Transcending Boundaries: An Aboriginal Woman’s Perspective on the Development of Meaningful Educational Opportunities and Online Learning

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Abstract

This paper serves as a personal reflection documenting my own perspectives on meaningful educational experiences for Aboriginal learners, by drawing on my educational journey as a graduate student. It begins by sharing a reflection of my first experience within an online graduate course that included a substantial amount of content exploring Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations in Canada. This reflection documents how the online course has shaped my own development as an Aboriginal scholar, and positions the online learning environment as a culturally safe space for engaging in controversial topics. This discussion involves looking at education within a historical context, reflecting on the present struggles involved in securing culturally safe spaces for Aboriginal students, and looking towards a vision for the future that promotes cross-cultural dialogue for the benefit of all learners. By drawing on my online course, this paper opens some conversation on meaningful educational experiences for Aboriginal learners.

Introduction

She:kon, Jennifer Brant Ionkiats. Kenhté:ke nitewaké:non tanon Kanien’kehá:ka ni’ ni:’i. Wakeniáhton ó:ni. (Hello, my name is Jennifer Brant. I am from the Mohawk Nation and have family ties to Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory and Six Nations of the Grand River Territory). In honour of Aboriginal ways of contextualizing knowledge, it is important that I begin by introducing myself in my Mohawk language and sharing a bit about my own story to position myself within my writing. In my tradition, as I have come to understand it, this is about honouring my ancestors who support me throughout my learning journey. It is also about relationship building and connecting with others whose path I cross. My previous research endeavour, for my Master of Education thesis, focused on the barriers that Aboriginal women face in access to, and success within, university institutions. Given the nature of my MEd research, it was important that I located myself within the research to build rapport and gain connectivity with the Aboriginal community and the readers of my research. Anderson (2000) writes about the importance of self-locating, especially when writing about Aboriginal women
who have been historically objectified and over-scrutinized through colonial or outsider research. As Anderson explains, “too often in the past, Native peoples have been misrepresented and appropriated on the page by outsiders” (p. 40). My positionality within the research stemmed from my own experiences as an Aboriginal woman and mother of two young children. My work was closely tied to my personal experiences of balancing the above roles, along with my role as a student. My success in university was, and continues to be, dependent on a myriad of support services that are not easily accessible, and often leave Aboriginal women in vulnerable positions atypical of the average university student (Kenny, 2006; Native Women’s Association of Canada [NWAC], 2009). Examples of these support services that were identified as limited and unfeasible in my MEd research include: childcare, housing, funding, and culturally relevant student services (Brant, 2012).

Because of my own lived experiences, I have a deeper understanding, an insider perspective, of many of the struggles and triumphs of Aboriginal women in education. For example, I can relate to other Aboriginal women who are resiliently balancing their roles and responsibilities as mothers, community members, and students often “singlehandedly and in situations of poverty” (NWAC, 2009). Not only has this understanding strengthened my MEd research, but it has also provided me with a meaningful educational opportunity, as my personal ties have allowed for a deeper connection with the women who participated in my study and shared their own narratives to inform and inspire educational change. My position, then, on meaningful educational experiences for Aboriginal learners can be understood as stemming from my research study, as well as my own perspectives, understandings, and lived experiences.

This paper is a personal reflection on how an online graduate course furthered my development as a scholar, and prompted a discussion that positions online learning as a meaningful educational opportunity for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners. The course required me to write about the meaning or purpose of education, by drawing on my experience in the course, and our engagement with the assigned readings. As a Yakonkwehón:we (Mohawk woman), I have a unique perspective on both the online learning engagement, and the meaning or purpose of education that stems from personal experience. Moreover, offering such a reflection encompasses a significant component of my development as a scholar, as it moves me to think deeper about my own research endeavours in relation to my experience as both a Yakonkwehón:we and a doctoral student.
The following discussion begins by sharing a reflection of my own experience within an online graduate course that included a substantial amount of content exploring Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations in Canada. This reflection documents how the online course has shaped my own development as a Yakonkwehón:we scholar, and positions the online learning environment as a culturally safe space for engaging in controversial topics. I then draw on the work of several Aboriginal scholars to present my own perspective on meaningful educational opportunities and future educational aspirations for Aboriginal peoples.

