ROOTS OF INQUIRY LEARNING: TEACHING & LEARNING IN TRADITIONAL ABORIGINAL PEDAGOGY

John W. Friesen, PhD, DRS,
Professor Emeritus Education, University of Calgary

Abstract

Although many educators are probably not aware of it, the currently touted inquiry approach to learning has deep roots in First Nations pedagogical history. Not surprisingly, Indigenous educators traditionally incorporated the spiritual dimension in their repertoire of encouragement, and there is a great deal to be learned from their approach. A unique feature of the traditional Native American approach was that learners could always count on elder input and counsel as they journeyed to discover new insights, including those pertaining to their personal roles in their communities, their tribes, and in the universe. This paper outlines the details of that tradition.

All young children are investigators—born with an innate desire to explore and understand the world…. they are eager to make a host of new, exciting discoveries… make predictions, and further investigate their world…. set the stage for greater inquiry and exploration (Shillady, 2011, p. 12).

These, then, are the directive concepts of the pragmatic mind: the scientific method, exact measurement, the reduction of error; the method of experimental inquiry…. Equipped with these concepts, the mind of the western man can attack the difficult problems of individual and social life (Rugg, 1931, pp. 220-221, italics mine).

The Indian learning process stimulates, sustains, and enhances human growth. This process is learned only through doing. …. This process develops a fully functioning mind… The Indian way removes one from the path of under-fulfillment, if not from self-destruction. It is an intriguing, benign experience (Couture and McGowan, 2013, pp. 74-75).

Introduction


Warner and Myers, 2011, p. 1) suggest that inquiry-based teaching is a teaching method that combines the curiosity of students and the scientific method in enhancing the development of critical thinking skills of learners. As students encounter problems they do not understand, they are challenged to
formulate questions, explore problems, observe, and apply new information in seeking a better understanding of the world. When learners engage in the process of seeking answers and deeper understandings they will naturally follow the generally accepted scientific method. The problems they address will likely grow out of their own experiences, and will therefore motivate “an active quest for information and the production of new ideas” (Dewey, 1963, p. 79). Often the answers posed by learners while so engaged lead to even more questions—much like the outcomes of scientific research (Warner and Myers, 2011, p. 1). Often viewed as a “new” pedagogical approach to learning, there is increasing evidence that the historical roots of inquiry learning have significant depth, particularly within the context of traditional Indigenous pedagogy.

Before tracing the history of inquiry learning in Aboriginal pedagogy, it might first be useful to mention that in this paper various terms will be employed to describe Native American cultures; for example, the term Aboriginal, appears to be the current preference of the Canadian government, although the Indian Act persists as such. Although historically not regarded as Aboriginal peoples, Métis and Inuit are included as such in section 35 of the Canadian Constitution Act, 1982.

Other terms used to identify the original inhabitants of North America include First Nations, (the preference of many Indian nations in Canada); Indian, still in use in the United States); Indigenous, (intended to underscore that these cultures are North America’s original residents); and, Native (a term often used to differentiate the original inhabitants from Europeans, and often employed to include all Indigenous groups--Indians, Inuit and Métis). There is some concern that the political correctness movement has muddied the waters of open communication regarding terminology among the various communities, so an interchange of terms in this discussion may be less controversial.

**Defining Inquiry Learning**

Inquiry-based learning is viewed as a student-centered strategy in the process of which students are encouraged to inquire into an issue by creating questions of their own and seeking answers to those questions following a clearly outlined procedure. It’s North American roots are based in the writings of progressive educators such as John Dewey (1859-1952) and Harold Rugg (1886-1960) and aptly documented by Lawrence Cremin (1961) and Ernest Bayles (1960). Defined in contemporary terms, the process includes identifying and explaining evidence and creating arguments to justify findings (Bell, Urhahne, Schanze, and Ploetzner, 2010, pp. 349-354). The major steps to be followed in inquiry consist of the formulation of a question, launching and investigation, using evidence to describe, explain and predict the outcome, then seeking to connect evidence to knowledge. Having done that, students will commence to share their findings and engage in further discussion (Dewey, 1963, p. 53; Donnell and Harper, 2005, p. 153; Warner and Myers, 2011, p. 1).

