



VIEWPOINTS

Some Honest Talk about Non-Indigenous Education

BY DEREK RASMUSSEN



And yet the way most of us have come to think and talk about ourselves prevents us from doing what we need to do. Why? Because it is not true to this place. If we make the enormous effort needed to think and talk in a more accurate way, we will see ourselves living within a society that wishes to be inclusive and balanced.

— **John Ralston Saul, A Fair Country: Telling Truths About Canada (p.284)**

In June of 2010, the Association of Canadian Deans of Education released their new manifesto, an Accord on Indigenous Education.¹ In it the Deans say they hope that “Indigenous identities, cultures and languages, values and ways of knowing and knowledge systems will flourish in all Canadian learning settings.” (p.4)

While this is an admirable aim, Indigenous identities, cultures and languages, values and ways of knowing and knowledge systems comprise a very wide and deep set of things — and Euro-Canadian Education is a very narrow container.

This narrowness is not by accident — it is by design. Big “E” Education has to limit who gets in and what it does in order to be able to confer both valuable credentials on its graduates, and legitimacy on the subjects under its gaze. Ask the Oppenheimer family how DeBeers made its fortune with diamonds: to make something valuable you have to make it scarce.

If we read between the lines of this Accord, the Deans are saying they are going to try to confer a bit more legitimacy on Indigenous subject-matter, and are willing to dispense a few more credentials to Indigenous graduates. This is good and necessary.

For too long, the languages and epistemologies of host civilizations have been denied recognition and respect within Education. First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students have been forced to master European languages and epistemologies in order to gain access to the valuable creden-

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tials which guarantee employment and increased income in market economies.

But host civilizations already have their own wisdom processes embedded in their cultural dynamics which predate European Education by thousands of years. How does that fit into this equation?

Simple: it doesn't. The Accord on Indigenous Education is not about embedded Indigenous wisdom, it is about fitting more Indigenous students and subject-matter into Euro-Canadian Education. The Deans don't explore questions around embedded Indigenous wisdom, because they assume (along with most of us English speakers) that our word “education” adequately encompasses all forms of cultural transmission. But it doesn't. Furthermore, there is a contradiction in how we use the word “education.”

Here's what I mean: when I lived in Nunavut for 12 years I was struck by the wisdom of elders there, and I wondered how they developed this wisdom without an Inuit education system. As a southern English person, it had never occurred to me that

wisdom could develop outside of the four walls of Education. When I cited this as my main question to study in graduate school, my professor chided me, saying “Inuit must have some form of education — all societies have some form of education.”

Here is the inconsistency, as illustrated by an Oxford graduate talking about his experience trying to grow food in northern India. He writes: “If an uneducated peasant could do it, then I could it.”²²

Do you see the contradiction here? If all societies have education, then how can we refer to people as “uneducated”? I see and hear this second type of comment all the time up north — usually as a back-handed compliment — “Oh that Aboriginal elder is a great leader; despite having only a grade five education.”

What I am getting at is that English speakers try and play it both ways when we use the word “education.” On the one hand we like to show our open-mindedness by asserting platitudes like ‘all societies have education’ — when in fact we may not be critically examining how imprecise this English word is to describe all the aspects of cultural transmission that we lump under this heading. And on the other hand, when we say that someone is “uneducated”, we are usually denigrating them because they weren’t admitted into or didn’t graduate from our deliberately limited European institutional process for which we also deploy the same English word: Education.

We create this problem for ourselves by conflating ‘cultural transmission’ with ‘education’; and we do this because, for us Euro-Canadians, education is the main tool we use for cultural transmission and continuity. Every day we are forced to spend the majority of our waking hours away from our families and communities in order to earn wages; this erodes our fluency and responsibility for cultural transmission to such an extent that we have basically had to hand the whole job over to our schools. (Which is an unrequested and unreasonable burden on them and on teachers — but that is a subject for another essay!)

The Restaurant Theory of Education

If the only tool you have is a hammer; every problem looks like a nail.

— Abraham Maslow

As I mentioned above, I began graduate studies in Education

with the question: how did Inuit elders get to be so wise without any discernible system of education in their society?

What I came to realize is that I had fallen under the spell of what you might call the “Restaurant Theory of Education.” Non-Indigenous people like me have so little experience of cultural transmission and cultivation of wisdom grown organically, within our families and communities, that the only place we think learning comes from is schools and universities. If we study another civilization and fail to locate an Education system within their social structure then we tend to refer to its members as ‘uneducated’, thereby also implying that they are not a very ‘developed’ or learned people.