Transcending Boundaries: Reflecting on my First Experience in an Online Course

As part of my course requirements for my doctoral studies program, I enrolled in the aforementioned online course. While I describe this course as my first experience in an online learning environment, it could more appropriately be described as a pivotal time in my development as a scholar. The course forced me to move out of my comfort zone, through the process of mandatory postings that offer a critical reflection to the required readings. While I have written critical reflections of required readings in the past, the experience of doing so in an online forum was new to me. Thus, it was my first experience sharing my reflections with all of my classmates and responding through interactive dialogue. This was a unique and rewarding experience, as I could be more generally described as a quiet student who seldom participates in class discussion through oral contributions. The course was set up in such a way that I simply could not remain a silent observer. Rather, we were required to participate by engaging with the online dialogue through weekly postings and reflective responses to the postings of our peers.

While I describe my experience in this course as one that forced me to move out of my comfort zone, I recognize this as a necessary element in my scholarly development. The online conversations served as a safe space for my participation for three reasons. First, I am more confident expressing myself in writing. Although the oral traditions of Aboriginal peoples may be well known, the hesitancy of some Aboriginal students to speak up in class must be understood in the context of colonization and how it has “crept into educational practices” (Dumbrill and Rice-Green, 2007, p. 111). My own experience of education was one in which I was the most quiet student in the class. Even though I had something to say, I lacked the confidence to raise my hand and simply participate in class discussions. Dumbrill and Rice-Green (2007) outline the importance of “understanding the relationship between power and
knowledge and on recognizing that colonization has caused, and continues to cause, a divide between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners” (p. 104). I still felt this divide in the online course, especially so with the material that dealt with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relationships. Through the mandatory postings, however, I found that I am more confident expressing myself, and engaging in critical dialogue through writing. Second, the nature of the online conversations allowed me the time I needed to reflect so that I could respond in ways that were both respectful and critically engaging. In this space I knew I would not be shut down, rather I could clearly articulate my view points, and respond to others. Dialogue that may be described as politically and culturally charged had time to be diffused in a way that it may not have in a face-to-face classroom discussion. Finally, the online environment served as a safe space, because my participation did not involve the usual anxiety I experience when I contribute within a classroom environment. This is an anxiety that I understand to be attributed to the ongoing nature of colonization within mainstream educational institutions (Dumbrill & Rice-Green, 2007; Hampton, 1995; Kanu, 2011; Kovach, 2009). It has also become part of my struggle to find balance in two worlds by overcoming cultural shame and strengthening my own cultural identity. This experience has allowed me to move beyond feelings of shame and anxiety resulting from colonial trauma and ongoing exposure to a curriculum that can be hostile to Aboriginal learners (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP], 1996), by acquiring the skills to clearly articulate my perspectives and understandings as a Yakonkwehón:we.

My engagement within this course has served as a transition period by contributing to my developing communication skills, because I was able to find my voice and gain the confidence to participate. Written feedback from my classmates also contributed to my own process of becoming more confident with self-expression in the academic context. This is because the interactive nature of the online discussion allowed us to transcend the boundaries of the divide that exists between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners (Dumbrill & Rice-Green), as we were able to gain new insights and infuse academic literature into our responses. I was able to witness ‘aha’ moments from classmates, as we educated one another about Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relationships. These are skills that I will be able to extend as I gain more experience expressing myself in classroom environments and at academic conferences.

My participation in the ongoing conversation of the course has also assisted me in articulating my views on areas that are not easily acknowledged or understood, and are often
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devalued in the educational milieu. Specifically, I am referring to the myriad of issues associated with Aboriginal education and Aboriginal realities. In many of the university courses I completed from undergraduate to graduate studies, I continuously struggled with articulating my worldview or perspective on particular issues that range from my own lived experience as a Yakonkwehón:we, to global issues that transcend territorial and national boundaries, such as land claim disputes or human rights issues. There have been moments in university classes when I have remained silent when such issues are discussed, and others when I have been centered out to offer my opinion on a current issue, such as a treaty or land claim dispute that has been the latest media topic. When I am not entirely knowledgeable about a specific Aboriginal issue or cannot find the correct terminology to offer my own insights, I am left to feel inadequate or somehow not Aboriginal enough. Anderson (2000) writes about these experiences:

How many of us have sat as the lone Aboriginal student in a classroom, embarrassed by the demands placed on us by instructors and students to field all the inquiries about Indians? Although I think it is good to give people a voice, this questioning (once again) reduces the complexity of our experiences as individuals and as peoples. (p. 22)

Anderson continues by sharing a university experience that prompted her to search out her own identity and “discover what it meant to be a Native person” (p. 25). She described this journey as one in which she had to “continually work through lots of doubts, notions and stereotypes that challenge [her] legitimacy as an Aboriginal person” (p. 25). Anderson (2000) continues by pointing out:

Ironically, we have gone from trying hard NOT to be Native, to trying hard TO be Native. Even though I realize this is just two sides of the same cultural genocide coin, the pressures are so insidious that I still have moments where I feel that I do not measure up to some kind of standard of Indianness. (p.25)