Educators who promote inquiry learning recommend that the ideal setting is a group-centered, although insights gained through the exercise will primarily result in changed individual perceptions. The conditions essential to adopting an inquiry approach include two elements, the first being that students will need to demonstrate a genuine interest in discovering something new or in providing solutions or alternatives to unsolved questions or problems. A second preparatory requirement will be for learners to develop the various processes associated with inquiry, including being responsible for planning, conducting, and evaluating their own efforts. Once a particular project has been completed, participants will be encouraged to discuss, explain, and evaluate their ideas and procedures so that their combined
perceptions may constitute a fuller comprehension of reality (Friesen and Friesen, 2001, p. 76; Hendry, 1996, pp. 20-31). The objective is that all participants working together in such a setting may come to a more comprehensive knowledge of “the truth.” As will be demonstrated, the format for this procedure finds an easy parallel in the pedagogical model traditionally utilized by North America’s original inhabitants.

**Indigenous Philosophy of Education**

Educational terminology that characterizes the objectives of inquiry learning includes a variety of words and phrases such as critical thinking, discovery learning, individualized instruction, problem-solving, and reflective learning, all of which emphasize that individual student insights are both necessary and valued if learning is to be successful. While not entirely innovative, these concepts may be traced to the writings of a number of constructivist thinkers including John Dewey (1997), Paulo Freire (1984), Jean Piaget (1926), and Lev Vygotsky (1962). These writers agree that in the final analysis, it is only what learners accumulate by way of personal perception and insight that constitutes their becoming educated. As the late Cree elder, Joseph E. Couture noted:

*As a thread running through the [Indian] value statements is a concept of being primarily concerned with the purpose of an individual’s being and becoming a unique person, responsible for his or her own life and actions in the context of significant group situations (Couture and McGowan, 2013, p. 177).*

In pre-contact First Nations societies students were taught to be responsible for personal engagement in relevant cultural practices in alignment with the notion of personal reflection. The steps they followed in pursuing a particular project included preparing, asking, seeking, making, understanding, sharing, and celebrating the merger of their findings with communal wisdom (Cajete, 1994, p. 23). These steps are not dissimilar from those elaborated by Eggan and Kauchak (1988, p. 208) in describing the process of inquiry learning, namely; (i) identifying the question to be answered or identifying the problem to be resolved; (ii) formulating an hypothesis; (iii) gathering data: (iv) assessing the hypothesis through data analysis; and, (v) generalizing to a conclusion. Cajete (1994, pp. 22f) goes on to explain the details of traditional Aboriginal driven pedagogy in four major steps.

The **first** step in educating the young traditionally addressed the practical needs of the community as a means of ensuring survival. This meant assisting cultural neonates in learning how to respect and cope with the variations existent in their natural environment as well as learning how to become productive members of tribal society. There is little or no indication that Indigenous children needed much prodding in this area since they would soon realize the importance of distinguishing themselves by contributing to community welfare.

**Second**, traditionally Native American learners were not left alone in their questing; grandparents and elders kept a careful watch on them in order to identify readiness or willingness to learn. They were always ready to encourage individual learning styles, self-reliance, and self-determination. Learners could always draw on elder knowledge and experience (Jenness, 1977, pp. 151-152). However, initial movement towards engaging in a new project always originated with the individual child (Cardinal, 1969, p. 52; Couture and McGowan, 2013, pp. 85-88; Haig-Brown, 1993, p. 41).
The *third* step in Cajete’s approach to creating a learning environment conducive to individual development emphasized flexibility, viability, and effectiveness, all of which were assured by the experienced monitoring of tribal elders (Kassi, 1997, p. 73). The assistance of elder input was readily available whenever searchers wanted to find out if they had really discovered a valued truth. Traditionally, tribal teachers were those recognized by the community as having knowledge and experience in historical, cultural, or medical arenas. There were also elders who possessed the valued gift of storytelling, and those who had earned the right to conduct, teach, and pass along ceremonial and ritualistic knowledge. The initiative to pursue these vocations lay with the individual who showed readiness and/or willingness to learn.

