Title:

Distance Education for Social Justice in the Wireless Era: Enabling Indigenous Students' Access to Post-secondary Education through Distance Learning

Discussants:

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Proposal Outline & Abstract

Method: Round Table Discussion Theme: Governance, Conflict and Social Justice

Background & Contextual Information

In a recent article on transformative e-learning, McLoughlin & Lee identifies the function of Web 2.0 technologies in assisting diverse learners through customizing and personalizing learning and offering "rich opportunities for networking and collaboration (Bryant, 2006)" (2007). Current technologies available to distance education and e-learning environments have the potential to support accessible education congruent with non-western pedagogical approaches and social justice aims to serve marginalized populations such as Indigenous peoples.

Distance education that is congruent with transformatory pedagogy does not depend upon the technology alone. The relational aspect between institutional support and instructor is intrinsic to achieving a distance education experience that upholds transformatory aims. While appropriate planning and use of technology in curriculum design allows for instructional delivery and assessment that upholds oral culture, there must be non-virtual relationships and support systems that attract and maintain marginalized students. This largely depends upon a distance education program's ability to offer an institution-wide system of service and support, tailored to the specific needs of the geographically distant learner.

Based on our extensive experience within distance education delivery of post-secondary studies in social work, and more recently in education, the purpose of this round table discussion is to share with colleagues our project team's reflections on

what has been learned. We share the transformatory pedagogy that is the undergirding of our approach based upon the four goals of participatory learning: a) accessibility of course options to geographically diverse communities; b) integration of distance learning methods that allow for collaborative, participatory learning; c) flexibility in design and delivery that can be customized for culturally diverse community ways of learning; and d) attention to the relational aspect of distance learning.

Community of Learners

Geographically, Canada is the second largest country in the world, spanning 5 time zones and touching 3 oceans. Although it is experiencing rapid urbanization in major cities located within 200 km of the United States border, many smaller and remote communities are still economically viable and retain deep cultural significance for the people who reside therein. According to the 2006 census, the population of Canada was roughly 31.2 million overall, and approximately 1.1 million people (3.8%) self-identified as having Indigenous ancestry (Statistic Canada, 2006). Slightly more than half of the total Indigenous population reside in towns and cities, although many Indigenous communities are considered to be remote, even within Canadian conceptions of remoteness.

Due to geographic remoteness, cultural and other social factors, it is not uncommon for Indigenous Social Work students to be employed as professional helpers in many Indigenous communities. Although they may have only a limited formal education, most are not in a position to leave their professional, societal, and family responsibilities to relocate to a larger urban community to pursue on-campus post-secondary education. Without the benefit of distance education opportunities, access to post-secondary learning opportunities would be impractical and unavailable to many of these students.

Many Indigenous communities do not have the human resource capacity to self-administer programs and services. A number of Canadian post-secondary institutions have stepped up to the task of providing on-campus professional training opportunities to Indigenous students. Few institutions however have fully embraced the social justice objective of providing training to Indigenous communities in situ. Although some steps have been made towards the establishment of Indigenous degree-granting post-secondary institutions in Canada, most initiatives have utilized

face to face delivery models, and distance education where it exists, still largely targets cohorts of Indigenous students living near larger remote communities who meet in person for classes delivered through outreach programs of universities based in large Canadian cities. Increasingly, Indigenous students are embracing virtual learning as a means to access higher education without having to leave their home communities.

A Post-Secondary Distance Education Case Example

A key vision of the University of Victoria's School of Social Work has been to develop a Bachelor of Social Work specialization stream that is customized for Indigenous populations and can be offered via distance education as well as on-campus modalities. The UVic SW attracts Indigenous students from diverse cultural groups and geographical communities across Canada. Providing these students with a distance education option allows them to contextualize their own studies within their community, allowing for increased curriculum relevancy for the student's experience. They are then able to integrate their experiences through their online learning activities and discussion providing a unique opportunity for a cultural sharing and exchange. To achieve this, much of the course content has been developed to relate to various Indigenous themes and issues, and the curriculum is authored by Indigenous peoples.

UVic SW, through its distance delivery provides an opportunity for Indigenous students to not only undertake studies from their home community, but to also forge strong connections and learn from the experience of others who share their traditional and cultural values and have a shared experience of the impact of colonization. The use of technology and multi-media that centres oral culture as a legitimate way of learning and knowing has been a key innovation. At the outset of developing distance education curriculum for Indigenous learners, some criticism was raised to suggest that a connection could not be made between traditional ways of learning and knowing and new educational technologies – that the two were not compatible, or at worst, the notion of using educational technologies was disrespectful of Indigenous values. In response, the program has moved forward in course development very carefully, always in consultation with our Indigenous faculty and Indigenous Advisory Council. The development process has been thoughtful and consultative, and has utilized the collective expertise of the University

of Victoria's design personnel, support infrastructure, experienced Indigenous course writers and faculty consultants, and the voice of the community we serve.