Reflecting on classroom experiences when I have felt silenced or pressured to become the spokesperson for such queries, I am reminded that I can only speak from my own lived experiences and realities as a Mohawk woman (Monture-Angus, 1995). I am well aware that it is not my place to speak about all Aboriginal issues. I am, however, positioned within a colonial
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institution and will inevitably continue to face cross-cultural conflicts associated with a colonizing curriculum that reinforces the dominance of Western knowledge (Dumbrill and Rice-Green, 2007). Despite the distinctiveness of Aboriginal nations across Canada, many of us share a common experience of education as a colonizing force. As Battiste, Bell, and Findlay (2002) express:

For those of us who have been educated in colonial, Eurocentric environments and had our Aboriginal identities revised or our white armour polished, we have needed to unpack Eurocentric processes to reveal the cognitive assimilative regime that has done such damage and what can be done effectively to change it. (p. 88)

This has indeed been my experience, and remains a significant obstacle as I struggle with the tension of securing my educational endeavours through a decolonizing journey. I define my decolonizing journey as one in which I have come to understand the ways in which colonization has suppressed Aboriginal cultures, languages, traditions, and ways of being, and have had the opportunity to reclaim these components of my identity and infuse them into my research and educational work. Coming to understand the ways in which I have been silenced in mainstream education (Monture-Angus, 1995), and being able to unpack these processes through my doctoral studies, especially within the comfort of an online engagement, has furthered my ability to effectively self-express in light of cross-cultural conflict. For example, simply being exposed to the literature that explains how other scholars have dealt with similar educational conflict (Anderson, 2000; Monture-Angus, 1995), can provide me with strategies to transcend these boundaries in their own educational experience. Through the online course, I had the opportunity to cite these scholars in my written reflections, so that my non-Aboriginal classmates could be exposed to their work and provided with an opportunity to understand these processes.

**Developing Stronger Cross-Cultural Communication Skills**

In my current level of education, as a first-year doctoral student, I have become increasingly aware of my need to overcome this ongoing tension, by developing stronger cross-cultural communication skills to clearly articulate my position not only through writing, but also through oral expression. The online course has been invaluable to my own struggle with this process. While the course was offered through an online written medium, it was continuously
interactive, and in this way, it has assisted with my own cross-cultural communication skills, and these are the skills that I will carry with me into other academic settings. I believe that I have developed stronger communication skills due to the course content; a big proportion of the course content was specifically related to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations in Canada. Saul (2008) writes about the influence he believes Aboriginal peoples have had on Canadian civilization in his book, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada*. The first sentence in his book declares “We are a [M]étis civilization” (p. 3). His contention is further explained in the following:

> When I dig around in the roots of how we imagine ourselves, how we govern, how we live together in communities—how we treat one another when we are not being stupid—what I find is deeply Aboriginal. Whatever our family tree may look like, our intuitions and common sense as a civilization are more Aboriginal than European....(p. 3)

This being the first required reading for the course made it easy for me to participate in online conversations, because my immediate quarrel with Saul’s description of Canada was rooted in my personal experiences and understandings as a Yakonkwehó:n:we. Thus, my lived experiences greatly influenced the way I read and responded to the course material and online dialogue. The online nature of this course allowed me the time I needed to reflect on the readings and the responses of others, so that I was able to step out of my comfort zone and clearly articulate my viewpoints. Had we approached this text through an in-class discussion, I would not have been able to respond in the same way as I responded in the online environment. Although I tend to remain silent in the classroom, especially when topics about Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relationships are discussed, the online course gave me the opportunity to draw on other Aboriginal scholars to strengthen my response and eliminate some of the anxiety associated with the nature of the discussion, being so personally connected to my identity. This experience has served as a critical transition point in my educational journey, as it has strengthened my own self-expression in a culturally safe manner, by allowing the necessary reflection time to respond to sensitive and controversial topics. It is an important part of my traditions to take the necessary reflection time before responding, and this course allowed me to do so. Moreover, I have gained the confidence to articulate myself beyond the written form.
Online Environments as Culturally Safe and Ethical Spaces