The Restaurant Theory says that Euro-Canadians think of the relationship between Education (scarce) and cultural transmission (wide) as being like the relationship between restaurants and food. Restaurants can be found in most neighborhoods — as can schools — but the difference is that no one believes that without restaurants we would starve. If we come across a society without schools, then we assume that there has to be some sort of Education system hidden in the social structure somewhere...and we just have to suss it out. Yet if we don’t see restaurants in another civilization we don’t immediately assume that they must have a restaurant system hidden in their food relations somewhere.

Our colleagues are unwilling to recognize that education is a concept... inconceivable in other societies.... They assume the need for education as an a-historical given... Wherever the historian of education finds a poetry ritual, an apprenticeship, an organized game, he smells educational activity. (Illich, 1992:114, 115)

Seeking converts

The second part of our Restaurant approach is proselytizing. The Deans say to the host civilizations: Why don’t you run your cultural transmission through our system? This is a large part of what the Accord on Indigenous Education is trying to do. We European descendents are so bewitched by our Restaurant-belief that we try to get all cultures to prepare *their* food *our way* — in our kitchens, in our processes, in exchange for money, with chefs trained to our standards. But what if their food-provision-

ing, food-preparation, and food-sharing are woven into an entire set of beliefs and cultural dynamics that don't lend themselves to being monetized, distilled, and converted to text — to our restaurant approach?

Here's a partial list of the many activities that we might expect to find embedded within Indigenous cultural transmission: transfer of cultural knowledge, cultivation of wisdom, skills apprenticeships, transfer of a moral code, values and social roles. Can all of these be distilled out and transmitted within Euro-Education? Should they be?

Just because my people believe that this wide thing (cultural transmission and continuity) can only be transmitted through this narrow tube (Education), should First Nations, Métis and Inuit copy us? Should they try to funnel all their Indigenous identities, cultures, languages, values, ways of knowing and knowledge systems into a state-sanctioned process of age-divided cohorts reading English texts inside cement buildings under fluorescent lights guided by credentialed professionals?

Elders are the embodiment of Inuit culture and language, they are the highest expression of culture and language.

Okay, so maybe I telegraphed my opinion a bit there; but let's at least consider the possibility that First Nations, Métis and Inuit might want to keep their options open. Maybe have a backup plan, some insurance? Maybe not all Indigenous cultural transmission should be channeled into Euro-Education? (I'll return to this question in a minute.)

As my friend Tommy Akulukjuk has argued to me and my Euro-Canadian friends: "You don't have a culture. You get your culture from books, from school — that's not a real culture. A real culture comes from your parents, from your family, from your elders, from your community." Elders are the embodiment of Inuit culture and language, they are the highest expression of culture and language. My people have no equivalent or point of comparison. I can't point to a Euro-Canadian on the street and say: "that person represents my culture", or "that person is the highest expression of my English language and values." I, and

my fellow settler descendents, believe that our culture, language and values are the responsibility of the schools and the courts — and are being preserved inside those institutions. But for Tommy, culture and language are living experiences, embodied in elders.

Alaskan Inuk Yupiktak Bista says it better than I do:

Before the erection of school houses and the introduction of professional teachers to whom Western civilization entrusts the minds of their children...we did not worry about relating learning to life, because learning came naturally as a part of living...(from) the father, mother, grandmother, grandfather, brother, sister, uncles, aunts, cousins, and friends...(and from) the weather, the sea, the fish, the animals, and the land....The coming of Western civilization broke this unity and living....Today we have entrusted the minds of our young to professional teachers who seemingly know all there is to know. They are teaching a child how to read, write, repair a car, weld two pipes together. But they are not teaching the child the most important thing; who he is: an Inuk or Indian with a history full of folklore, music, great people, medicine, a philosophy, complete with poets....Now our culture and subsistence way of life are being swept away by books, patents, money, and corporations.⁴

Creating scarcities

Twenty-five years ago, philosopher Ivan Illich “begged” educators to study “education under the assumption of scarcity” (during his address to the fifth World Congress of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies in Paris). After a decade of trying, he admitted that he had “failed, completely.”⁵

Schooling is the ritual of a society committed to progress and development. It creates certain myths which are a requirement for a consumer society. For instance, it makes you believe that learning can be sliced up into pieces and quantified, or that learning is something for which you need a process within which you acquire it. (Illich, quoted in Cayley, 1992: 66)

