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## **Bicultural teaching of helping approaches: integrating Native Indian and Western perspectives in a social work classroom**

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This paper examines a bicultural teaching experience in an isolated northern Canadian community where a Native and a non-Native instructor worked together to offer a social work methods course to a class of Native Indian students. An overview is presented of the particular course adaptations (content, preparation and delivery), along with discussion of the unique co-teaching issues that arose in this bicultural education experience.

Social work education in Canada has placed an increasing priority on the recruitment of Native Indian students in professional programmes at the community college, undergraduate and graduate levels. As a result, many community college and university social work programmes are involved with off-campus delivery of outreach courses in remote Indian communities.

Some preliminary work has already been done to develop our knowledge base for effective delivery of such programmes. In a study of Native Indian Master of Social Work students, Tate and Schwartz (1993) identified three factors associated with retention difficulties: the gap between their own cultural experience and the majority culture university setting; outside family and financial pressures; and faculty support issues. Macias (1989) found evidence among Native social work students of a strong ability to synthesize knowledge, but cautioned that superficial deficits of grammar and vocabulary may mask these abilities in conventional education programmes. Comparing the learning styles of Native and non-Native social work students, Elliot (1994) found greater variation within the groups than between them. DeMontigny (1992) argued that the cultural values of

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Native social work students are actually violated by the grading, competition, probing and doubt inherent in conventional Western approaches to social work education.

Preliminary work in this area has tended to focus only on the Native students themselves. Very little attention has yet been directed towards the process of instruction. This paper will describe the experiences and materials developed by two social work instructors, one Native Indian and one non-Native, delivering a social work methods course for a class of Aboriginal students in a small community in northern Canada.

The reader is cautioned that these experiences are not intended as a blueprint to be replicated intact in other Aboriginal communities. It is offered as a guideline for other instructors who may be considering co-teaching as an option in outreach programmes. In presenting this material, I have deliberately chosen to write in the first- rather than the third-person voice, because the perspective I offer has been developed from my own immediate teaching experiences. Co-teaching has had an unanticipated and profound impact on my understanding of my role as a teacher and a learner in Native outreach education. Through the sharing of anecdotes and specific materials developed for this course, I hope to convey some of the power and the challenge of that experience.

### **The instructors**

Two instructors were involved in this co-teaching endeavour: Dr Pam Colorado and myself. Dr Colorado, an Oneida Indian with a PhD in social work, is a powerful healer in the Native tradition, as well as an accomplished academic and practitioner in the Western school. I am a white male social worker and academic, with practice experience mostly in northern Canada. My research and teaching continue to focus on issues of rural and remote practice. Although we had been colleagues for several years and had each taught courses in the same Native outreach programmes at both the college and university level, Dr Colorado and I had never taught together in the classroom. Typically, we would be contracted to deliver specific courses within a sequence. Dr Colorado would be assigned courses dealing with Aboriginal issues, while non-Native instructors such as myself would be assigned conventional core course material.

### **The context**

The setting for this particular course was High Level, Alberta, Canada, a small community about 800 km north of Edmonton and 200 km south of the Northwest Territories border. In the late 1980s a Board of Chiefs of the High Level Tribal Council formed an Education and Training Committee to plan for on-site delivery of post-secondary courses in an effort to train local persons for service positions within the area. Grant MacEwan Community College, based in Edmonton, was selected as the institution to deliver an Aboriginal Social Work Programme. Following a year of

upgrading and personal development courses, 26 students began the Aboriginal Social Work Programme in January 1991. Two years later, 19 of those students had successfully completed the programme and graduated with their Social Work diploma (Pelech 1993).

### The course

The particular course that is the focus of this discussion is 'Social Work Practice Methods II', a required core course in the curriculum. As specified in the 'Course Outline':

The course will unite the social work/communication skills learned in Methods I with the process of help based on an ecological systems perspective. Attention will be given to the phases of work in the helping process.

Course content was organized according to three major topic areas:

- *Helping process* (Problem-solving Model: Engagement, Assessment, Planning, Interventions, Evaluation);
- *Theoretical concepts* (Ecology, Systems Theory, Cross-cultural Sensitivity);
- *Professional role* (Organizational Constraints, Service Networks, Accountability, Professional Growth).

The textbook used by Grant MacEwan Community College for their Methods II course sections in Edmonton was *Direct Social Work Practice: Theory and Skills*, by Hepworth and Larsen (1990). Final course grade was determined by the standard combination of: an Assessment and Case Plan from the field placement, a Case Summary and Evaluation, a taped Interview and Evaluation, a Final Examination, and Attendance and Participation.

