

“WHAT AND WHY DO I WANT TO KNOW?”

LOCATING THE SPIRIT IN A FIRST-YEAR INQUIRY CLASS

Jonathan Anuik

Introduction

“In addition to asking what, you need to ask why you want to know; Elders decide if you are ready for the knowledge; they question what you will do with the knowledge that they have to share.” (Sakej Henderson, Chickasaw, in Anuik & Battiste, 2008, p. 19)

The epigraph informs my philosophy of teaching and learning as a university teacher. It comes from the Banff Dialogue, a gathering in May 2007 of 15 Indigenous scholars in Banff, AB, Canada, part of the applied research, knowledge exchange, and monitoring and reporting activities of the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre’s (AbLKC) Nourishing the Learning Spirit animation theme bundle. As a graduate student researcher on the bundle, I describe, in this article, how I apply the lessons from my time as research assistant on the learning bundle to my practice in an Inquiry class in the winter term of 2011. I consider spirituality foundational to teaching and learning, as students need to think of the questions they ask as part of a lifelong learning journey.

The Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre and Nourishing the Learning Spirit

The AbLKC was one of six knowledge centres, funded by the Canadian Council on Learning through agreement with Human Resources and Social Development Canada, with a three-year mandate to investigate lifelong learning in multiple contexts in Canadian society. Dr. Marie Battiste, Mi’kmaw scholar of education and director of the Aboriginal Education Research Centre in the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan, served as co-director and lead of the Nourishing the Learning Spirit animation theme bundle. As bundle researchers, we explored “the potential we have as human beings for learning,” understanding that there is a “journey that each person travels to arrive comfortably at their own awareness of their gifts, capacities, and strengths, which is broadly the result of their learning spirit being invigorated, challenged, motivated, or nourished” (adapted from Canadian Council on Learning, 2006). Therefore, learning is a life-long endeavour, and every question and problem in a university classroom has influences from one’s current life history, within and outside of the formal modern education system.

What and Why Do I Want to Know in Inquiry?

I served as graduate student research assistant with Battiste until 2009, when I joined the Departments of History and Interdisciplinary Studies at Lakehead University Orillia campus as a faculty member. There, I was part of a team of seven instructors responsible for teaching the foundational courses in the Honours Bachelor of Arts and Science program: Inquiry 1010 (Foundations of Inquiry) and 1030 (Applications of Inquiry). In Inquiry, students ask original questions while honing critical thinking skills. Elsewhere, I have discussed how Inquiry affords the chance for learners to connect their minds to their hearts (Anuik & Gillies, in press) when investigating a problem. In this article, I want to focus on how I build an environment for learners to reflect, with their heads and hearts, on the questions they ask.

Inquiry 1030: Asking a Question

In Inquiry 1030, learners are expected to ask an original question, conducting a six-page literature review on it. The literature review fulfills part of the requirements for successful completion of the course. To help students pose meaningful and relevant questions requires learners to consider “what” they want to know but also, as Henderson suggests, “why” they want to know; this part is addressed by reflecting on one’s own lifelong learning journey.

Your Lifelong Learning Journey: Questions Asked over a Lifetime of Thinking Critically

The above heading was the title for class on Tuesday, March 1, 2011. I introduced to learners the following spiral graphic to help them to reflect on their own learning journeys. I asked them to share the questions they have asked during their own lifelong learning journeys, understanding that each section on the edge of the spirals represents part of this journey, involving families, friends, faith organizations, workplaces, elementary and secondary schools, college, and university, to name a few spaces where learning happens. The edges of the graphic were kept indecipherable so that learners were able to identify their own stopovers on their lifelong learning journeys. The centre of the graphic represents the beginning of the journey, and I ask learners to identify for themselves when this beginning was. However, I did suggest that Inquiry was part of the journey, being one sector of this graphic, and that the question would be the result of the intersection of the course with the previous knowledge that learners held, and questions that they have asked.

After 10 minutes of reflection, students had to share the questions they have asked during their own lifelong learning journeys, identifying those especially that they believed had led them to their current research questions. Then, learners had to identify why they have asked the questions. I wanted learners to situate their questions, the problems that had caught their hearts and minds, as part of a longer journey toward insights on a problem.

to understand “why” they ask questions. Then, there is a nourishment of spirit in the post-secondary classroom, in this case in Inquiry 1030.

References:

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