Illich, John McKnight, and Nils Christie have described well the predicament that settler society has gotten itself into (Christie, 1977; Illich, 1977; McKnight, 1994, 1995). Each one of

our professional monopolies has expropriated a particular field of meaning from the settler community, creating an artificial scarcity, and cutting off some of the vital ways people used to form bonds with each other. We used to build ‘social muscle’ through our repeated daily sharing in ‘small acts’ — sharing food, shelter, transport, pain, joy — this used to be the glue that bonded our (somewhat) civil society together. Today we may be much more efficient with these activities distilled out of the web of life and handed over to bureaucrats and professional monopolies, but it leaves non-Indigenous people somewhat ‘disabled’, dependent on all these service providers. For most of us, the bulk of our human interactions are as patients, clients, or consumers. Or students. How did we end up handing over all our cultural transmission to the Education system?

An anthropology of education

For Euro-Canadians, this all began back in the 1800s, when Egerton Ryerson, the founder of Canada’s educational system, persuaded us that “Education is the remedy of a defect, the supply of a deficiency” (Prentice, 1977: 180).

Prior to this, most settler farming families wanted their children to stay at home and learn how to run the farm. It took years for Ryerson, Upper Canada’s Chief Superintendent of Schools, to convince settlers that the “the family (was) educationally inadequate.” Once he won that concession, Ryerson lobbied for legally compelled school attendance “to protect children against” the “cupidity and inhumanity” of their negligent parents (Prentice, 1977: 61, 175).

I was reminded of the rural roots of this battle for souls one day during graduate studies, when my professor described an “ideal” school in rural Australia. The teacher and pupils had built an entire sheep paddock in the classroom — little cardboard fences, mock-ups of the sheep dipping and shearing areas — the whole works. My professor oohed and aahed and described this as “the ideal learning situation.” Apparently this school was in the middle of Australian farm country — there were sheep farms all over the place right outside the school property — so I kept wondering, why not just have the kids go outside and help out on a real farm?

Because that is not “education,” that is work. There may be sheep farms everywhere, but until you build one inside a *classroom*, under the direction of a *credentialed professional*, you have not engaged in that rarefied activity called *education*. Another way of saying this is that you can have ‘water, water everywhere’ but you are only allowed to drink if you have a tap.

Learning is woven into our being as humans, the “one truly universal character of human sociality is our symbolically constructed kinship relations”⁶, so how could we succumb to the ideology that we can only learn if we have a pre-approved outlet called Education?

No faculty of education in Canada will tell you that the word “education” didn’t show up in French until 1498, in English till 1530, and in Spanish not until 1632⁷. Universities like to believe that ‘education’ is a universal occurrence... like gravity. But with a bit of effort, we can discern how the parts of this molloch were assembled, and in what order they were put together. In 1792, a Cambridge tutor was the first teacher to grade a student paper, marking the point where “human thought succumbed to writing and writing succumbed to numerical evaluation”⁸. This marks the birth of the widespread European belief that knowledge is a subset of writing and that “learning can be sliced up into pieces.”⁹

And so it was that Europeans began to believe that children “evolve toward adulthood by acquiring the sort of intellect we expect of a good reader” (Postman, 1982: 46).

I do not mean to imply that prior to the development of literacy human beings lacked knowledge, in the sense that they were ignorant. Indeed there is evidence that a wealth of intelligent accomplishment existed before literacy... What I mean by suggesting that knowledge is a subset of writing is, rather, that the very idea of knowledge, the concept of knowledge “as such,” and hence the idea that human beings could lack, develop, transmit, and possess knowledge, may be entirely a literate construction. ...Perhaps most serious among these negative consequences of writing's ability to preserve knowledge is the illusion of progressive enlightenment that may come with the accumulation of texts. (De Castell, 1990: 24-5; 31-2)

Fossilize pieces of knowledge into texts. Pour texts into stu-

dents via literacy. Wait. Shake. And test to see what residue remains: give higher marks to students who regurgitate texts most accurately. Voila: Education.

And avoid legitimating oral knowledge; always require students to “back up” what they say with texts. Orality cannot be controlled and made scarce, it is used by everyone (most humans even learn their mother tongue without ever going to school — the horror!). Orality is too fluid and non-exclusive; orality should have little or no stature in education.

So the schools denigrated orality and instead used literacy as their main medium of expression and evaluation, and today, in settler society, cultural transmission has been almost completely expropriated and handed over to Education. Amongst my people, very little vernacular transfer of wisdom survives. The oral tradition is largely extinct. We can no longer figure out who our ‘elders’ are, let alone find one to apprentice with.