### Adaptations

Several adaptations were made in the basic design, delivery, evaluation and grading aspects of this course in High Level, Alberta, to reflect a cross-cultural approach.

### Co-teaching

Dr Pam Colorado and I had originally been hired to teach one section each of the Methods II course. We decided to combine the sections and teach together, giving the students both a Native and a Western perspective at the same time in the classroom. Material presented by one instructor could be assessed and critiqued by the other.

The students responded very well to this approach. Having Dr Colorado and me as models for the dialogue between the Native mind and the Western mind encouraged students to participate in the work.

They watched us sort out differences and similarities between our two approaches—a process which was sometimes painful, and sometimes very funny—in an atmosphere of trust and support.

Students told us they had previously been left to do this integration on their own. Native content had been presented by Native resource people when possible; and Western content had usually been presented by non-Native instructors. Students described for us how they had learned to consciously 'flip' between their Indian mind and their Western mind. The students had become quite adept at producing what was needed to pass a course from either perspective. Because the two minds seldom came together in the classroom, however, students often felt 'split'. The result was a lack of confidence in gaining proficiency in either system. Having students watch and then participate as their instructors explored these connections in the classroom was a profound learning experience for them and for us.

Each day began in a ceremonial manner with a circle for smudge (cleansing of the head and heart with smoke from burning sweetgrass), prayer and affirmations. For the first few days, Dr Colorado led the ceremonies and taught about the circle, the directions and respect for one another. Later, students assumed the various functions in the circle. In many ways, this tradition prepared us for our day's work. We dealt with many issues in the circle: the unfinished business from the previous day; overnight insights and reflections on our work; personal accounts of the fear, the pain and the humour associated with our work; and affirmations of the importance of our work and the value of one another. Gratitude was often expressed for the progress we were making and appeals were made for guidance with the tasks ahead. When we were ready, we began our academic work. On most days the opening ceremony lasted about half an hour; some days much more time was needed.

### Course content

As described earlier, the 'Course Outline' for Methods II had put forward three major areas of focus: Helping process, Theoretical concepts and Professional role. Important adaptations were necessary in each of these areas:

- **Helping process:** According to the Outline, the Helping process was to be presented as discrete stages in a problem-solving model. As the current mainstream Western social work approach, this was clearly something the students had to master. Yet there was no room here for consideration of a traditional approach to helping and healing. Assessing the 614-page text by Hepworth and Larsen (1990) as too long and intricate for a class of college-level students (most of whom did not have English as their first language), we opted instead for Garvin and Seabury's (1984) *Interpersonal Practice in Social Work* as a more concise and approachable treatment of the problem-solving stages. This created space for Dr Colorado to present her own material on Native approaches to helping.

Over a period of many years between the two cultures, Dr Colorado had identified a set of dynamics underlying Native interviewing which she shared with the students. These dynamics included components such as the use of history as a tool, relations and relatedness, a collapsed sense of time and space, and a striving for balance and harmony. Dr Colorado also presented her model of the process of traditional counselling (Colorado 1989, 1993a, b).

● **Theoretical concepts:** The course outline referred to 'an ecological systems perspective' as the overall theoretical framework for this Methods II course. Here was an obvious cultural assumption underlying the course content. What did the Western scientific tradition have to teach Aboriginal people about an ecological systems perspective? While the Western mind is dealing conceptually with whole systems thinking, Aboriginal communities around the world have been living holistically.

We determined for this course that our theoretical focus would require examination of key concepts from both systems, with an emphasis on the bridges or connections between the two. We discovered, for example, that replacing the labels 'Assessment, Implementation, Termination and Evaluation' with 'Vision and Transformation' served to connect the problem-solving process more closely with local conditions and traditional approaches to helping. Discussion of traditional concepts such as the Good Mind, Stream of Life and the Still Quiet Place helped us explore the different approach to time, relations and spirituality underlying the two helping models.

● **Professional role:** Material in this section of the course typically dealt with professional development, accountability and interaction with other service providers. For the group in High Level, we determined to focus on personal issues involving the integration of Western and Native helping approaches within the individual Aboriginal social worker. What resources could support the individual working between both worlds? Students explored resources such as ceremonial development, elders as guides, dreams, gifts, generations and relations.