While there is little research in the area of online learning engagement among Aboriginal learners, the importance of this area of research can be drawn from the above narrative. In addition to my personal narrative, one study by Rice-Green and Dumbrill (2005) revealed how online courses can facilitate an effective learning environment for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners. While their study moved beyond the geographical benefits of online learning for Aboriginal learners by focusing on the course design and commitment to decolonizing approaches, an emphasis on the online environment as a culturally safe or ethical space was not explicitly outlined by the authors. The authors rather draw attention to the need for further research in this area noting that, “without paying attention to both decolonization and holistic knowledge systems, Web-based education may bridge geographic divides, but will reinforce the divide between different peoples and different ways of knowing” (p. 180). Dumbrill and Rice-Green (2007) expand their previous study by exploring “differences between Indigenous knowledge and Western/European ways of knowing” (p. 103), and by outlining the pedagogical implications these differences can present in online learning. They draw attention to the importance of disrupting “the dominance of European thought and the ongoing subjugation and colonization of Indigenous knowledge” (p. 112). One example offered in their article is the role of rigid academic conventions, syntax, and grammatical rules have in enforcing Eurocentric dominance over knowledge construction and presentation. They propose that Web-based education must be decolonized to include alternative forms of expressions, such as writing styles and aesthetics (e.g. line spacing and word font) that disrupt dominant Eurocentric stylistic rules. While their advice for decolonizing Web-based education is very general, they caution that “there is no simple formula for the ways to undertake this disruption, not least because to devise such a ‘formula’ would be a characteristically Eurocentric approach” (p. 113). Extending this thought, I propose that online learning environments can incorporate Aboriginal perspectives into the course design, much like classroom environments, by including material that is authored by Aboriginal scholars, and by including Aboriginal histories (Dion, 2009). It is important that online courses, like all courses, facilitate a culturally and ethically safe learning environment that enhances Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students’ engagement. In order to establish such an environment, especially when controversial topics are discussed, it is important that a respectful collegial environment is promoted. Respectful rules of engagement should be presented at the
very beginning of an online course, and the instructor should serve as a moderator to ensure that
this protocol is followed. The instructor of our course ensured the development of an online
community beyond the regular postings, by creating a student lounge within the course site. We
managed to establish a trusting learning community online for the following reasons: (a) there
were only eight of us enrolled in the course, and (b) we already had the opportunity to meet and
develop relationships prior to our online course (i.e., during our Seminar 1 course). A smaller
number of course participants and our established relationships allowed for the development of a
supportive network that encouraged collaborative learning, and inspired collegial relationships
among the entire group.

**Konthahonninoron (They Make a Precious Road)**

A conversation on meaningful educational experiences for Aboriginal learners involves
looking at education within a historical context, reflecting on the present struggles involved in
securing Aboriginal control of education, and looking towards a vision for the future. In the
previous sections I expressed my own experience of transcending boundaries, especially my own
personal boundaries in an online learning environment, and I mentioned my need to transcend
beyond the crossroad as I find balance within the two worlds in which I am positioned as an
Aboriginal doctoral student in a mainstream education program. During the online course, I was
asked to reflect on the meaning or purpose of education. I wrote about the purpose of education,
drawing from the course readings and from my own perspective as a Yakonkwehón:we.
Reflecting on the meaning of education from a Yakonkwehón:we perspective, allowed me to
share my journey beyond this crossroad in which I find myself positioned. The title of this
section, Konthahonninoron, captures my own perspective of a vision for the future, serving as a
metaphor for journeying forward on a precious path. The word ‘they’ in the title represents my
journey with other Aboriginal scholars on this road.

Through the work of Aboriginal scholars, who I have come across through my research, I
have come to understand that education has always been of importance to Aboriginal peoples,
and has always existed to prepare younger generations to adapt to environmental and societal
conditions. Reflecting on the history of education in the northern community of Nunavik, Watt-
Cloutier (2000/2008) advises:
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Education is a means of learning, the way a people prepare themselves for life. All cultures and all people have education, but its forms and effectiveness varies. The effectiveness of education is measured by how well it prepares people to handle the problems and opportunities of life in their own time and place. (p. 114)

In reading this passage, I was reminded of Saul’s (2008) discussion on education in Canada’s Northern communities that I responded to in the online course. What can the imposition of ‘Southern’, or perhaps more appropriately described as ‘Eurocentric’ educational standards, have on the effectiveness of education for individuals living in Northern communities such as Nunavik? I think the answer to this question is evident in the following comments by Saul (2008): “If they can’t get Inuktitut in the core of the system, English will simply act like a bulldozer knocking over Northern realities,” and “if education is not relevant to life in these communities...then it simply becomes an isolating force” (p. 290). Evidently, imposing a curriculum that is based on a Eurocentric worldview and ‘Southern’ realities, proves to be not only an ineffective model of education for Northern communities, but also an ineffective model of education for all Aboriginal learners (Dumbrill & Rice-Green, 2007; Hampton, 1995; Kanu, 2011; RCAP, 1996; Youngblood Henderson, 1995).

