

TEACHING ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

The 'HOW' Approach

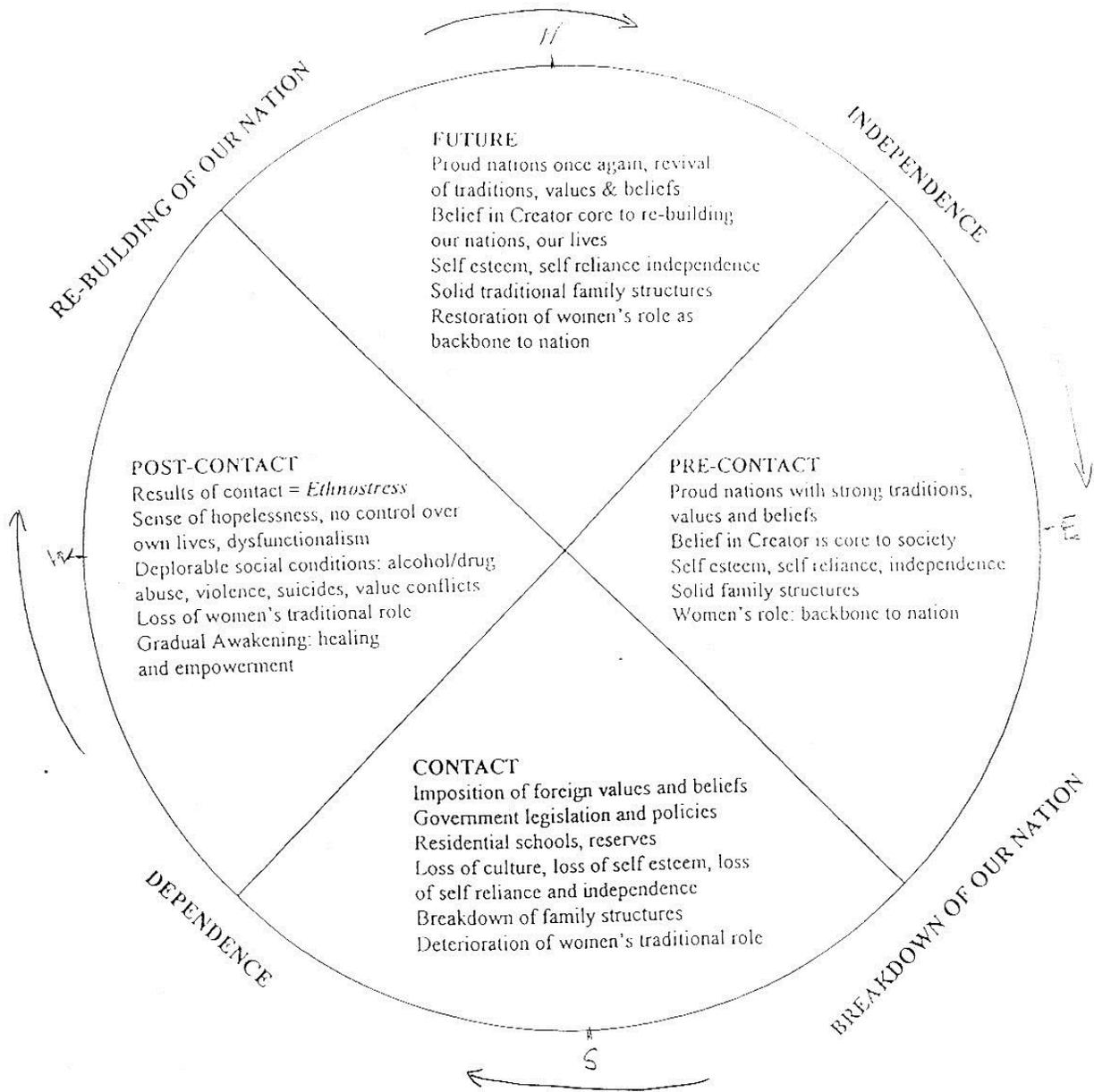
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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present and describe an approach to the teaching profession concerning the teaching of students who are of Aboriginal origin. It is directed to the new teachers who have little or no experience in teaching First Nations' students. In fact, the **'HOW' approach**, as it has been identified, offers a method that is conducive to the teaching of all students no matter what their cultural background.