#### Course evaluation

Since the course content and teaching approach were new to all of us, instructors and students alike, there was a need for immediate feedback on each section of material. The usual course evaluation conducted during the last class would not be adequate here. Students were given time to answer these questions following each section of course material:

- Will this be useful for me in my community?
- What do I like most about this material?
- What do I find most difficult or objectionable about the material?
- Can I express these ideas in more useful words?

### Grades and assignments

It was impossible to determine appropriate graded assignments prior to the commencement of this course. Simple imposition of the same assignments used in Edmonton would have undermined much of the special focus of the learning experience (Zapf 1993a). Due dates, weightings and content of assignments were negotiated between the instructors, students and coordinator early in the term to provide the best fit between student needs and programme requirements. Following are two examples of the special graded assignments developed within the context of this course. Students worked in small groups on one particular project with consultation available from three resource persons, Dr Colorado, an elder and myself:

#### Assignment

Karen Goodearth is a 10-year-old Native girl who was apprehended by Social Services when she was 8 months old. At that time, her parents had a severe drinking problem and were unable to care for Karen.

Once in the system, Karen went through a series of foster placements until she was 4 years old. Then she was placed with Jim and Julia Roberts who live in a non-Native community 50 miles from the Reserve. Karen has lived with the Roberts family for the past six years. She is doing well in Grade 5 at the local school and has a group of friends in town.

Jim and Julia Roberts, non-Natives themselves, have never encouraged any involvement for Karen with Native culture. They have never attempted to locate Karen's natural parents. Things have gone so well with Karen in their home that they have been talking about possible adoption. Social Services then located Karen's natural parents: Orville and Mary Goodearth.

Now ten years older and having followed a sober lifestyle for four years since they went to Poundmaker's Lodge, the Goodearths want Karen back with them. They went to court to ask for her return to their home.

The court has just ordered Karen to be returned to her parents on the Reserve. The Roberts are very upset because they think this is unfair and wrong for Karen. The Goodearths are very pleased but a bit scared about getting to know their daughter again after ten years. Karen is curious about her parents but she is very afraid to move and does not want to leave the Roberts family or her friends.

*The Court has ordered a three-month transition period during which you, as the social worker, will be responsible to prepare everyone for the move.*

*Suggest how you might use a Native approach for your interviews with:*

- (a) Jim and Julia Roberts
- (b) Karen Goodearth
- (c) Orville and Mary Goodearth.

*Suggest how you might use a Western approach for your interviews with:*

- (a) Jim and Julia Roberts
- (b) Karen Goodearth
- (c) Orville and Mary Goodearth.

*Which of the two approaches (or what combination) would you choose to use for this case? Explain your answer. Explain how a worker might be limited if he/she had only one approach.*

*Explain how you as a social worker might find the strength to develop both approaches for your work.*

The Final Examination presented students with eight questions, four based on a Western approach and four based on a Native approach. Students selected any six to answer. This meant that a student could emphasize either approach (4 + 2) or treat them equally (3 + 3) on the exam:

*Final examination*

Select any six from the following eight questions:

1. Why do we say that an assessment is never completed?
2. Explain the difference between an applicant and a client. Give an example of each.
3. Explain how monitoring and evaluation are important for both the client and the worker.
4. Explain the difference between a target system and an action system. Suggest an example of each.
5. Explain the steps of the Native counselling process.
6. Explain the dynamics of the Native counselling process.
7. How can you keep yourself strong as a Native social worker?
8. Explain how you might tell whether or not a traditional counselling process is good.

### Examples of the process

To illustrate the excitement and impact of co-teaching with a Native instructor, I will present some brief scenarios from the Methods II course in High Level (Zapf 1993b). During the course, Dr Pam Colorado asked her students and colleagues to call her by her Indian name, Apela; to honour that request, I have used her Indian name in the following material.

The first scenario depicts the point at which students and instructors fully realized that we were committing ourselves to a risky, new two-way process of learning:

Early in the course, Apela spent an entire half-day with the students exploring the impact of internalized colonization. I believe she reviewed the history and process of colonization as background, then guided the students through experiential exercises to learn about the ongoing internalized thought processes that continue the victimization by forcing them to devalue themselves. Students reached for their own pain and anger at this devastating legacy on their communities, their families and their own identity.

I say that 'I believe' this is what happened because I was not there. This experiential component, the intense grief and anger that has to be recognized and confronted, is something that Apela has worked on for many years in her own development. She could share her own struggle with Native students and guide them into the process, but she did not feel comfortable doing this with a non-Native present. I respected her judgement and stayed away.