*Fourth*, and finally, whenever individual seekers took up a vocational or spiritual pursuit, and adopted a path toward it as their own, it was expected that they would continuously reconstruct and refine their insights in order to more fully participate in cultural and spiritual activities. These individuals always had the privilege of checking out their “findings” with a respected pedagogue. This would assure that the fruit of their pursuit was in keeping with societal goals and values. This objective is entirely in keeping with a much later platform adopted by non-Aboriginal educators who argued that schooling should constitute a simplified mirror of community life (Havighurst and Neugarten, 1967, p. 222).

The Aboriginal cultural renaissance of the last several decades (Lincoln, 1985) has drawn attention to a number of previously overlooked but significant cultural contributions emanating from First Nations communities. Numbering among their prized inventions and discoveries are contributions to such fields as agriculture, architecture, arts and music, education, government and medicine. Only recently have historians, scientists, and educators acknowledged these developments and are slowly combining and synthesizing them with more contemporary European imported North American practices. This is particularly essential in terms of traditional Aboriginal pedagogy from which much can be learned. The road back to historic times when traditional Aboriginal child raising functioned without interference from non-Native sources, may be long and hard, but will hopefully be better understood and more appreciated in this century. It seem hard to believe that only a century ago, in 1920, Duncan Campbell Scott, deputy superintendent general of Indian affairs, rose in the Canadian House of Commons to announce the introduction of a new bill. He stated, “Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian department. That is the whole object of this bill” (Walmsley, 2005, p. 9).

Hopefully, attitudes like those displayed by Scott have been replaced by more sensitive attitudes toward Aboriginal ways so that aspects of their pedagogical approach may still be initiated and appreciated. Such a tack could turn out to be a very fruitful undertaking.

**Traditional Aboriginal Child-Raising Practices**

The inquiry-based learning model traditionally practiced by North American Natives rested on two primary pillars—a unique approach to the practice of child raising, up to and including adolescence,
and the practice of storytelling. The first pillar emphasized the concept of intergenerational interaction; raising children was a corporate affair with elders and grandparents fulfilling a dominant role. The second pillar expanded the child’s capacity to store in his/her mind the meaning of literally hundreds of instructive, imperative, and spiritual legends, all of which were intended to convey valued cultural truths.

One of the earliest non-Aboriginal written sources pertaining to the child-raising practices of First Nations in Canada is the work left behind by New Zealand anthropologist, Diamond Jenness (1977). First published in 1932, Jenness’ work comprises the results of a cross-country tour of Canada’s First Nations on behalf of the National Museum of Canada. Although Jenness’ ethnocentrism sometimes shows through in his descriptions of Indigenous life, he did manage to provide a fairly accurate picture of traditional Indian child-raising practices. This is borne out in later publications by Aboriginal writers. Thoroughly impressed with Native ingenuity, Jenness described these practices as being handed down from generation to generation amidst harsh economic conditions, and at times against tremendous odds (Jenness, 1977, p. 151).

Bias aside, Jenness did provide valuable information pertaining to the education of the young, noting that Indigenous children had more freedom (but not license) than their non-Native peers, and they were exempt from the innumerable petty checks and restrictions that too often cramped the development of Euro-Canadian children. Native children were not disciplined physically, but gently exhorted through chiding and the relating of moral legends. Every adult took an active part in child training—including supervision of someone else’s children, and elders always stood by to arbitrate disputes and apportion praise or blame. Because the size of individual Indian villages was small, it was easy for children to detect whether or not their behaviors generally resonated with community approval or disapproval.

Jenness noted that Indian educational practices did not have regular hours and included two sets of “curricula,” namely physical labor, which consisted of learning skills necessary to tribal survival, and spiritual knowledge pertaining to ethics, morality, and tribal ceremonial life. The latter was presided over by elders who once again related stories and legends appropriate to the occasion (Jenness, 1977, p. 152). Stories were also employed to provide entertainment, and the ubiquitous, mythical trickster character, who was capable of both doing good and playing tricks, often figured in First Nations storytelling.

Aboriginal writers are generally in agreement with Jenness’ appraisal, but go further in offering helpful details about educating the young. Grant (1996, p. 31) sounds her lament that the first European explorers were so blinded by ethnocentrism that they sometimes failed to provide accurate descriptions of Indigenous family practices. On a more positive note, following the lead of Ojibway elder Basil Johnston (1976), Grant (1996, p. 31) emphasizes that traditional Aboriginal education was based on respect, humility, caring, healing, generosity, cooperation, patience, humor, and a willingness to help others. MacIvor (1995, pp. 75f) identifies a series of bases for First Nations education, arguing that spirituality, namely the interconnectedness of all living things, traditionally formed the foundation of student learning. Learners were consistently made cognizant that their first responsibility was to their culture in the form of being willing to provide service to its members. These services were to be transacted with respect.

