

## Ways of Learning: Indigenous Approaches to Knowledge: Valid Methodologies in Education

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Knowledge is inherent in all things. The world is a library . . .  
Chief Luther Standing Bear, Oglala Lakota (Sioux)

A friend, whom I had not seen for some time, recently asked me what I had been doing over the last several months. I replied, 'I have just spent the past year in the most incredible headspace.' This elicited an excited curiosity from my friend to hear more and I began to explain. At fifty-six years of age I had made the decision to return to academic life as a student and pursue a degree in Australian Indigenous Studies. This had been suggested and encouraged by my Aboriginal sister, Jackie Huggins, and so, with her guidance I applied and was accepted to attend the University of Queensland within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (ATSIS) Unit of the Arts Faculty. It was a major step for me, for although I had been presenting lectures and workshops on aspects of traditional and contemporary Native American culture in the educational and public arenas for a decade, I had not been on the student side of the lectern for 40 years. In the first few weeks of semester one the impact of my decision was almost overwhelming. I had completed secondary school in Canada, being the first person in my family to achieve that and now here I was going to university, another first in my family. What a responsibility and challenge!

Everything was so different, the system and its expectations of students, the approaches to study, the need to be computer literate, even academic life itself. Could I, a man of First Nations ancestry in the autumn of his life, who had been learning and living the traditional ways and holistic values of his people, rise to the challenge of entering into a totally cerebral space of being?

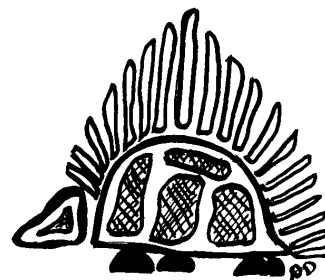
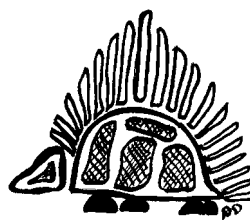
Well, I did. With the support of the teaching and administrative staff of the ATSIS Unit I immersed myself into the processes, adjusting my ways of learning and knowing to the ontology and paradigms of academia. (See, I am even using words that I had not used before.) The courses I had chosen were interesting, stimulating and thought-provoking. I learned things about the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island cultures and issues that I had not known. Some areas even pushed me to contradict the boundaries of accepted concepts and stereotypes of Aboriginality on many levels that could only come from my own experiences. I had risen like a trout to the stimulus of a shadfly on the surface of a rock pool, seized the offering, consumed it and was looking for more. When the semester ended with exams written and all my assignments completed, marked and returned, I discovered that *I had become a student* to the levels of expectation of the system. In fact, I had achieved a standard I had not even considered. I also discovered that this was just the beginning of a whole new chapter in my book of life.

With the advent of the second semester, the courses I had enrolled in began. I found that having just gotten my thought processes into the

academic mode of the first semester, I now had to return to alternative Indigenous approaches to knowledge. It was using the right brain genius in accessing inner knowing and applying that to left-brain analysis. Indigenous Approaches to Knowledge; here was a 'feast' to be relished. The old trout in the rock pool knew the shadflies were hatching and he was hungry. But what about the younger swimmers in this pool of learning, would they too rise, consume, and thus become nourished? By the fourth week of the semester I observed that these approaches to learning from an Indigenous point of view, applied within the parameters of academic format, were challenging most of the students. These students' reactions showed that the effects of the constructed methods of learning, paternalism and bias still being used from past formats and theories were entrenched within the larger university system. Yet most had a desire, some a true yearning, for a more encompassing methodological approach to the 'truth of knowledge', a want not to suppress or dismiss the subject of Indigenous Approaches to Knowledge before understanding and perhaps even accepting it. Engagement at different levels was being manifested, especially emotionally and spiritually. This was most notable in the triad discussions and group participation sessions held in all of the courses. I began to see a change in these students' perceptions of contemplation, seeing and learning through what was termed 'deep listening', instead of just reading. Letting the mind access spirit and feeling, not just thought, allowed a recall of life experiences and recognition of the actual knowledge they had gained through those experiences. At this point most verbal response came from the young men, showing a desire to be at one on a very personal level with the natural world in order to seek some understanding of the supernatural world. The young women were less vocal and seemed to be sitting in a place of introspective or reflective silence. Some questions arose through my own contemplation. Was there a need to find a place of belonging, a place of being, a real place? Are males rejecting the social expectations of their identities as constructed by those expectations? Were they becoming more willing to vocalize this? Is the complexity of rationalization for justification necessary when simple truth may be all that is required? I recalled some of the

teachings and symbolism of the Eagle in my own cultural traditions, those of farsighted vision, of striving to attain the highest principles of personal truth, of honoring them, and the affirmation given when the presence of the Eagle is seen or felt.

