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Unlearning Colonialism: Storytelling and the Accord

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Abstract: This paper outlines the process of storytelling to unlearn colonialism and recover indigenous traditions. It starts with the framework of the “Accord on Indigenous Education” and provides examples of the power of storytelling from the Idle No More movement and the Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

“Most of us think that history is the past. It’s not. History is the stories we tell about the past.” Thomas King (2012, p. 2)

Accord on Indigenous Education

On June 1 2010, three leaders of Canada’s Indigenous Peoples, Mary Simon (President, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami), Clement Cartier (President, Metis National Council) and Matthew Coon Come (Vice-Chair, Assembly of First Nations), witnessed the launch of the Accord on Indigenous Education from the Association of Canadian Deans of Education. In a news report widely carried in Canadian newspapers, Mary Simon (Curran, 2010) talked about “a new era of education for aboriginal peoples,” comparable to the federal government’s apology to aboriginal people for their treatment in residential schools. Matthew Coon Come (Curran, 2010) stated “...it is indeed possible for the larger society to be truly inclusive of indigenous peoples by embracing our special history, our rights and our special relationship to the larger society and to do it in a way that brings honour to us all.”

The Accord was developed over three years by a working group that had extensive involvement from aboriginal scholars. The group was led by two deans of education and two prominent aboriginal scholars, Jo-Ann Archibald (Q’um Q’um Xiim) from the University of British Columbia and Lorna Williams from the University of Victoria. MacLean’s Magazine quoted Williams view of significance of the document: “Education was the tool used to destroy our languages, ways of life, cultural traditions, relationships with families and the land. This action by the deans of education is leading the way to education being an institution that can also heal and restore what it attempted to destroy.” (Dwyer, 2010) This paper will demonstrate the method of narrative inquiry developed by aboriginal scholars to unlearn the assimilation from centuries of colonialism in aboriginal education. The process of writing the Accord involved several drafts and round table discussion sessions with members from the newly formed Canadian Association for the Study of Indigenous Education (CASIE). The Accord is based on respect, partnership and promotion of indigenous knowledges. It is a statement of principles to be used by Faculties of Education to work in partnership with indigenous communities “to promote indigenous identities, cultures, languages, values, ways of knowing, and knowledge systems.” (ACDE, 2010)

The purpose for the Accord is to promote work in partnership to overcome the shared heritage of colonialism that has guided aboriginal education since the establishment of aboriginal schools in the nineteenth century and the process of assimilation that has denied indigenous languages, culture and traditions. This heritage is the result of over 100 years of residential schools that were set up to “civilize the native.” This has been finally recognized as a mistake and a wrong by the both the churches and government who set up the residential school system, culminating in an apology by the Prime Minister of Canada in 2008. This apology has coincided with establishment of the Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission that has a mandate to document the experience and move towards reconciliation.

Political Program of Indigenous Education

In reviewing the treaties signed between First Nations and the British Crown in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Henderson (1995) shows that they are based on trust between nations. He argues that the treaties recognize aboriginal control of education as a right and obligation. In the eighteenth

century treaties there was no transfer of rights for education. In the later nineteenth century treaties there is a clear commitment from the Crown to establish schools on reserves. This is the recognition of fiduciary responsibility for education by the Crown.

This responsibility for aboriginal control over education was abrogated in the creation of the Indian Act, regulations and the residential schools. Henderson (1994, p. 254) states: "Federal government regulations were not benign intrusions; they were deliberate psychological experiments which attempted to destroy First Nations consciousness." He goes on to detail the concerted campaign to extinguish language and cultural heritage, to assimilate and to remove children from their families.

With the rejection of the assimilation strategy of the 1960s, the call for Indian Control of Indian Education, and the recognition of treaty rights in the 1982 Constitution Act, the Supreme Court of Canada has been much more active in enforcing Treaty Rights. This is shown through the Simon ruling on the 1763 proclamation, where the judgment stated "old colonial rule must be deconlonized." In both the Sparrow and Marshall decisions on hunting rights, treaties are being interpreted for their original intent, not by the regulations of the Indian Act. This still needs to be done for education. Henderson (1995, p. 258) concludes: "The absence of clear federal and provincial initiatives is the post-colonial order to comply fully with the constitutional obligations under the treaties continues to fuel frustration, anger, and conflict. The educational challenge is for federal, provincial and treaty orders to work together as partners. ... The harmonization of Aboriginal educational choice protected by treaties ... will lead to many quandaries, but these are unavoidable in the creation of a post-colonial Canada."