Emphasizing the experiential and life-long learning role associated with Aboriginal education, Youngblood Henderson (1995) advises us that “Our communities were our classrooms, our families, and our sacred order provided the methodology....The linguistic worldview and values were passed from generation to generation; they continue to shape Indian educational aspirations” (p. 247). As Youngblood Henderson points out, the struggle for Aboriginal people to have control over their own education systems continues to be shaped by worldviews and values that are distinct from Eurocentric ones, and by extension cannot be found within a Eurocentric imposed education system.

Connecting the past to the present, Castellano, Davis, and Lahache (2000/2008) state that Aboriginal peoples were distinct nations when Europeans first arrived, and continue to be distinct and sovereign nations today. They note that “a fundamental responsibility of nations is the education of their citizens, preparing them to take their place as members of the community and world at large” (p. xii). Hampton (2000/2008) also documents the historical treaty negotiations that were made between First Nations and the Crown, “In treaty negotiations First
Nations agreed to share an immense and rich land with European immigrants. In return, the Crown committed itself to major responsibilities in the areas of health, economic development, and education” (p. 211). Rather than fulfill their end of these treaty agreements, the government of Canada funded church-run residential schools, on and off reserves, aimed at the assimilation of Aboriginal peoples, cultures, and traditions. First Nations communities have, however, remained loyal to their treaty agreements, and as Hampton (2000/2008) advises: “the fact remains that Canada has a moral and legal obligation to fund First Nations educational institutions” (p. 212). While Hampton positions education as “a weapon of assimilation” by drawing attention to the dispiriting nature of public education and the tendency of university courses to pose a threatening hidden curriculum that devalues Aboriginal identities, he also posits that with Aboriginal control, education can be transformed into “a tool of self-determination” (p. 222).

I am fortunate that my travel follows the footsteps of Aboriginal scholars who have already paved the road and created spaces in academic institutions, providing opportunities for future Aboriginal students to engage within a “hostile” (RCAP, 1996, p. 516) academic climate. Archibald (2009) refers to five Aboriginal women, Freda Ahenakew, Marlene Brant Castellano, Olive Dickason, Verna J. Kirkness, and Gail Guthrie Valaskakis, as the first-wave of Aboriginal women who worked diligently to transform the nature of mainstream universities by “creating an Indigenous intellectual movement” (p. 126). According to Archibald (2009), these women were the first Aboriginal women to work in tenure-track positions in mainstream universities, and they did so with their identities and community ties intact. Archibald points out that because of these women, she was able to be part of the second-wave of Aboriginal scholars who have benefited from the body of scholarship, intellectual work, and institutional changes advanced by this first group of Aboriginal women. Through my own scholarship, I hope to contribute to the making of this precious road, as I become part of a subsequent wave of Aboriginal academics. In order to do this, it is important that I understand this history of Aboriginal scholarship, and draw on the work that these previous waves of Aboriginal women have already begun. This knowledge will shape my own progress down this precious road, as I become more informed about the meaning and purpose of education for Aboriginal peoples.
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Conclusion

Reflecting on the purpose of education for Aboriginal peoples is indeed a complex task, especially within the limitations of a short critical reflection paper that documents my own experience as an Aboriginal student in a mainstream doctoral studies program. In writing this piece, I drew on the edited anthology of Castellano, Davis, and Lahache (2000/2008), *Aboriginal Education: Fulfilling the Promise*, that presents “a snapshot of the complex landscape in which Aboriginal education is taking place—a landscape in which hope and possibility live side by side with constraint and frustration” (p. 251). As an emerging Aboriginal scholar, I am firmly planted within these complexities, as I intend to contribute to the ‘making of a precious road’ by advocating for meaningful and culturally relevant educational opportunities for all students. The “hope and possibility” exists within this road, and evidence of this lies in the meaningful impact an online course had on my development as a scholar, as well as in the profound guidance I have received by reading the works of other Aboriginal scholars. Drawing from my experience, I see the value and possibilities that online learning opportunities can offer to all learners if these opportunities are designed and delivered in a decolonizing manner (Dumbrill & Rice-Green, 2007). Not only can they be diversified to engage students into cross-cultural dialogue, and promote culturally safe spaces, but they can also be flexible and adaptable (Smith and Ayers, 2006), providing access to a plethora of scholarly work that suits the needs of all learners. As I continue on my educational journey, I know that I will be able to gather strength and inspiration from the many Aboriginal scholars who have already begun to pave this road, and the many others who are also walking along this path, as the third wave of Aboriginal scholars (Archibald, 2009), sharing their visions for providing meaningful educational opportunities for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners in Canada.

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