I imagine that in the old tribal days everyone must have sensed that people are born knowing how to be human, just as beavers are born knowing how to be beavers, and that learning is an aspect of normal human behavior — built in. So there wouldn’t have been any more concern about children learning than there would have been about them breathing or eating.¹⁰

— *First Nations Elder Wilfred Pelletier talking in 1974.*

The Accord on Indigenous Education

Now let’s return to the Accord written by Canada’s Deans of Education. The Deans devote a lot of ink (the entire first page) to defining the word “Indigenous”, and almost as much ink in describing how aware they are of the *dangers* inherent in defining the word “Indigenous.” Here’s how they put it:

Diversity also exists in relation to the problematic area of nomenclature. To name an Aboriginal person as “Aboriginal, Indigenous, First Nation, Indian, Métis, Native, North American Indian, or Inuit,” is to participate in a complex process of either self-identification or, as Chartrand (1991) puts it, “outside-naming.” We are very aware that this process is often fraught with interactional discord and can be either emancipating, painful, or both for Indigenous persons. (pg 3)

Although they claim to be “very aware” of the problems of “outside-naming” — they seem completely unaware of the need to name themselves. The Deans don’t devote any space at all to defining what makes them or our society non-Indigenous. Nor do they discuss why we in the dominant society refuse to face our

We are non-Indigenous because we don’t belong anywhere yet. Belonging has not soaked into our bones and myths. We still set our course by following the Empire’s markers.

non-Indigeneity, or why we show no interest in examining the factors that make us non-Indigenous. Isn’t that curious? After all, there’s no risk of “outside-naming” at all if we describe ourselves, is there? The Deans also don’t write anything describing what they

mean by non-Indigenous Education; but I tried to tackle that part in the preceding paragraphs, so let’s now turn our efforts to the thorny question that the Deans avoid: What makes me and my people non-Indigenous?

What makes us non-Indigenous?

It happened at a meeting between an Indian community in north-west British Columbia and some government officials. The officials claimed the land for the government. The natives were astonished by the claim. They couldn’t understand what these relative newcomers were talking about. Finally one of the elders put what was bothering them in the form of a question. “If this is your land,” he asked, “where are your stories?” (Chamberlin, J. E., 2003)

An Indigenous people are those who believe that they belong to a place; a non-Indigenous people are those who believe that places belong to them. I apologize if this is too blunt for my fellow Euro-Canadian readers, but an honest appraisal says that we non-Indigenous folks have little or no sense of long-term belonging to this land. Despite efforts to antique our pedigree, most of us have not lived here longer than three or four generations. We don’t stay in any one place for longer than about six years on average; and we buy and sell the land and lakes here like mad. We are non-Indigenous because we don’t belong anywhere yet. Belonging has not soaked into our bones and myths. We still set our course by

following the Empire's markers. As a result we have almost no stories that weave us into this landscape.

In fact, if you think about it, the whole concept of non-Indigenous peoples is a strange and new phenomenon in human history. The anthropologist Wade Davis says we are a “new and original culture that celebrates the individual at the expense of family and community — a stunning innovation in human affairs, the sociological equivalent of the splitting of the atom” (Davis 2002). This “historically specific social form” has “only existed for a short while — barely a fraction of humanity’s existence on earth”; and it represents a “rupture” with all previous social forms (Meiksins Wood, 3-7).

Renegade economist Karl Polanyi provided a simple checklist of what he called four “weird” ideas that mark us as a new and aberrant form of civilization:

- the idea that members of one species could ‘own’ bits of the earth’s surface;
- the idea of humans renting their bodies or minds to others (a.k.a. “wage-slavery”; and that this is something morally superior to outright owning the bodies of others — a.k.a. slavery);
- the idea that all value can be represented by different amounts of “coloured paper” (currency; a.k.a. money); and
- the invention of “huge fictitious bodies” called corporations¹¹.

If you contrast mature host civilizations, thousands of years old, with our juvenile 400 year-old Euro-Canadian society, you come away with the impression that we are kind of like ‘the lost boys’, a perpetually teenage civilization with the keys to dad’s car, burning rubber and doing donuts in the parking lot. “You cannot know who you are until you know where you are,” said Wendell Berry. By that measure, we have a lot of work to do....

Should Indigenous folks copy the non-Indigenous?

Back to the Accord on Indigenous Education: the Deans would like to see Indigenous identities, cultures and languages, values and ways of knowing “flourishing in all Canadian learning set-

tings.” Should host civilizations copy the non-Indigenous and put all their eggs in the Education basket?