Shannen's Dream

The clash of treaty rights and responsibilities is clearly evident in the struggle Shannen Koostachin of Attawapiskat First Nation for a safe school. (First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, 2013) Attawapiskat is on shore of Hudson Bay, 310 km north west of Moosonee by winter ice road. A First Nation of over 2000 members, it was very much ignored and neglected until 2008 when DeBeers Diamond company spent \$1 billion dollars to open a diamond mine 75 km away that produces 600,000 carats of diamonds a year.

Shannen Koostachin was known to stand up to authority. She initiated the 'Safe and Comfy' school campaign from Attawapiskat. She stated: "School should be a time for dreams. Every kid deserves this." Here is her story:

Over 10 years ago, the elementary school in Attawapiskat, serving over 400 children, was closed because thousands of gallons of diesel fuel had contaminated the ground underneath the building. Portable trailers formed a "temporary school" and after nine years, and repeated promises, there was no plan to build a permanent structure. Many students did not attend classes as the portables became more and more run down. School was often cancelled due to lack of heat, warped doors and insufficient insulation. The children initiated the Attawapiskat School Campaign to ask all children to help them pressure the government for a new school. Although three Ministers of Indian Affairs made repeated promises for a new building, each one broke their promise. Finally in 2008, after the children had raised funds for a trip to Niagara Falls, they cancelled their trip and sent three youth to Ottawa to meet with Minister Strahl to ask for a new school. Although the Minister advised that there was no money, the students persisted, speaking to thousands of other students across Ontario about the dire situation. In 2009 Shannen spoke to over 500 delegates at an education rights conference about this abuse of the right to a safe education. She was nominated for the International Children's Peace Prize for her advocacy of educational rights for all children. Finally in 2009 the minister promised a new school. Unfortunately,

Shannen died in an auto accident in 2010, but in her memory, the Shannen's Dream campaign works to ensure that all First Nations children have "safe and comfy schools" across Canada. Construction of the new school started in the fall of 2012.

Idle No More

Shannen's Dream campaign inspired the "Idle No More" movement that swept across Canada and the world in December, 2012. Started by four women activists from Saskatchewan, Nina Wilson, Sheelah McLean, Sylvia McAdam and Jessica Gordon, Idle No More (Idle No More 2013) began as a protest against Bill C-45 of the Canadian Government which ignored treaty rights and the protection of the environment. Through social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, the four called for teach-ins, demonstrations, and direct actions (blockades, information pickets, round dances, etc.) to protest the undemocratic, oppressive legislation. The response was phenomenal. For one call for a "Day of Action" on January 28, 2013 (there had been at least three earlier days of action) their website lists 22 protests in Canada, 20 in the United States, and actions around the world in more than twenty other countries.

Idle No More (2013) is based on three strategies:

"INM has and will continue to help build sovereignty & resurgence of nationhood.
INM will continue to pressure government and industry to protect the environment.
INM will continue to build allies in order to reframe the nation to nation relationship, this will be done by including grassroots perspectives, issues and concerns."

Idle No More (2013) is based on four sets of principles. They believe that The Treaties are between sovereign nations, in Canada, the Crown and First Nations. The spirit of the treaties is that by First Nations sharing access to the land, they retain inherent rights to resources. The current situation of lack of funding for education, housing and subsistence, guaranteed in the treaties, is the results of a colonial abrogation of the treaty rights.

They believe that Canada has become wealthy through exploitation of resources, oil, copper, logging, fishing and diamonds, that have not improved the lives of First Nations peoples. The exploitation of resources has resulted in great environmental damage to land, water and people. The government does not value how to live on the land that is critical for First Nations.

They believe that the government of Canada is trying to pass laws so that reserve land can be sold to corporations and those who profit from resources. This is an attempt to not recognize the sovereignty of First Nations over land and resources.

They believe that many other countries are moving towards sustainable development, but Canada's resource, environmental and First Nations policies are not. They have a vision for healthy, just and sustainable communities.