Stairs (1995, p. 86) points out that traditional Native American learning focused on values and identity, developed through the learner’s relationship to other persons and to the environment, namely Mother
Earth. This approach involved a high level of abstract verbal meditation in a setting somewhat removed from daily activities, with the skill base for a specialized occupation as the principal goal. Young children were not expected to progress at the same speed nor in the same direction, but they were expected to attend to adult initiatives around them according to their individual motivations and abilities. They could always feel free to consult parents and elders about individual concerns. On reaching adulthood and having discovered their talents and calling, the benefit of practicing their occupation was to honor the family and accrue to the community (Deloria, 1999, p. 141).

A primary Aboriginal avenue by which to initiate the young was the emulation of adult practices. In Inuit society, young boys would literally be encouraged to “stab” their meat as a way of demonstrating the harpooning of prey. Young girls were encouraged to imitate domestic chores. Tribal rites of passage indicated formal recognition of having attained a valued skill. Most importantly, desired child behavior was not to be influenced by direct or coercive means (Miller, 1997, p. 17). The key to effective learning was self-discovery via the process of inquiry. As the teen age years approached, children tagged along with their parents and learned various skills on their own. If they attempted a particular activity and mismanaged it, they would not be corrected unless the result was potentially dangerous. Even then, any word of caution might be offered quietly, without a hint of condemnation.

One way to illustrate the self-directed orientation of Native child-raising is to offer an interpretation of a pedagogically directed quotation of an elder. The saying is occasioned by an incident in which an elder is approached by a youth seeking advice about his or her destiny. True to traditional Indigenous philosophical form, the elder employs the process of inquiry-based teaching. Since the individual is actively involved in the search, the elder offers these encouraging words: “Don’t worry. Take it easy. Do your best. It will all work out. Respect life. Respect your elders. It’s up to you. You have all the answers within you” (Couture, 1991, p. 205). Sensing the youth’s uneasiness at being left on his or her own, and using the metaphor of a moose, the elder offers to help the searcher periodically evaluate the nature and result of the search.

On a given day, if you ask me where you might go to find a moose, I will say, “If you go that way you won’t find a moose. But, if you go that way, you will.” So now, you younger ones, think about all that. Come back once in a while and show us what you’ve got. And, we’ll tell you if what you think you have found is a moose” (Couture, 1991, p. 205).

In this saying the elder is clearly making himself/herself available to the youth for consultation regarding the direction the youth might be taking. This encounter is typical of the traditional Indigenous interpretation of inquiry. The search for a “moose” is metaphorical, and represents a significant life pursuit. Like contemporary approaches to inquiry learning, the investigation is concluded with evaluation. The method emphasizes insightful input from respected elders who proceed with acknowledged experiences and wisdom. Today non-Native educators often bypass input from elders and stress the importance of evaluating individual experiences in consultation with the searcher’s peers, thereby hoping that through the process, “truth” will eventually emerge. Thus any value from the Aboriginal tested and vindicated intergenerational approach is lost.
Protocol for Aboriginal Inquiry Learning

Literature pertaining to Aboriginal storytelling is ample, since this universal tribal activity was viewed as the primary means by which to pass along cultural knowledge and encourage the development of individual insights (Macfarlan, 1968, p. xiii; Price, 1979, p. 41). In the absence of written forms of communication, the practice of storytelling also “…trained and taxed the memory at the somatic level and in the soul” (Wheeler, 2005, p. 191). Children learned literally dozens of legends about hundreds of things—animal life, tribal beliefs and customs, and spiritual truths. Storytelling ensured that education for the young did not need to be haphazard or incomplete. Elders would often gather children together during the day and tell them stories. These stories were useful for instruction and discipline, and helped children learn about tribal life and how be respectful (Grant, 1996, p. 37).

