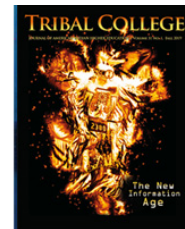


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## Stories, Dreams, and Ceremonies: Anishinaabe ways of learning

*Volume 11, No. 4 - Summer 2000*

Leanne Simpson ♦ May 15, 2000

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In pre-colonial times, the process of learning for

### ANISHINAABE CANOE TRIP

**A canoe trip through eastern Manitoba with tribal young people becomes a teaching experience for these three Anishinaabe elders,**

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Aboriginal young people was very

different from educational systems found in Western societies. There were no formal schools. Rather, learning was considered a life-long process embodied in the individual and embedded in the principles of immanence and ceremony, reflection, and sharing. Learning was concerned with the mental, spiritual, physical, and emotional being and was rooted in personal experience.

Mainstream literature about Indigenous knowledge, written primarily by non-Natives, tends to focus on the data or factual components while ignoring the spiritual foundations. For my doctoral dissertation, I decided to operate from an Anishinaabe (Ojibway) cultural paradigm and use Anishinaabe ways of working together, transmitting knowledge, and generating new knowledge.

Aboriginal peoples use a diversity of methods to transmit knowledge and to teach younger people. This paper focuses on four of those: learning by doing, story telling, dreaming, and ceremonies. (Others include reflection, dreaming, song, dance, prayer, observation, experimentation, and apprenticeship with elders.) Although Indigenous peoples share many fundamental beliefs, our cultures are diverse. My research focused upon the Anishinaabe people of Manitoba and Ontario, Canada. The conclusion discusses the benefits and limitations of using such “ways of knowing” in academic endeavors.

## Learning by doing

Before schools, Aboriginal children were educated in a holistic way. “The traditional way encompassed all aspects of the person’s life, In-Relation to the world around her or him,” according to research by F.J. Graveline (Métis, 1998, p. 60). The learning process addressed intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical dimensions.

**Ray Raven, Conrad Spense, and Garry Raven.**  
Photo by Steve Daniels

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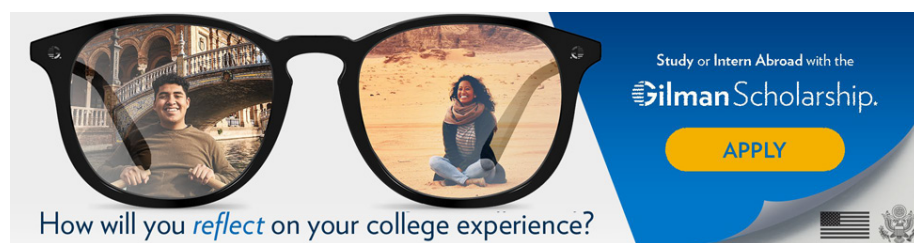
## Shared Stories



### The Stories We Share

June 12, 2019 | By Scarlett Cortez

Experience continues to be a fundamental principle of Anishinaabe learning processes (Cajete, 1999). Knowledge from an Anishinaabe perspective originates in the spiritual realm, and “other-than-human beings” largely control the dissemination of that knowledge. Unlike Western pedagogies, Anishinaabe rely upon children, spiritual entities, plants, and animals as teachers, according to three Anishinaabe researchers, G. Raven, G. Flett, and G. Bushie in their book, *Alternative Ways of Healing from Addictions*. For example, they describe the role plants and animals play in teaching, “Plants are teaching tools. They tell us when and where they grow, where and how they multiply. They anchor soil, provide food for other animals and often grow in harmony, preferring the company of some plants while remaining distant or even inhibiting the growth of others” (pp. 11-12).



Some elders describe “the culture of plants,” according to Raven, et al., as “having gifts and lessons of caring and sharing. We could not survive without them. The plants that animals eat are a clue for food and medicines ... We learned of them in the first place — by watching what the animals used to heal themselves. .... Plants and animals teach us respect, caring, and sharing for our environment. Grass represents compassion because although we trample it down or walk on it or cut it, it continues to grow and flourish and provide a refuge. Our spirits are that way too. And so we are indeed connected to all living things. By watching how they produce and reproduce, by respecting what is around us and the life within it, we learn lessons for ourselves” (pp. 11-12).

In her farewell blog post for TCJStudent.org, IAIA student Scarlett Cortez reflects back on the past year and what it means to share your lived experiences with others.