The **'HOW' approach** presented here is from an Aboriginal perspective. It suggests some specific goals that can facilitate effective teaching for the non-Native teacher who is teaching First Nations students. It provides information that demonstrates the teaching and learning process in a holistic view and it offers strategies that can facilitate and promote the empowerment of Aboriginal students in their pursuit of higher education. In order provide a clear understanding of this approach, it is necessary to present an historical overview of Aboriginal people in North America.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW "THE JOURNEY OF FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE"



PRESENTED BY: DR. EMILY J. FARIES, MARCH 29, 2001

Goals for effective teaching

An important goal to strive for in teaching all students should be to foster the empowerment of these individuals for the enhancement of personal autonomy in making right and good choices. An equally important goal could be to make the learning experience both practical and meaningful. Hence, the ultimate goal of the learning process must be the application of the newly acquired knowledge and skills by the students to situations in life. When the students have learned how to apply what they have learned then the learning experience is effective and successful in that it is meaningful for life as well as practical for the empowerment of the individual.

Some other important goals can be considered for the effective teaching of First Nations students. In order for the students to remember what they have learned and apply what they have learned to their life and to their work, it is important to establish the goal of making the learning experience interesting, enjoyable, and more importantly, experiential. Experiential learning is learning that is based on experiences, and so, this means actually doing or having actual hands-on experiences that promote learning so it can be applied in other situations.

The challenge for any teacher of students from a different culture is to find creative, productive and effective ways of achieving these goals in the classroom. This challenge involves HOW to make the teaching and learning experience a beneficial and productive one for both the students and the teacher.

Some people may question why it is important to include the goal of experiential learning in the teaching of Aboriginal students. The following may explain the reasoning behind the importance of utilizing an experiential approach to teaching and learning. A Chinese saying states: *I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I know*. This saying is true for all people no matter what their identity.

Another way of explaining this view is in the following four steps:

What I see, I can imitate;

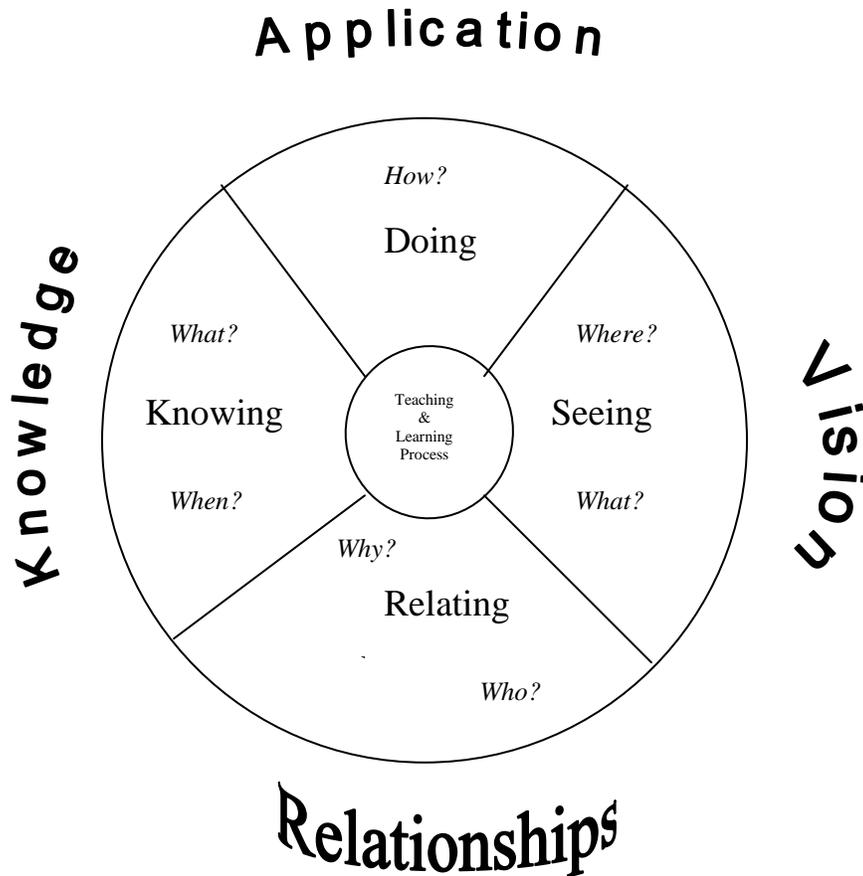
What I relate to, I find meaningful;