As the late Chippewa elder, Gail Valaskakis (2000, p. 76) stated:

_Stories are narratives—written or visual—and academic writing has long recognized that the narratives we express are windows on who we are, what we experience and how we understand and enact ourselves and others.... Stories are not just entertainment. Stories are power. They reflect the deepest, the most intimate perceptions, relationships and attitudes of people. Stories show how a people, a culture thinks._

Although the repositories of legends in most traditional First Nations societies included a variety of tales, such as sacred creation stories, historical legends, tradition-maintaining tales, and local legends, legends can basically be catalogued in accordance with four purpose: (i) for entertainment, (ii) to pass along valued cultural knowledge, (iii) for moral teaching and/or discipline, and (iv) spiritual legends (Bird, 2005, p. 35). Before European contact, storytelling was a very important activity among North American First Nations. Some Indian tribes even had recognized storytellers among them who were judged by their eloquence and powers of invention. They were given the best seats in the lodge, and the choicest foods wherever they went (Clark, 1971, p. x).

Although entertainment type legends could be told by almost anyone, a complex form of protocol was in place for relating other kinds of legends, particularly spiritual legends. It was often the case that specific versions of instructive and moral legends “belonged” to an individual elder who would be gifted for relating that version. When this genre of legend was told, the fundamental essence of the story remained intact, though the approved storyteller might embellish certain parts of the tale. Traditionally, legends were not told merely for enjoyment or instruction; the lessons inherent in their content were believed. Legends were viewed as emblems of active spirituality, because they provided a concrete avenue to established beliefs and traditions that linked generations of people together (Erdoes and Ortiz, 1984, p. xv). Legends were perceived to be living phenomena, and each listener was expected to take something personal away from the experience of listening to the recounting of a story (M. Blackfish, quoted in Norman, 1990, p. xiii). On occasion a listener might not immediately recognize the inherent truth of a legend, but days later, having cogitated (inquired?) on the experience, realize what lesson might be learned or what was implied about his or her behavior in the telling of the story. In this context inquiry learning was also an adult activity.
Grant (1993, p. 1) suggests that relating legends comprises an attempt to explain the unexplainable. This is similar to Jungian psychology which suggests that there are two kinds of knowledge—knowledge of the conscious, external world of everyday life, and knowledge of the subconscious workings of the human mind. Because the encouragement of personal ruminations is the target of inquiry-based learning, relating legends appeals to the latter kind of knowledge.

Traditionally, the general protocol for sharing legends included telling them only in the wintertime and then only during the evening (Clark, 1988, p. 15; Mayo, 1990, p. 11). Stories were not to be told during the springtime when plants were growing; “they might listen and forget to grow” (Montiel, 2010, p. 37). During the summer months when certain animals were out of hibernation, they might overhear a story being told and possibly find its reference to their habits unflattering. Relating legends other than during late autumn or in the winter months was therefore forbidden, since the saying, “all my relations” implies maintaining positive relations with all living phenomena. In traditional Indigenous cultures, everything in the universe was viewed as interconnected. The people believed that the happenings in every river, waterfall, echo, thunder clap, and even the changing positions of stars in the sky resulted from actions by indwelling spirits whose activities could have implications for human behavior (Clark, 1989, p. xv). After all, we are all connected.

Storytelling was never undertaken when other activities such as those pertaining to tribal livelihood demanded attention. Though storytelling served various purposes among both adults and children, adults made the most of them during long winter evenings. Some Iroquois storytellers carried with them a bag of props, and when requested to relate a legend, would reach into the bag, pull out an item, and relate a tale about it. On more formal occasions, during some evenings, tribal members would gather in a circle around a fire and request that one of the elder keepers of old stories relate a valued tale. The responsibility of listeners was to concentrate on the legend, while at the same time keep in mind that the meaning of the story might have a personal application—even if they had heard the story many times. The storyline may not have changed very much in between hearings, but the experience of the listener might have, and this could affect the individual’s interpretation of the story. As an added feature, some storytellers would design unique ways to check if their listeners were awake by uttering a particular word and expecting the audience to utter a certain response (Mourning Dove, 1990, p. x).