The Idle No More movement is a worldwide social movement that uses social media (videos, wikis, blogs and tweets) to organize direct actions (marches, blockades, etc.) Its values are the resurgence of indigenous identities and building solidarity with allies.

Unlearning Colonialism

Many of the Idle No More actions draw upon the First Nations traditions of storytelling. To work to overcome this legacy of colonialism and residential schools, aboriginal scholars have developed

powerful narrative methodologies such as “Storywork” by Joann Archibald (2008) and the “Talking Stick” by Isabelle Knockwood (1992). In “*Indigenous Storywork*”, Archibald (2008) shows that one must not use western narrative for the stories, but base it on the connections between the speaker and her people. In her account on her experience of residential schools, “*Out of the Depths*,” Knockwood (1992) bases her stories on the Talking Stick. Overcoming the centuries of colonialism and assimilation will be a long, slow process. It involves unlearning Western concepts, including narrative structure, and re-inventing and re-living the language, culture and identity which has been lost.

Overcoming the Legacy from Residential Schools

An example of these methods is the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2013) that was established to overcome the legacy of residential schools. Through stories, pictures, plays and witnesses, the Commission is working to document the experience of both those who attended the schools and the effect upon their families, children and grandchildren of the loss of language, culture and identity. It is providing a public forum for these stories to be shared. This process has resulted in this experience of colonialism being named, talked about and shared in communities. This has led to a cultural revival, both of language, of spiritual outlook and of community life. This cultural revival through the use of storytelling will explore the opportunities for this method to be used in a non-Western, non-linear fashion on social media, new media, in the classroom and by the campfire. This method of research, sharing and teaching, will be key in bringing about the goals of the Accord on Indigenous Education.

In 1988, I met Isabelle Knockwood when she was seeing admission to university. I asked: “Why do you want to study at university?” I was surprised by her answer: “I want to write a history of the Mi’kmaw people.” I had never heard such an eloquent reason for university study. During her four years at university she wrote her book, “*Out of the Depths*” on the student experience at the Indian residential school in Nova Scotia. The book, published in 1992, was the first book length account of the residential school experience written by an indigenous person in Canada. Moreover it was based on the principle of the Talking Stick, a non-linear form of narrative or story telling, to present the experience. As Donaldson (1998) observes alphabetic disciplines threaten the interactive oral communication so characteristic of aboriginal cultures. She quotes Knockwood’s (1992) use of the Talking Stick: “I am holding the Talking Stick. I have been talking about the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie for many years, and I still don’t understand why the hurt and shame of seeing and hearing the cries of abused Mi’kmaw children, many of them orphans, does not go away or heal. I hope that the act of writing it down will help me and others to come up with some answers.”

Storytelling as the Way Forward?

To unlearn colonialism, activities must be pursued in three separate institutional spheres: schools, governments and universities. For schools, the curriculum must start with the recovery of language, concepts and sense of place. The holistic approach to indigenous education is complemented by promotion of environmentally sustainable education. The recovery of knowledge of the earth requires the recovery of local, indigenous knowledges. For governments, the focus must be on the recognition of the treaties that create our identities as peoples who must work together; we are all treaty people. It is important to focus on identity rights, which are the key in naming, understanding and interacting with others and the world. For universities, much work is to be done developing curriculum, indigenous research and programs for teaching the diversity of knowledge forms and representations.

The unlearning of colonial education will require incorporation of the trickster, Glooscap or Coyote, into our stories. We need to hear how our grand narratives of discovery, progress and empire can be transformed by the trickster to ones of relation, harmony and culture. Take the “hegemony of test scores” that currently dominates educational storytelling. The media immediately respond to any story of “low performance,” “slipping rankings,” or “losing competitiveness” from the latest international testing regime. Why don’t we represent the story of the test, as the story of the trickster, who is providing the wrong clue on which to focus. Shouldn’t unlearning colonialism, mean transforming the story of losing language, respect and indigenous culture into one of rediscovery, recreation and reinvention? The process of Story Work and the Talking Stick provide promising methods for this work. How can we unlearn colonialism by bringing forward this process of change? What are our stories that will be told in this process?

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