What I understand, I know/ remember;

What I learn, I can do.

This view of the learning process is directly in line with the achievement of all the goals just mentioned. The holistic perspective looks at the whole picture and not just one aspect of the teaching process. A picture of this process describes an Aboriginal holistic view of both the teaching and the learning experience and is demonstrated in the following circle diagram.

A Holistic view of the Teaching and Learning Process



When looking at this circle it is important to start at the right side of the diagram which is **'Vision'**, then move to the bottom of the circle which is **'Relationship'** and on toward **'Knowledge'** and finally **'Application'**. According to the sacred Medicine Wheel teachings, the process always starts in the east because that's where the sun rises and life begins. All four aspects or quadrants are related and inter-related to each other, as well as being dependant and inter-dependant.

Something worth mentioning here is that whenever students come to school, the first thing they experience is vision. They see a new environment, they see who their teacher is and who their classmates are, and they, most likely, want to get to know them. Mentally, they may begin to ask many questions, such as, who are you? Where are you from? What will you teach me? What

am I going to learn in this course? What do I already know about this subject? What assignments will I have to do? Where will this course take me? ... etc. The questions can go on and on for each section of the circle, but, the important point here is: *will they get answered?* With the '**HOW**' *approach* this is not only possible, it is sure method of getting questions answered. It is a holistic guide that helps to promote the intellectual development and the empowerment of individuals.

Based on personal experience of more than twenty years in teaching both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, the '**HOW**' *approach* has proven to produce successful and effective results. It makes the teaching profession a very satisfying and rewarding experience and it also promotes the assurance of success and perseverance for First Nations students in a formal educational environment.

A Specific Approach for Effective Teaching with First Nations students:

The '**HOW**' approach is geared towards both the students and the teachers, as well as, the teaching /learning process itself. It basically means:

H - Have a '**HOLISTIC**' perspective

O - Have an '**OPEN-MIND**' attitude

W - Have the '**WILLINGNESS**' to learn about each other and to learn from each other

Having a **holistic** perspective reflects a view that looks at the whole picture of the situation, in this case, the teaching experience. Thus, it looks at the student as a whole person, that is, all aspects of the student's life and well-being. These aspects include the physical/material, emotional/social, mental/intellectual and cultural/spiritual development. In a holistic view, the four main aspects of a person life are related and dependant on each other for healthy growth and development.

In order to have a holistic view of the students we are teaching, it is necessary to get to know our students well, and this means the development of an interacting relationship between the instructor and the students. The key factor here is respect between teacher and student. It means that, as teachers, we should model respectful behaviour and value the students as

individuals and as human beings. You can demonstrate that you value the students by acknowledging who they are, what their strengths are and treating them with dignity. The more we get to know our students and the more they get to know us as teachers, the better we can facilitate and make the teaching and learning experience more interesting, enjoyable and practical.

Having a holistic perspective works in line with having an ‘**open-mind**’ attitude as well as having the **willingness** to learn about Aboriginal people and to learn from them too. Having an ‘open-mind’ and a willingness to learn means that we as teachers need to start about learning all we can about Aboriginal people. In order to understand our students as individuals who belong to a specific indigenous group, we need to be familiar with the authentic history and worldview of their people, including their traditional education, health, and justice systems, as well as their cultural beliefs, values and customs.