The prudent answer is some eggs, yes. But not all.

The entire Accord on Indigenous Education is written from the point of view of the gatekeepers and their well-intentioned efforts to widen the doors and widen the perspective of Euro-Education, in order to lend some of their legitimacy to Indigenous issues and allow more Indigenous students to participate in credential-earning. As I said from the start, I think this is good and necessary. We shouldn't be naïve and think that Indigenous folks are going to be allowed to earn wages in our imported and dominant market economic system without fulfilling the required steps to become members of our trained and compliant workforces. (The revolution is not just round the corner. Yet.) The market economic system will likely continue to exert its stranglehold on our ways of life for some time to come, so it is only fair that First Nations, Inuit and Métis not be held in monetary poverty due to lack of Educational credentials.

So, yes, it makes sense for host civilizations to accept the offer from the Deans of more access to the Euro-Education process and credentials; that means increased wage-earning is not to be ignored. But I'd suggest that host civilizations should also keep a safety net, an insurance policy of their own cultural transmission processes maintained and reinvigorated outside the four walls of Education.

Here's Nunavut Inuit president Paul Quassa speaking in 2001:

“Almost all the schooling in Nunavut is in English, and it is all oriented towards skills needed for the wage economy, not for the land-based way of life. ...All the skills needed for the land-based economy — navigation, weather observation, understanding wildlife, outdoor safety — are not learned in the formal learning environment. We learn these things in our families and from our elders. We may not have as many of our young people graduating from formal schools as southern Canada does, but we have a lot more of our young people “graduating” from their learning with the elders, better equipped to travel across and live on the land.” (Quassa, 2001)

If oil dried up tomorrow and planes stopped flying, young

Inuit in Nunavut might still be a lot better equipped to deal with it than young folks in urban Canada.

Should non-Indigenous folks copy our Indigenous neighbours?

Yes. My people need to resuscitate our own forms of cultural transmission — outside the walls of schools. Following in the steps of the local food movement, and local renewable energy movement, we need a local culture movement. We non-Indigenous folks need to re-establish and reinvigorate our own diverse forms of wisdom development and cultural transmission within our families and communities. This will mean finding ways to steal back some of our time from wage-earning. It will also mean taking up John Ralston Saul's challenge of looking to "absorb the local culture into the way we think," rather than persisting in behaving as if our "real culture is that of the empire" (Saul, 2008: 230). Such a resuscitation might allow us to learn from and work hand-in-hand with local Indigenous peoples, whose non-institutional forms of cultural transmission have survived the enormous onslaught of our Education system via residential schools, suppression of language, and de-legitimization of their wisdom processes and elders.

This might start us on the path to truly belonging in this place, to this land. And maybe, in the long run, our neighbours from host civilizations might eventually honour us by saying, "Hey... you guys aren't so non-Indigenous anymore...."

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ <http://experience.congress2010.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Congress-Indigenous-Accord.pdf>
- ² Sangharakshita, *Precious Teachers: Indian Memoirs of an English Buddhist*, (London: Windhorse, 2008). p 40.
- ³ R.A. Shweder & E.J. Bourne, *Does the concept of the person vary cross-culturally?*, Essay from the book *Culture Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1984) pp194-195
- ⁴ Frank Darnell and Anton Hoem, *Taken to Extremes: Education in the Far North* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996), 254.
- ⁵ Ivan Illich, *In the Mirror of the Past: Lectures and Addresses 1978-1990* (New York: Marion Boyars, 1992), 104. David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation* (Concord, Ontario: Anansi Press, 1992), 71. In 1998 I surveyed all the major Canadian university faculties of education and I could not find a single Illich text on a graduate level reading list. See David Gabbard's *Silencing Ivan Illich: A Foucauldian Analysis of Intellectual Exclusion* (San Francisco: Austin and Winfield, 1993).
- ⁶ Marshall Sahlins, *The Western Illusion of Human Nature* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2008).
- ⁷ Madhu Suri Prakesh and Gustavo Esteva, *Escaping Education: Living as Learning within Grassroots Cultures* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 17.
- ⁸ Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Millennium and Utopia: a Study in the Background of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Harper Torchbacks, 1969) and Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1992), 13.
- ⁹ Illich in Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation* (Concord, Ontario: Anansi Press) 66.
- ¹⁰ Wilfred Pelletier, and Ted Poole, *No Foreign Land: The Biography of a North American Indian* (New York: Pantheon, 1973) 54.
- ¹¹ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, (Boston: Beacon Press Paperback 1957) 57, 71,130,178-9, 280.

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