The upshot of relating legends to adults was that gifted storytellers were counted on to pass along revered truths by maintaining the thread of important legends though they might be allowed to embellish story details. The basic storyline remained the same. When adult stories were related to the young for instructional purposes, they sometimes had to be sanitized and portions of what adults might call “ugly” removed (Mourning Dove, 1990, p. ix). First Nations elders were very much aware that educational content had to be relevant to time and place and appropriate to the mood of those on the receiving end.

**Storytelling as Inquiry Learning**

The educational process that highlighted Aboriginal pedagogy before European contact took place in a holistic social context that emphasized the importance of each individual as a contributing member of the social group. The underlying purpose was to promote opportunities for individuals to form a reciprocal relationship between their community and the natural world and find their place in it. This relationship involved all dimensions of the individual’s being, while providing both personal development and technical skills through active participation in community events and activities. The
fundamental theme of effective education was to learn about life on one’s own terms through participation and relationship within the greater community of humans, plants, animals, and indeed the whole of nature (Cajete, 1994, p. 26). This approach contrasted with the one introduced by incoming Europeans who emphasized the appropriation of objective knowledge and experience, often quite detached from the natural world.

As the centuries since contact have unfolded, educators in European influenced societies have begun to realize that students have not been given enough credit for learning on their own; they are too often being spoon-fed theories and figures that the framers of the educational system perceive to be in their best interests. A half century ago, a break-through occurred with the publication of Jerome Bruner’s book, *The Process of Education* (1960). Bruner promoted the idea that academic disciplines function according to unique principles, and successful students would find it necessary to comprehend the appropriate principles for each discipline. The result would be that a spiral-like curriculum be developed for each discipline beginning with elementary forms of knowledge for earlier grades with ever increasing levels of complexity as students progressed through school (Parkay, Stanford, Vaillancourt, and Stephens, 2009, p. 278). Using the example of mathematics, Bruner explained his approach in this way:

*The three fundamentals involved in working with [mathematical] equations are commutation, distribution, and association. Once a student grasps the ideas embodied in these three fundaments, he is in a position wherein “new” equations to be solved are not new at all, but variants on a familiar theme. Whether the student knows the formal names of these operations is less important for transfer than whether he is able to use them* (Bruner, 1960, pp. 7-8).

Two pivotal differences between Bruner’s theory and that practiced by pre-contact Native Americans may be noted. *First,* traditionally Indigenous educators worked in sync with the natural rhythms of Mother Nature, not with the underlying principles of humanly-made fields of knowledge. This position posited that Nature was a given and should not be trifled with by attempting to redesign it with elaborate engineering feats. Second, Native educators believed that during the learning process individuals should be motivated to understand what might be the nature of their sojourn of earth, that is, what might be the nature of their personal calling? This pursuit would be undertaken in a holistic environment provided by the community and comprising physical, intellectual, social, and spiritual domains. Four kinds of elders might be called upon to assist in this journey—those blessed with medicinal knowledge; wisdom elders who might be sought out for advice; ceremonial elders, who had earned the right to invite searchers to participate in the enactment of specified rituals; and, storytellers who could provide assistance by relating stories appropriate to the individual’s instructional and moral readiness (Friesen and Friesen, 2005, pp. 124f; Benyon, 2008, p. 49).

Contemporary North American educators tend to formulate precise outcomes for most educational practices, including inquiry learning. Little is left to the imagination of the learner; even the protocol of the inquiry journey is virtually dictated. For example, Kourilsky and Quaranta (1987, pp. 75-76) suggest that inquiry-oriented learners follow these steps: (i) make an outline of the inquiry focus; (ii) initiate the discussion; (iii) ensure active participation, drawing in timid participants; (iv) keep the discussion on track; (v) make occasional summaries of on-goings; (vi) keep the discussion from becoming one-sided; and, (vii) test the information stated and the line of reasoning used.
The traditional Aboriginal approach to inquiry learning contrasts somewhat with the above outline, albeit there are similarities. To begin with, both approaches emphasize checking out “findings” with one’s compatriots. Thus an element of community is introduced. The difference with the Indigenous approach is that the “checking out” process has two steps. First, the individual has opportunity to discuss personal insights and experiences with various elders along the way. This is where storytelling such as that of the “moose” story cited earlier becomes relevant. The second check point occurs within community. For example, a young man may undertake a vision quest, as was often the case in Plains Indian cultures, and on returning to camp elaborates a vision he has experienced. The validity of his experience will be tested out in the future based on his subsequent behavior and in terms of how that particular vision aligns itself with tribal beliefs and practice. If the vision in question promises special warrior, hunting, or medicinal skills to the recipient, his subsequent enactment of those skills will provide validation of his vision to the community.

