

From Local View to International Vision: Creating Spaces for Global Learning Within and Among Indigenous Students

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Abstract

The University of Victoria (Uvic) in the province of British Columbia, Canada is committed to the definition of Internationalization formulated by Jane Knight¹, which has been extensively cited in the post-secondary sector: "Internationalization is the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education." As part of such commitment, academic curriculum in most disciplines is being redefined at Uvic recognizing that a fundamental aspect of internationalization within higher education is the transformation of the curriculum that reflects a shift from local view to a worldly vision. Such shift has the potential to have an impact on the way in which we understand the world and consequently each other and more specifically, on the way in which we prepare our future teachers for this necessary reality. This presentation delves into some of the changes as well as the challenges that I have experienced as an instructor within the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program at the University of Victoria in the past four years in relation to the process of internationalization of the curriculum. Implications for teaching and learning are also discussed.

¹ Knight, J. (2003). Updated internationalization definition. *International Higher Education*, 33, 2-3.]"

Introduction

I have been at the University of Victoria for the past 12 years, that is, if one combines the years spent there as a student and the time I have now been working as an academic in the institution. I was privileged to have been accepted in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction back in 1996 to work on a Masters degree in Educational psychology.

Interestingly enough, back then as an international student the tuition I paid was the same as any Canadian student but I was excluded from applying for any type of financial assistance. However, this changed dramatically in 2002 and now international students pay a much higher fee than their Canadian counterparts but they have the privilege of applying for financial aid in the form of bursaries or scholarships just like any Canadian student. These changes were part of the strategic plan called A Vision for the Future, which has guided the University of Victoria for the past six years.

Background

The aim of the strategic plan is primarily to guide the University in the pursue of future directions related to the development of infrastructure, programs, admission and retention processes, growth, and overall advancement specifically as it pertains to curriculum development and the offering of academic opportunities to students from Canada and the world over. In 2005, the Plan went through a review process and it was approved last November with input from members of the university and the broader community as well as from retirees and alumni.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the plan is the construct of internationalization, which, according to Jane Knight an adjunct professor at the University of Toronto is the

process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education. Due to the changing demographics and diversity of the student body at both the undergraduate and graduate levels at the University of Victoria and in order to infuse these ideas into the curriculum, UVic has committed to the inclusion of courses that introduce students to the diverse notions of internationalization whether they refer to processes within Canada or abroad. Although the university supports and promotes exchange programs with universities around the world, it also recognizes that not every student will have the opportunity to study or live outside of Canada. However, it is imperative that students are exposed to diverse perspectives, outlooks, and worldviews. Therefore, the transformation of the curriculum ought to reflect a shift from local view to a worldly vision because such shift has the potential to have an impact on the way in which we understand the world and consequently each other and more specifically, on the way in which we prepare our students for the necessary reality of globalization.

Aboriginal students

Perhaps one of the most relevant changes within the Faculty of Education with regard to the preparation of new teachers is the creation of the Aboriginal Teacher Education program, which is only three years old; Objective 3 of the strategic plan as it pertains to students, is : *‘To increase the number of Indigenous students graduating from all faculties at UVic, building on our commitment to and our unique relationship with Canada’s First Peoples’*. (Strategic Plan, University of Victoria, 2007, p.6). In order to achieve this goal, it is imperative that Aboriginal children continue to succeed in the different levels of the education system and in this case, we believe that part of this success can be achieved if

teachers are better prepared to tend to the needs and characteristics of the different cultural groups that are represented in the classrooms, one of which is conformed by Aboriginal people.

The province of British Columbia is the most diverse in all Canada with regard to Aboriginal groups and languages. This represents both an opportunity and a challenge when curriculum is being designed, programmed, and implemented because one needs to bear in mind such diversity in ways of being, thinking, and living. Therefore, providing students with opportunities to learn about others and from others requires that they learn from and within their local context: their culture, their history, and themselves. Further, it is important that the students learn about Indigenous groups around the world in order to better understand perspectives and worldviews and also for them to develop an international perspective and thus a global view.