The students see these traditional values honoured through online use of Indigenous pedagogical methods as story-telling, working in circle, and oral presentations. To further widen the circle of engagement, the Indigenous curriculum offers a unique opportunity for distance education and on-campus students to connect with each other via the various course sites. There is an expectation that on-campus students log on to the distance education course website, and post under the various discussion topics. This has allowed distance and on-campus Indigenous students an opportunity to traverse learning communities through distance education.

While by far the majority of students have access to the required high speed Internet connection for online coursework, it should be noted that an Indigenous student who does not have Internet connectivity due to poverty or community remoteness, or who is not able to work online due to a disability would not be denied access to the course. In this situation the materials can be utilized in an individual, "directed studies" arrangement between instructor and student.

Round-Table Discussion Format

The presenters will share their respective experience as distance education program coordinator, curriculum developer, and instructor. They represent an interdisciplinary team from Social Work and Education, at the University of Victoria and University of Saskatchewan respectively. The proposed format for the round table discussion will include: • A short presentation by each discussant on four thematic topics of the presentation identified below. • Following the presentations, there will be an opportunity for dialogue on the following four thematic topics. Prompt questions for each presentation have been identified.

(a) The Indigenous context in Canada:

The impacts of Euro-American colonization and globalization have had significant impacts on the Indigenous peoples of Canada. All 53 languages and the distinctive cultural practices of more than 615 Indigenous communities within Canada are have been seriously disrupted (INAC, 2004). Currently and by all accounts, Indigenous peoples are disproportionately overrepresented in all negative socio-economic

indicators with life expectancy rates 5 to 7 years lower, infant mortality 1.5 times higher, and suicide rates 2.5 times higher than the Canadian public.

Following the repatriation of the Canadian Constitution in 1982 and the social and fiscal pressures of worldwide economic globalization, post-colonial relations between Indigenous peoples and successive Canadian governments have witnessed a gradual transfer of health and social services to Indigenous authorities. For example, since 1995 the responsibility for providing Indigenous child welfare services in Canada has begun shifting from provincial governments to First Nations, Métis, Urban Aboriginal, and Inuit governments and agencies. As a result, there is an increasing demand for university trained Indigenous social workers to assume positions within Indigenous child welfare organizations.

Historically, the profession of social work in Canada was complicit in the systematic oppression of Indigenous peoples, however several Canadian Schools of Social Work have adopted social justice principles to learn from past injustices and have taken concrete action to rebuild the social capital of Indigenous communities. The Anti-Oppressive Practice focus of UVic SW, the creation of Indigenous Specializations and the development of web-based courses designed to build upon and strengthen the practice of Indigenous social work students have done much to establish UVic SW as a leading figure in social work education for Indigenous students in Canada.

(b) Distance Education Program Support

The ability of an institution of higher learning to attract and retain marginalized students is largely dependent on its infrastructure of support. Learner support beyond course materials and instructor facilitation on the course website is provided by UVic SW and through the University's distance education support infrastructure that is integrated in a variety of ways. Learner support for Indigenous students within UVic SW includes: 1) an Indigenous faculty member who acts as Faculty Advisor 2) a Program Assistant for Indigenous Programs 3) School's Academic Advisor

Additional support provided by the School of Social Work includes: 1) ongoing instructor availability via Webmail 2) scheduled 'office hours' in which the instructor is available for consultation by telephone 3) Learning Technologies support person available by telephone and email for technical or course material assistance

Additional support provided by the University includes: 1) "Onlinehelp Desk" for telephone or email requests for technical assistance 2) Distance Education Library

Service, "INFOLINE". Students can request books, articles, and literature searches, which are delivered, free of charge, by courier or fax.

New instructors also receive a complete orientation to distance learning. Orientation sessions are provided, along with ongoing technical support. Each new instructor is assigned a faculty mentor, who is available for consultation and guidance around issues of online teaching and assessment.

Student evaluation of the Distance education Indigenous BSW curriculum suggests that they appreciate the opportunity to access curriculum that has relevancy to their experience as emerging Indigenous social workers. Course evaluation summaries indicate that the majority of students feel the Indigenous curriculum and WebCT structure also allow them to: examine and develop their concepts of anti-racist practice, better understand decolonization and their role in it, and build practice relationships within and outside of their communities.