**Analysis**

The first two steps in Kourilsky and Quaranta’s model are to originate a focus for inquiry, and initiate discussion. In Indigenous communities such an undertaking could commence with a young individual seeking out an elder regarding his or her future role in the universe. A story might be told, or the youth might be questioned about the matter in a non-directive way. Generally speaking (third step), the event would be initiated by the youth in question, although there were exceptions. The Assiniboines (Nakoda Sioux) of Alberta, sometimes selected a young man to pursue a vision quest, and supported the individual each step of the ritual with prayer and support (Snow, 2005, pp. 16-17). The primary target of the process was to discover one’s spiritually assigned role in the universe and to align its benefits with the needs of the community.

The formulation of a procedure by which to test the posed question in a Plains First Nations setting was established through time. For example, before a vision quest was undertaken, a purification ceremony would be observed, often involving a pipe ceremony led by respected elders. The pipe would be offered to the four directions, and prayers would be said. As the youth repaired to a hillside to pray and to wait on the Great Spirit, his hopes were that the Great Spirit would make known to him the purpose for which he was born. The inquiry was fundamentally spiritual, not cognitive; it was an appeal both to the subconscious and to the world beyond. It should be noted that today non-Native seekers are not informed about this avenue of inquiry; nor is it encouraged.

The fourth step in the Kourilsky-Quantana model is to keep the pursuit of truth on track. In traditional Indigenous societies, this was primarily the task of the seeker, though he was strongly encouraged by the presence of supporting elders. Interestingly, the role of elders, like the selection of youth for vision questing, occurred in much the same way. Men and women who were sought out for the impartation of advice or to relate legends were not appointed; they simply emerged over time (Medicine, 1987, p. 141). Like successful seekers in a vision quest, elders gained status through their interaction with peers who in turn reinforced their gifts. Tribal members gradually came to recognize whom to consult for advice on personal matters or medicinal assistance, or with regard to the arrangement of and participation in ceremonies.

Fifth, the inquiry-based model discussed here mandates the occasional summation and evaluation of individual progress. Once again, the metaphor of moose-hunting is relevant, youth having the privilege...
of checking in whenever the spirit led them to do so. Meili (1992, p. xi) describes her experience in consulting with elders:

*I was impressed with their prophetic vision. They taught me that I am part of God, so I could stop my search in trying to find Him/Her in someone else.... The Great Spirit, or life, or God (whatever you consider to be the highest), is love and always says yes if we seek and try to live good lives. The elders collectively taught me that all things have a spirit and gently influenced me to give up my search for personal enlightenment and gain. I need to love, trust, and learn from all my relations.*

Discussions are kept from becoming one-sided (step six), if the inquirer learns how to listen, not just to input from a sought after elder, but to also to his or her inner self—the unconscious—which in Indian metaphysics is the Creator’s way of communicating with individuals. In the First Nations context this would mean to experience affirmation of the spiritual search. Did the individual in question receive a special message about his/her role in the universe? Could he/she correctly explain it to supporting elders in a meaningful way? Would his/her later behavior in the community validate the nature of his/her claimed vision? Community approval was traditionally always the means by which new information was verified in Aboriginal communities. The persistence of truth throughout antiquity was a valued fact (Knockwood, 1994, p. 14) and new truths would need to correspond to it and cohere with it. These criteria are no longer valued by members of Euro-Canadian society and greatly frustrate Indigenous educators who continue to place great value on truths that endure.

In conclusion, inquiry learning, as currently defined, was very much part of the traditional Indigenous educational process although Native elders who promoted it took cognizance of a much wider swath in terms of potential learning parameters. Not only did their practice validate the historical longevity of the approach, but because Aboriginal teachers also recognized the spiritual domain, it therefore comprised a more comprehensive process of learning. Today’s educators might do well to revisit the history of inquiry learning by examining the traditional Aboriginal philosophy of education and perhaps integrating this important dimension.

References