For me the pathways of the three courses, Torres Strait Islander Studies, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Approaches to Knowledge, and Aboriginal and Islander Australia were unfolding, not unlike the painting given to us in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Approaches to Knowledge, into a colorful, visual dialogue of knowledge, place, and spirit, which in turn facilitated access to further insight, knowing, and understanding. I was beginning to comprehend these aspects in relation to my decision to come to the university, to study and participate, with all allusions to the past, the present, and the future happening at once. It was becoming evident that these Indigenous approaches to knowledge are much more provocative in enhancing and expanding creative learning than just the linear paradigms of the structured academic processes found in a 'humancentric' world. With the more holistic approaches to acquiring knowledge that have been used for millennia by Aboriginal peoples worldwide, it is obvious that learning unfolds more comprehensively if you take the time to listen deeply. As we are shown a way to knowing, another unfolds like petals on a flower, like flowers on a plant. There are many petals, many flowers, many plants, each with its own knowledge. They in turn grow from the earth and its knowledge,



which is in turn nourished by the elements, recycled life and all their inherent knowledge. Thus through these cycles of life and learning, knowledge becomes encoded within each and every thing. Learning is part of the process not only in acquiring new knowledge, but also in accessing that encoded or stored knowledge. Every student in these classes was also learning their relationship and kinship to all the 'worlds' of their natural, supernatural, personal, social, and academic environments, and how to engage in a dialogue with each of them. They were recognising that with acquiring knowledge comes the responsibility to respect and honour whichever source that knowledge comes from. If these courses imbued students with nothing more than this, they have succeeded in educating them.

All of the students, myself included, felt that the most powerful times in these classes were when we were allowed to engage in immersive learning. This might be in cultural sharing with Elders or members of Indigenous communities, hearing their experiences, music, song, dance, storytelling, or just sitting outside in discussion groups, surrounded by the natural environment and all that it teaches us. Sharing on a social, personal level is the only true way to understanding and communication. What became evident for all of us is that anyone given the responsibility of making decisions affecting lives should first experience at least some aspects of those lives. Social justice is honour and respect for differences, not similarities.

This first year of study has truly been a 're-awakening' for me. Not only have I been able to use my own cultural knowledge and approaches to learning, but I have learned additional methods from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island cultures through the courses I have taken, formatting these within the established processes of academic analysis and expression. I have been expanded on so many levels and I have been inspired, and encouraged, to go further with my studies, perhaps even to a PhD. For these opportunities and gifts I am grateful.

When we touch the Earth and Sky we are reminded that all things, all creatures, indeed all

life, share the same source. We are part of that Oneness. We are all relations. This is the Sacred Law. Being in harmony, learning, honouring, knowing, seeing, hearing, communicating, loving, teaching, living, working, and sharing in gratitude, with Mother Earth, her diverse and wondrous life-forms, and each other is a Way of Life. It is the original way as lived and kept by Indigenous or First Nations people worldwide. It is the complex Science of Being, expressed through common sense application that has currency across all the sciences (hard and soft) and knowledge processes. It uses holistic, natural structures of learning to discover these realities through interaction rather than reaction. Thus learning becomes immersive and self-assessing, emphasising respect throughout the process of acquiring knowledge, utilising it, and sharing it. The Circle of Life encompasses the physical, mental, spiritual and emotional. True knowledge is only acquired by the use of all of these four elements and this is the Indigenous approach to knowledge. Touch it, taste it, smell it, see it, hear it, feel it, love it, and then live it!

Akita mani yo. Hau mitakuye oyasin. Observe all things as you walk. All my relations.  
Oglesa .. Red Shirt

**Michael Red Shirt** has a Lakota, Siksika, Russian and Italian heritage and resides in Brisbane. He is a Traditional Faith Keeper, Lecturer, Teacher, and Storyteller. Michael has acted as a public and keynote speaker throughout the world in both the public and private sectors. Michael is currently studying at the University of Queensland in Education and Indigenous Studies. □

