Indigenous Pedagogy in Mental Health Workshop: Healing Teachings for Mental Health Workers, Valuable Knowledge for Clients

S. Stewart
Yellowknife Dene, OISE/University of Toronto

Abstract: Indigenous pedagogy places mental health care, like education, in the context of culture, values, relationship, and historical realities. It is this understanding that provides the foundation of "Indigenous Standpoint Pedagogy" (ISP), which is the "inherently political, reformative, relational, and deeply personal approach that is located in the chaos of colonial and cultural interfaces" (Philips, Whatman, Hart, & Winslett, 2009). ISP fundamentally identifies and embeds Indigenous community participation in the development and teaching of Indigenous perspectives, or standpoints, and is a multi-faceted process. This workshop identifies and explores ISP as a valuable way to teach counsellors from diverse Native cultural perspectives, and to use this approach in mental health support work with clients. Also provided is a rationale for ISP in curriculum for Indigenous mental health workers as an integral way to promote and maintain mental health and healing.

Workshop Outline: This session details my approach to mental health worker (counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, child and youth care) training and client contact, which is based on an Indigenous pedagogy that places education and mental health services in the context of culture, values, relationship, and historical realities. The session will be an interactive dialogue between the presenter and audience that will invite reflexive listening and learning. Three main aspects of an Indigenous pedagogy will be discussed as they relate to Indigenous counselling and healing practices and Indigenous counsellor training: ISP theory, relationship, and empowerment.

Possible Participants: This workshop is designed for mental health trainers and mental health frontline workers (counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, child and youth care workers).

ISP Theory: It is this theory of understanding of teaching and learning that provides me with the foundation of what Philips, Whatman, Hart, and Winslett (2004) have termed the "Indigenous Standpoint Pedagogy" (ISP), which is described as being the "inherently political, reformative, relational, and deeply personal approach that is located in the chaos of colonial and cultural interfaces". ISP fundamentally identifies and embeds Indigenous community participation in the development and teaching of Indigenous perspectives, or standpoints, and is a multi-faceted process. It is mainly concerned with Native perspectives in education not as an alternative to western approaches but as a legitimate form of education in and of itself. I bring this perspective to my teaching by virtue of my identity and my desire to work from an Indigenous perspective in all aspects of my teaching methods and goals. This means in practice is that I value multiple perspectives on learning and teaching in my interaction with students and clients, such as linear and non-linear thinking, differing time orientation, holistic approaches and dualism, and community-based and individual focussed connection. However, the most important facet to this approach is a focus on the understanding and process of healing.

Relationship: The foundation to this counselling and counsellor training approach lies in relationship, and this will be discussed as the centre of success for meaningful communication with students and clients. "Yet only through communication can human life hold meaning" (Freire, 2003, p. 62). Further, a discussion of the relationship between Indigenous peoples and colonial rule will occur in the context of mental health and healing (Gone, 2004; Mussell, Cardiff, & White, 2004; Smith, 1999; Stewart, 2009).

Empowerment: Another important principal in my philosophy of teaching and counselling is empowerment. And this has its roots in Paolo Freire's seminal work, Pedagogy of the Oppressed. From this point, I come from a humanist perspective in which my efforts as an educator must be consistent with those of the students in order to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization—my goals in teaching and counselling. Freire (2003) states that the educator’s efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them. The teacher's thinking is authenticiated only by the authenticity of the students' thinking. The teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thought on them. Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication” (p.61). For me, education and healing through counselling is based on traditional Indigenous values of sharing, supporting, and liberating, and that teaching is a practice of freedom, not domination (Mussell, 2005; Mussell, Nichols, & Adler, 1993). For me, a teacher and a counsellor assumes a leadership role in the classroom or the session, not an expert stance, in order to be an effective educator and helper. A helper must take responsibility and leadership in pragmatic ways that reflect such traditional values of respect, incorporation of community, voice, trust, mutuality, authentic communication, and shared interest in learning (McCormick, 1996, 1997).

Objectives for workshop: Attendees will learn to understand the fundamental of Indigenous pedagogies and healing in mental health teachings and practices (such as counselling, social work, nursing, etc) and to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses as applicable to their own personal teaching and helping philosophies and practices. Additionally, those interested in policymaking will come away with a concrete understanding and articulation of a rationale for Indigenous pedagogies for counsellor educators and counsellors engaged in professional helping (Erasmus & Ensign, 1996).

How attendees will be engaged: Participants will be invited to discuss and dialogue amongst each other and with the presenter throughout presentation of main ideas. This could include sharing of experiences, ideas, and hopes regarding the presentation topic.

Contact: Suzanne Stewart (slstewart@utoronto.ca)