The Aboriginal Teacher Education Program

I have been teaching at the Faculty of Education in the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program for the past three years, preparing student teachers both of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent. In that time, I have experienced challenges and successes related to academic issues and the professional development of future teachers. The program was developed several years ago with the aim to support Aboriginal children in the public school system by preparing student teachers at the university within an Aboriginal perspective. Even though not all the student teachers are of Aboriginal ancestry, they are all required to take mandatory courses as part of their degree. So far, three core courses have been developed to assist these goals. There is also one elective course that changes every

year and which is offered in an informal or rather, unconventional way compared to the standards at a university. Such course introduces students to the arts such as drum making, working with fibers of the earth, storytelling, and carving, just to name a few.

The three core courses, two of which I have taught for a couple of years, offer the students the opportunity to learn about diverse issues concerning the First Peoples of Canada: their history, cultural expressions, rituals, philosophy, and worldview. Because some of these aspects are shared perspectives among other Indigenous people around the world, the potential spaces for appreciating and broadening a personal standpoint are extensive. Such spaces are created in diverse ways according to the course requirements, the size of the group, and the disposition that comes from both the students and the instructor to make this happen. In my opinion and experience, it is within these mind frames that the notion of internationalization could be described since it can potentially integrate intercultural components into the everyday functions of the students' life.

For the Indigenous (and the non-Indigenous) students, this represents a unique opportunity to gain deeper understanding about the historical, social, economic, political, and educational concerns of their group and compare and contrast them with similar issues of other Indigenous groups around the world. The main purpose of these exercises –to compare and contrast- is to generate ideas about development, advancement, improvement, and change. It is not a recent phenomenon that the world has turned its eyes to embracing Aboriginal worldviews and ways of being as the backbone of sustainability. The 'old ways' have become the new trends on how to preserve life on earth and how to protect the environment. Indigenous wisdom and traditional ways of knowing are becoming the

solution to the ailments of the earth. Ecological knowledge, before only utilized by our grandparents and great grandparents, is being revived as a means to gain a better understanding of the way in which our earth operates.

Consequently, Indigenous people the world over are positioned in a place of advantage having much to offer with regard to sustainability and ecology. Some of this knowledge comes from within if people are raised in a traditional way and other knowledge or wisdom comes from what is gained or reaffirmed in a systematic or formal way in school or in other learning places. However, more important than these knowledges is the ecology of the mind and body and the sustainability of the soul. By learning about their own history and people, Aboriginal student teachers are preparing themselves to pass on the wisdom, traditions, knowledge, appreciation, and value of their culture contributing in this way to the preservation of the culture. Consequently, Internationalization becomes a process by which Aboriginal students 'teach' their non-Aboriginal classmates about their culture and hopefully provide them with opportunities to appreciate, learn, and understand about Aboriginal worldviews more than offering a global view. The non-Aboriginal students on the other hand, can also share their perspectives and culture with the Aboriginal students and exchange viewpoints, opinions, and perspectives in order to grow in a professional and a personal way.

Implications for teaching and learning

How can the spaces for internationalization be created within and among Aboriginal students?

Although one could argue that Aboriginal worldviews and perspectives are shared in more ways than one with other Aboriginal people around the world, exposing students to viewpoints from various Indigenous groups in other continents offers them the opportunity to learn, understand, and appreciate ways of being in the world. Specific examples include themes that are applicable to their everyday life and which are founded in ideas from diverse groups. For example, leadership, epistemology (ways of knowing), ecology, sustainability, and diversity. Further, the university is committed to establishing and maintaining relations with universities across Canada and beyond: in Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii, México, and other countries with high Indigenous representation in order to open and expand its horizons.

By broadening the curriculum, we believe we are offering our student teachers (and others) the opportunity to expand their local view and ultimately assist them in the creation of a global vision that will bring about change within and towards the outside.