The next morning was extremely difficult. The experience of the previous day had been profound. Many students had spent the night agonizing over the buried issues that had now been made conscious. It was not enough that I was the only non-Native in the room; I was now a white male authority figure, an easy target. Many students would have no eye contact with me. Some refused to join the circle if I was there. Some students gave voice to their anger, questioning my motives and my right to be there at all.

This was very hard to take. I felt betrayed and resentful that I was being set up as a target. What had happened to our nice little class? With Apela's support, I moved past my initial defensive reactions. I could see that this was not a personal attack; the students needed a target for their new rage. How I would react would be crucial for the future of our work together. If I retreated to the safety of the instructor-student relationship or the trite defence that I had not personally harmed anyone, I would be perpetuating the colonial process. They were experiencing and experimenting with powerful new and frightening feelings, looking at some of the real issues between us. How could I respond at the same level?

I acknowledged my initial defensive feelings. I told them that the colonial process had been internalized by the colonizers, as well as the victims. I had much to unlearn

and relearn about my past and my assumptions. I shared what I had discovered about my influences, from early images of Tonto and Injun Joe through to the Native communities where I had worked in the Yukon.

This was a slow and very difficult sharing process, with hesitation and tears on both sides. I was involved with this class, with *our* process, with an immediacy that I had never experienced through prepared lectures, lab exercises or class discussion. This had moved beyond an instructor-student relationship. We were risking and listening, learning about each other's task. For them, the dominant feeling to own was anger; for me, it was guilt. Enough trust had been established that we allowed ourselves to be each other's targets.

We came to a realization, probably the most powerful and crucial insight to come out of the entire course. *If their anger forced them to shut me out and dismiss me, or if my guilt sent me back to the city where I could comfortably ignore the issue, then we would waste a special opportunity to build a bridge that we both needed.* We agreed to stay with the struggle with our new understanding of the task undertaken by the other and the feelings involved. From this point on, the learning was indeed a two-way process.

The relationship between instructor and student changes profoundly when both are understood as teacher and learner with parallel tasks. As an extreme example, consider in this scenario how the role of one particular student changed in the second methods course, as well as my role in relation to her:

Prior to the first methods course, I had been told that one of the women in the class was older than the others. She was a grandmother. I was told that she was quiet but determined, someone who would work hard to complete the programme, but would not say much in class and could have trouble with reading and the written work. As explained earlier, of course, I found these 'deficits' because I was looking for them. My limitations prevented me from seeing this woman's strengths and learning from her in that first course.

Early in the Methods II course, Apela told me that she sensed a great power from this student. She suggested that the woman's perspective as an elder and a grandmother could be very helpful for us and for the whole class. Apela thought we should approach her in a traditional way to ask for her help with our work.

I did not know how to do this, but Apela helped me. She would bring tobacco and I was to bring a scarf. We would offer these gifts to the elder in the circle and ask for her help.

This plan frightened me, on many levels. In my system, it is a definite taboo for an instructor to offer a gift to a student who is still to be graded, especially in front of other students. What if the students think I have selected a favourite? What if someone appeals? I have enough trouble choosing a birthday gift for my own grandmother, let alone select a scarf for someone I did not really know. What if I make a bad selection? What if I offend her? What if she thinks I am silly, or making fun of her?

Apela explained the gifts to me in terms of balance, an exchange for the help we were requesting. She taught me of the importance of cloth and the connections with the earth and with dancing. Rather than some designer, silk creation, I should seek a cotton scarf with a simple design. But it was important that I pick it out.

Finally, the moment came. Apela invited the woman and me into the circle. I had the scarf but I was still very nervous that I would make some great mistake and either offend her or look foolish, or both. Do I enter the circle first, or do I wait and follow her? Do women enter before men? Does an elder enter last? Once inside, do we sit? Do I sit first, or do I wait for her? Will she expect me to speak first, or do I wait for her? There were a million ways I could screw this up in front of everybody.

Once we sat and this grandmother held my hand, all of these fears disappeared. I relaxed, feeling not only comfortable, but very secure with her. She knew I was trying my best to approach her in a respectful way and that we really wanted and needed her help. She agreed to help us with our work in the class

This woman became an important leader and resource person for the rest of the course. For example, the students at one point were working in small groups developing assessments and work plans for clients from case studies. The grandmother, Apela and I moved from group to group offering advice and answering questions from our own experiences and perspectives.

Throughout this process, I became increasingly aware of how little I really knew about traditional Native helping approaches. The next scenario offers a glimpse of my learning process in this regard:

We began to role-play interviews, much as the class had done in the previous methods course. The major difference now was that Apela would conduct an interview from a traditional Indian approach, while I would use a Western approach. Students could watch and comment on either approach, or get involved and participate with either model.