In order to learn all we can about First Nations people, we can use the strategy of the questions **WHO? WHAT? WHEN? WHERE? HOW? WHY?** We can use these questions as motivators to initiate our own learning as well as increase our knowledge about Canada’s Aboriginal people.

Asking the question **WHO** includes: who am I? who are you? who are we together? Teachers and students need to get to know each other so that we can understand each other and, as teachers, we must not attempt to impose our ways on the students. When we communicate and understand each other we can make the teaching/learning process more relevant and significant. The **WHO** question can clearly demonstrate how the student and the teacher are brought together into a close relationship that involves the flow of information from two different perspectives.

Another example involves the **WHAT** question. As teachers, asking ourselves the **WHAT** question leads us to seek answers to any of the following: What is my goal in teaching Aboriginal students? What are the students’ interests? What is their worldview? What are their cultural beliefs, values and practices? What is the traditional Aboriginal approach to education and to justice? What is their view of the environment? What is the students’ goal in post-secondary studies?

Asking the question **WHEN** involves questions to adult students such as: When is it the best time to return to school? When is the motivation (of the students) at its best? When will I (as a student) learn to apply what I am learning? When is learning and teaching most productive?

WHERE questions can be: Where are my students from? Where do they live now? Where does their learning take place? Where is the most beneficial or productive place to learn?

The next question **HOW** brings teaching strategies and methodology. How can I approach my teaching more effectively? How do I understand their culture? How do I learn about their culture and history? How can I value the students? How do I see my students? The questions can go on and on.

The **WHY** question helps teachers to understand our role in the teaching profession. Some **WHY** questions include: Why am I teaching these First Nations students? Why am I here? Why are they in my classroom? Why are they interested in learning?

And so, the six questions, **WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, HOW, WHY** enable us to learn many things about our students. They include learning about the Aboriginal cultural background, history, holistic worldview and vision, beliefs, values, customs and practices, as well as their traditional education and justice systems.

Having both an ‘open-mind’ attitude and the willingness to learn provides us with an understanding about where First Nations people have been in the history of Canada and the knowledge that they do have an authentic history and worldview. They can contribute valuable insight with regard to teaching other nations how to live with respect with one another and in balance and harmony with all other human beings.

Having a holistic view of the teaching/learning process means seeing, understanding and experiencing the whole teaching/learning situation to its greatest potential. Having a holistic perspective helps the teacher to understand the students better and it stimulates us to make the teaching/learning process more interesting, enjoyable and meaningful.

Strategies to Empower Students

The following is a list of things to remember when teaching Aboriginal students. These strategies have been proven to enhance both the teaching and learning experience.

1. Know and understand your students
2. Get connected, share differences and similarities
3. Value your students, be interested in them
4. Focus on the strengths of the students
5. Get students involved in activities
6. Ask for their input (suggestions) in planning activities
7. Present new information straight forward and direct
8. Have fun; enjoy a laugh together
9. Make learning exciting and meaningful
10. Know that learning is experiencing
11. Use lots of examples
12. Use an 'experiential learning' approach (activities that promote learning by doing)
13. Get students to work together in pairs or small groups
14. Be culturally sensitive, be aware of cultural differences
15. Make the learning experience memorable
16. Use positive reinforcement
17. Avoid labels with students
18. Share stories

Conclusion

Both teaching and learning involve a two-way process that includes the giving and the receiving of information. A two-way process means that there is a direct communication, hence, the development of an interactive relationship between the teacher and the students. Life is about relationships. Teaching Aboriginal students is about seeing where we are going, building relationships, interacting together and acquiring momentum to apply the new knowledge to life in general. A good teacher strives to make a difference in the lives of her or his students. A good teacher will be remembered for making a difference in someone's life.

THE ABORIGINAL APPROACH TO LEARNING (Learning Styles)