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Human teachers function less as absolute disseminators of knowledge and more as facilitators in the learning process. Relatives, children, elders, or spiritual leaders may all serve as teachers for Anishinaabe. The elders focus on learning from one's experience through respectful and patient observation, according to J.E. Couture (Anishinaabe) and his research on the role of Native elders (1996).

To a large extent, this type of learning is still practiced by traditional people in Aboriginal communities. Although children are required by the state to attend schools, they also learn Anishinaabe life-ways by listening, observing, reflecting, and participating (Simpson in press, Graveline 1998, Couture 1991).

Because experiential learning is the fundamental principle behind the transference of knowledge, the Anishinaabe elders and community experts from Manitoba asked me to participate in a number of activities in spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental dimensions. I went on hunting trips and checked fishnets and traps. I traveled old canoe routes. I visited sacred sites and participated in sweat lodges and shaking tent ceremonies. I camped with community members and observed healing and sentencing circles. I participated in a number of smudging ceremonies and sharing circles. I was also asked to share my dreams and visions. In this way, Anishinaabe people teach by doing. Thus, if researchers don't "do" they cannot learn from the people. (For a discussion of some of these ceremonies, see TCJ, Vol. VII, N. 4, pp. 20-23.)

## Story telling

Story telling remains an effective means of teaching and learning in Indigenous communities, according to Gregory Cajete (Tewa) and D.Y. Buffalo (Cree). In her book, *Life Lived like a Story*, Julie Cruikshank emphasizes the importance of cultural processes for understanding Aboriginal worldviews. She says we must pay close

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attention to the way elders teach us. “By looking at the ways people use the traditional dimension of culture as a resource to talk about the past, we may be able to see life history as contributing to explanations of cultural process rather than as simply illustrating or supplementing ethnographic descriptions,” Cruikshank says.

Practitioners of the oral tradition often transfer knowledge through traditional story telling. Anishinaabe people are recording and interpreting traditional stories to help their children and outsiders understand and appreciate the Anishinaabe principles and values. Sylvia O’Meara, an Anishinaabe from Cape Crocker, Ontario, explains, “Stories remain a key component of passing on knowledge and expressing an Anishinaabe world view. Community history, treaty rights, land surrender, gender roles, the old ways, they were all taught to me by my leaders through traditional stories” (Eigenbrod & O’Meara, 1997).

Traditional stories provide us with a lens to see the past and with a context to interpret that experience. It is therefore vital to be aware of the cultural “rules” regulating the oral tradition. These rules must be practiced when interpreting the stories.

Cruikshank explains, “I always brought questions to our sessions...about childhood experiences, about seclusion, about marriage and childbirth...the women would give brief answers to my direct inquiries and then suggest that I write down a particular story they wanted to tell me. Usually such stories involved a bewildering series of characters and events, but with practice I learned to follow the complex plots and to understand that when women told me stories, they were actually using them to explain some aspect of their lives to me” (Cruikshank, 1990, p. 15).

The Anishinaabe people distinguish between two different types of stories. The *tabatacamowin* include anecdotes or narratives about exceptional experiences. The *atiso’kanak*

are the sacred stories — “our Grandfathers” (Smith, 1995. Hallowell, 1992). Over the course of my work with the community, I heard both types.

## Dreaming

Knowledge is often transmitted from the spiritual world to humans through dreaming and visioning. Anthropologists say that the Anishinaabe people believe the physical and dreamed world are one, or they are equally real (Driben, Auger, Doob, & Auger, 1997. Hallowell, 1955). Anishinaabe take dreaming very seriously.

 CANOE ON LAKE

**Ando pawachige n means seek your dream, live your dream, understand your dream, and move forward with your dream.  
Photo by Steve Daniels**

“In other words, the Anishinaabe experience of the world, whether awake or in dream, is an experience of a world controlled by the actions of persons, human and otherwise,” according to T.S. Smith in his book, *The Island of the Anishnaabeg: Thunderers and Water Monsters in the Traditional Ojibwe Life-World*. “The levels and directions are not ‘animated’ or ‘anthropomorphized’ by humans who, in a purely cognitive exercise, posit souls and spirits and ascribe them to things in the world. Rather, the cosmos is experienced as a place literally crowded with ‘people,’” Smith found.

Garry Raven, an Anishinaabe sweat lodge leader from Hollow Water First Nation, explains:

“Dreams  
Remember your dreams  
They tell you what you need to do  
Ask elders what your dreams mean  
You will learn more about  
Choices

## Meaning in Your Life

The Contributions you should make ”

(Raven and Prince [Anishinaabe], 1996, p. 53).