(c) Distance Education Curriculum Development

Post-secondary institutions in Canada are increasingly aware of the need to provide learning opportunities for Indigenous students and communities. To traverse geographical distances, virtual classrooms have increasingly become an integral aspect of this strategy. However, accessibility of programs is not the sole consideration. To offer effective programs for Indigenous populations, the curriculum must be based on pedagogy consistent with the community's cultural and learning needs. Integrating into course content activities for collaborative learning that uphold cultural knowledges has been a central goal of UVic SW distance education program. This discussion will identify how transformative and Indigenous pedagogy share qualities that work particularly well within an e-learning environment.

The premise of this discussion point is that curriculum design is successful to the extent that it unifies methods of instruction with a particular pedagogical approach. Pedagogy can be described narrowly as a method of instruction, or it can be broadly defined as a set of philosophical beliefs that guide instructional strategies. Within distance education, there has been increasing attention to pedagogical approaches that fit best within distance environments, specifically e-learning, to illustrate how technology supports an instructional philosophy rather than directs it. Michael Smith identifies this as "e-pedagogy" and defines this approach as a transformative pedagogy (Smith, 2005). The approach, based upon Freirian pedagogy, integrates a collaborative learning model that is critical and participatory with social justice aims.

Indigenous pedagogy is holistic in nature involving the four dimensions of being: spirit, mind, body, heart. Within Indigenous approaches to learning, as Maori pedagogy, both the learner and teacher engage in a reciprocal, collaborative learning relationship (Hemara, Wharehuia, 2000). The shared pedagogical qualities of both transformative and Indigenous include: collaborative, holistic, contextual, relevant, relational, active, and creative. Indigenous pedagogies, in particular involve the integration of learner, teacher, and community within the identity-building and affirming aspects of a lifelong learning process.

The use of technology in these applications has become a strength of the curriculum. We wanted to ensure that our cultural commitment to oral history and sharing of knowledge was not lost to an overdependence upon textual course material. We have integrated the use of audio, visual and interactive technologies to engage oral culture and designed course activities that can be contextualized within community life through course design and evaluation methods. In designing a course structure and assignments that facilitate this form of learning, the UVic SW Indigenous curriculum development has utilized technological tools, such as digital audio files on the course website interface, use of films on DVD, and links to Indigenous web-based resources.

The development of the Indigenous Bachelor of Social Work curriculum has involved a collaborative, project team approach and ongoing consultation with representatives from the Indigenous community. The UVic SW works in concert with the University of Victoria's Distance Education Services (DES). DES is a university service that provides technical support and consultation on the design and delivery of online distance education. The project teams consist of the following members: • Course Writer • Curriculum Consultant (Indigenous Faculty member) • project manager (Director of E-learning) • Instructional Designer (online/web-based specialist) • graphics and text layout designer • audio-video technical support • representatives from the Indigenous Community

Representatives from the Indigenous community include Indigenous instructors and student advisors from the University, Elders, and social service workers who served as an Advisory Council for Indigenous Curriculum development.

(d) Distance Education Instruction and Delivery

In the early 1980's the University of Victoria School of Social Work piloted the cohort model of program delivery for Indigenous students, in conjunction with correspondence courses available to non-Indigenous students throughout Canada. The Indigenous students themselves were extensively canvassed about program design before beginning cohort coursework, and the resulting scheduling flexibility enabled accommodations to be made for climatic, cultural, and ceremonial dynamics that would not ordinarily be encountered in urban on-campus delivery models. Over the years, as technological improvements occurred and applications for admission from Indigenous students unable to participate in a cohort model increased, the School of Social Work has moved away from the outreach face to face model of distance education to a fully web enabled model.

The UVic SW has recognized the need to lead by example and has designated that all courses relating to Indigenous issues or in an Indigenous specialization must be led by an Indigenous instructor. Accordingly, the UVic SW teaching staff complement has been significantly adjusted to the extent that currently 4 of the 9 tenure-track professor positions are designated for (and filled by) people of Indigenous ancestry.

Questions for Discussion

How can we further develop "e-pedagogy" that respects transformatory and culturally specific pedagogical approaches as Indigenous?

How can we improve upon e-learning curriculum design that integrates culturally diverse learning strategies?

We have facilitated bringing together Indigenous students in Canada, is there opportunity for bringing together Indigenous students worldwide?

What elements of distance education curriculum are important for Indigenous students? How do you incorporate and assess the effective use of these elements?

References

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