I watched Apela conduct interviews with very little verbal exchange, sometimes complete silence. I began to understand how limited was my understanding of this process. I had learned and practised the conventional, simplistic list of 'tips for interviewing Natives', such things as: limited eye contact, comfort with silence, non-intrusiveness, avoidance of direct questions. But I was seeing something more here. Apela was not just avoiding or delaying dialogue; she and her client were waiting for something. As she explained later, she was 'waiting for the spirit to show itself'.

To help me understand, she gave me an image. In her language, the *Gilai* is that deep pool at the top of a waterfall where the tired salmon struggling upstream can find peace in the calm water full of nutrients before resuming their trek. When two people reach that level of peace, speaking from the *Gilai*, a profound connection is possible. Until they are there, it may be wise to wait or do something else with the person.

That image of the *Gilai* has remained with and haunted me. Often as I prepare now for meetings and interviews, even scheduled time with family, I realize how my culture places the clock ahead of readiness. I begin when it is time to begin, regardless of my own inner state. I try to begin 'where the client is at' emotionally, intellectually and socially, yet I would seldom consider the clients peace or how to facilitate that, or wait for it with trust that it will come. Students in this course had several good laughs as they saw me struggle to set aside my Western mind and not view the schedule as paramount. It is difficult for me to wait and trust; my helping models focus on action.

Through these immediate encounters with Native helping approaches, I came to see how clearly my system has removed the spirit from the helping process. I operate on a linear time system with a past that has a strong influence on the present. My work involves planned change for the future, mobilizing resources in the person and environment to change things towards some desired goal. As I learned more about a circular view of time from Apela and the Native students, I could begin to sense the importance of ancestors and future generations in the Native helping process. My system trumpets an ecological approach to social and physical environments, but we want our spirits linear. A more circular notion of time allows for spirits to be available for the helping process.

Obviously, I am in no position to write with authority about Native spirituality. I cannot explain how it works or how to use it. Even my words reflect the limitations of my Western approach as I have isolated spirituality

as some sort of special technique. All I can say is that I was privileged to be present when Native helpers were effectively using forces that are not well known or understood in my system. Once more, I became aware of limitations in the models I teach as generic and holistic. The last scenario is one example of how we were able to explore this sensitive area in the atmosphere of trust we had created together:

A candle was lit in the centre of the circle. As one of the students spoke from her heart on a very difficult issue, the flame began to behave very strangely and the smoke suddenly shifted direction dramatically. The student recognized this as the spiritual presence of a relative in the circle.

After we had left the circle, I told the students I had something to share with them that might illustrate some dangers of the Western approach to knowing. I cautioned them that they might be disturbed by what I was about to do, that I would deliberately push my Western mind to an ugly extreme. They agreed and I began.

I told them that I could not accept all this hocus-pocus about the presence of a spirit in the circle based on one observation with so many uncontrolled variables. Next time we would need several candles to ensure that the effect was not due to some quirk or defect in the wick. We would need to tape all the windows and doors to control draughts. Then the student would have to call on the spirit at randomly selected times. If this was done and the spirit still appeared on demand, then I might be convinced.

Initial suspicion and anger soon turned to laughter. Obviously, my approach would prevent me from ever again experiencing the presence I had encountered in that circle. My Western mind and empirical approach to knowledge building fails me in some situations.

### Conclusion

I have attempted to share the vision and selected materials developed for a social work methods course for Aboriginal students co-taught by a Native and a non-Native instructor. As Dr Pam Colorado later wrote (1993a: 67):

Our small classroom in High Level represented the convergence of Western linear thought and its hierarchical pedagogical form with the holistic, processual knowledge system of the global indigenous family. Kim and I were to stand between these two historically antagonistic ways of thinking! . . . The High Level class challenged us to integrate the social work perspective within a Native context. It gave us the opportunity to try to merge the Western mind with the nature-based mind of Native Americans. We knew that these divergent thinking patterns have kept Native and Western people separated, from their first moment of contact until today. Thus, this meeting of minds in our small northern classroom represented a microcosm of the larger global struggle.

The partnership we developed demanded a tremendous commitment of time and sharing as we worked to develop a relationship of trust that would enable us to model for the class the struggles involved in building connections between our two belief systems. We have both been influenced in our writing and teaching within our own traditions. I encourage others to try this co-teaching approach, and record their experiences, so that we continue to develop a knowledge base for connections between the two systems.

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