During my work in the community, dreams were repeatedly shared, interpreted, and used to make decisions about my work. Tobasonakwut Kinew, another Anishinaabe elder, confirms Raven’s teaching: “It’s called *ando pawachige n*, which means seek your dream, live your dream, understand your dream, and move forward with your dream. That determines how I’ve lived all my life, and how my parents lived. It points to the fact that when I go into the forest, often I realize I have been here before, although I know full well that I have never before set foot in this particular piece of land. This particular piece of forest reminds me of a different time. When I go to sleep at night, I may have a situation that I cannot comprehend. I make offerings, and invariably the choices I have to make to resolve the problem become clear. That is how I have lived my life” (Kinew, 1998, p. 34).

## Ceremonies as sources of spiritual knowledge

The stories of Anishinaabe story-teller Maude Kegg show how spiritually derived knowledge is fully integrated into the consciousness of Anishinaabe people and contemporary Aboriginal people who follow traditional ways. She tells her stories in *Portage Lake: Memories of an Ojibwe Childhood* (Kegg & Nichols, 1992). “Spiritual knowledge” or “power” forms both the foundation of knowledge and knowledge itself. It is at once context, content, and process.

Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo) describes the relationship between the self and the rest of the world in her book, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. “Because of the basic assumption of the wholeness or unity of the universe, our natural and necessary relationship to all life is evident. All

phenomena we witness within or ‘outside’ ourselves are, like us, intelligent manifestations of the intelligent universe from which they arise” (p. 61).

Since Indigenous knowledge is spiritual in nature, many Indigenous peoples rely on the ceremonies passed down to them from their ancestors as sources of knowledge, guidance, and support. Traditional people use different ceremonies, depending upon the community and the culture. When performed properly by trained spiritual leaders, ceremonies can be a medium for beings from the spiritual realm to communicate with humans. For example, traditional Anishinaabe people use the *jiiksaan* or shaking test ceremony to receive knowledge from the spirits and ancestors about the future. Some Aboriginal researchers who seek to understand Indigenous knowledge use ceremonies as a source of knowledge (Martin-Hill, 1995). However, the sacredness of these ceremonies prevents Aboriginal researchers from writing about these experiences in much detail.

Academe remains especially suspicious of knowledge gained through dreams and ceremonies. Many researchers simply do not accept the reliability or validity of spiritually-derived knowledge. Even when using community-based or collaborative research paradigms, spiritual knowledge is not often acknowledged and treated as the foundation of Indigenous knowledge. Social scientists often focus instead on “collecting,” “gathering,” or “documenting” non-spiritual knowledge.

Those who do accept spiritually-derived knowledge find it difficult to use or include in their studies, according to J. Wolfe, C. Bechard, P. Cizek, and D. Cole in their book, *Indigenous and Western Knowledge and Resource Management Systems* (1992). They risk offending and potentially harming their traditional teachers if they have not received permission to include this knowledge, and their academic colleagues often dismiss their work as unreliable.



In Aboriginal paradigms, knowledge from the spirit-world is taken seriously, as an integral component of knowledge and the processes of coming to know (Graveline [Métis], 1998. Martin-Hill [Mohawk], 1995. Beck [Navajo], Walters, & Francisco, 1990). In my own work, I acknowledged that spiritual knowledge provided the foundation of my studies, but I avoided discussing the details in my dissertation. I relied on previously published works on spirituality by Native authors to fill in this gap.

## Conclusion

My use of these “methods” for my dissertation research generated profoundly different “results” than conventional social science methods. Since Anishinaabe people continue to learn about our environment and ourselves in these ways, it may be appropriate that Anishinaabe teachers, academics, and communities utilize them in our own research and education projects. De-colonizing our processes—turning to our ancient ways— is one way of maintaining a distinct cultural identity in the face of an increasingly globalized world.

However, these processes are not appropriate for use by all academics.. Nor are they appropriate in all research or educational situations. Communities are best equipped to decide. Some will use Western scientific methods, while some communities may use collaborative or participatory methods to work with outside researchers. Others may use Indigenous methods or processes, and still others may use combinations of methods from the natural sciences, social sciences, and Indigenous knowledge. As Aboriginal peoples take control over research in our own communities, it is certain that we will employ a diversity of methods to meet our local needs.

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