with one another suggest [ing] the cohabitation of western science (with its rationalist logic) with indigenous knowledges" (Kraak, 1999, 2). As Lambton College is

publicly funded and has a mandate to be responsive to their communities it would make sense to consider where cognitive justice principles could apply to create 'cohabitation' with western curriculum.

The cultural perspective regarding Indigenous education can be categorized by the concept of diversity integrating all learners to ensure full participation. Diversity proponents strive to ensure the 'cognitive other' is not created and racism is minimized. Within this approach there is a danger of thinking of Indigenous learners as another group to be included when trying to diversify the curriculum and teach tolerance. One diversity guide indicates 'we use the term 'culture' to refer to ethnocultural groups (including those of Canada's First Nations) (College of New Caledonia, 2004, 7). For the political reasons stated earlier, Indigenous learners are a Charter group; therefore, cannot be grouped with other groups not from the dominant culture to be tolerated only. Post-secondary education must go beyond tolerance to provide education that prepares Indigenous learners to participate fully in the Canadian economy and in their communities by addressing cognitive imperialism. Cognitive Imperialism is a 'form of dominance and control of the education of Aboriginal peoples, which (Marie Battiste) defines as a form of cognitive manipulation that validates one source of knowledge and empowers it through public control of education funding (Battiste, 2002, as cited in Neegan, 2005, 9). Cognitive justice principles support this goal of moving beyond the concept of tolerance to valuing Indigenous knowledge systems equally and addressing cognitive imperialism.

Important to diversity is integration of all learners and minimizing racism. Chief Dan George made this comment on integration in 1972 'you talk big words of integration in the schools...does it really exist...can we talk of integration until there is social integration. . .unless there is integration of hearts and minds you have only a physical presence. . . . and the walls are

as high as the mountain range (George, circa 1972 as cited in Kirkness, 1995, 4). Critical as well to the diversity agenda is addressing the racism that has existed and continues to exist. In a colonial relationship the power is assigned by race in a systemic effort to enforce superiority and maintain politically, economic, social, and cultural control. Joyce Green in her article *Towards a Dentente with History: Confronting Canada's Colonial Legacy* quotes Albert Memmi who wrote "racism appears then not as an incidental detail, but as a consubstantial part of colonialism" (Memmi as quoted in Green, 1). Labeling the historical Canadian treatment of its indigenous population as colonial reveals new understandings of the organization of the political, social, and racial power then and now. These new understandings force the interrogation of the presentation of the events as not racially motivated, as mostly peaceful and non-violent, and as mostly negotiated.

The social perspective is characterized by the changing educational structures in regard to the post-colonial relationship and what this means for Indigenous education. There is a call by Indigenous groups to meet the treaty obligations in the post-colonial world to ensure full Indigenous participation in Canada's funded post-secondary institutions. In a report from a federal government committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development entitled "No Priority Higher: Aboriginal Post-secondary education in Canada" it states "...it is rare to find unanimity on any topic in the realm of public policy...when it comes to Aboriginal education, however, the now overwhelming consensus...all agree, quite simply, that improving educational outcomes is absolutely critical to the future of individual Aboriginal learners, their families and children, their communities, and the broader Canadian society as a whole" (Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, 2007, 19). Arguably, educational reform to

improve educational outcomes requires recognition of the colonial past and the Eurocentric curriculum. It is clear the paradigm and the assumptions underpinning this paradigm of a peaceful succession to Canadian nationhood require interrogation. The Canadian story I learned did not categorize the past or current relationship with Aboriginal people as colonial. My perspective as a 39 year old, white, middle class, heterosexual, Ontarian woman was informed by a Canadian education that hinted at a shameful past with lessons on the Indian Act, the movement to reserves, and residential schools; however, the relationship was framed as not colonial or racial, but economically motivated and a mostly peaceful, non-violent, and maybe most importantly, as mostly negotiated. The ``postcolonial is about rethinking conceptual, institutional, cultural, legal, and other boundaries that are taken for granted as "natural" or "proper," or assumed or asserted to be universal, but that function in fact as structural barriers to justice for marginalized and dispossessed peoples`` (Battiste, Bell, Findlay, 2002, 6).

One identifiable common theme in the political, cultural, and social perspectives regarding Indigenous education is the concept of participation of Indigenous learners. The political perspective speaks to the treaty rights and whether an inherent right of Aboriginal learners to post-secondary education that prepares them for the Canadian economy while maintains Indigenous culture is valid. Indigenous reports and government reports are pre-occupied on how to remove barriers to ensure that Indigenous learners attend post-secondary education mainly focusing on funding to ensure participation. Also, concerned with participation is the cultural perspective, trying to address participation through full inclusion programs of all ethnic groups. Lastly, the social perspective highlights the need to address Eurocentric curriculum to move beyond a colonial relationship to increase participation. Although, within each perspective there is mention of curriculum and programming as a barrier, a commitment to

cognitive justice for Indigenous knowledge is lacking to address what perspectives are preoccupied with –namely participation. Cognitive justice has the potential to move beyond the colonial past, the eurocentrism of the curriculum, assist with racial misconceptions, and aid in integration and goals of social justice.

Although, the social justice goals of Lambton College are not linked directly to Indigenous learning and increasing Indigenous participation the benefits of cognitive justice principles have the potential to enhance Lambton`s social justice goals. They can ask us to question the assumption that providing western knowledge as part of the social justice agenda is the most beneficial way to achieve social justice. Principles of cognitive justice seem to call for reciprocity of knowledge or else you risk sacrificing true social justice which, in my opinion, should encompass cognitive justice. Arguably, for Lambton College to improve the environment for Indigenous learners the question for non-indigenous teachers and administrators should be “what did you learn from each other today`” as this would allow for more cognitive diversity and justice than just sharing western knowledge.

The political, cultural, and perspectives regarding Indigenous education revealed a common goal of increasing participation of Indigenous learners in post-secondary education. Cognitive justice principles that support acknowledging Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing have the potential to contribute to increased participation. Consideration of cognitive justice has the potential of helping Lambton College reach its strategic goal of improving the learning environment of Indigenous learners. Recognition of Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing can add value to the education for Indigenous learners and help the institution continue to build and enhance its relationship with its Indigenous community.

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