Culture, Gender, Power

"Revisioning" Northern Education

by Shari Buchan and Ingrid Johnson

Cet article explore les problèmes inhérents à la culture, au pouvoir et au genre dans l'éducation des régions du Nord et examine comment l'éducation peut être transformée pour assurer que les institutions, les plans de cours et le procédé selon lequel ces mêmes plans sont transmis, correspondent aux priorités des Premières Nations du Nord.

Gail Geltner, "Out from Under," 1984.

Whatever else education is about, it is also about power.[1] Power is manifest in such questions as what constitutes knowledge, who are the experts who possess this knowledge, and who decides what should be taught and how it should be taught. With reference to First Nations education in Canada, Michael Apple points out "education is not a neutral activity. It is profoundly political" (ix). Apple argues that decisions about what constitutes "official" or "legitimate" knowledge are political decisions.

> The curriculum itself is *always* a choice from a wider universe of knowledge and values. Thus, schooling is deeply implicated in cultural politics, with some groups having the power to declare their knowledge, values, and histories (i.e., "official knowledge"), while others are marginalized. (xi)

A similar observation is made by Kevin Keefe, who also points out that power is exercised in what is *excluded*, as well as in what is *included*. In his words, "powerful learning also sometimes happens in the gaps and silences of the school [or university] curriculum" (8).

This exercise of power applies within as well as across cultures. Within any given culture or society, some have more power than others—some are dominant or central, and some are marginalized or "other." "Others" include women, Aboriginal peoples, and visible minority groups. Decisions about what constitutes knowledge thus reflect not only the ideas of the dominant culture, but the ideas of the dominant group(s) within that culture.

Apple also observes that transforming the existing educational system, and then defending those changes against those who are opposed, requires that we think politically. If education is political, then educational change is equally political.

We argue that such changes and shifts in power are necessary in northern educational institutions so that they will reflect the knowledge, values, and experiences of those they serve. By and large, educational institutions have not reflected the experiences of First Nations people. Criticisms of traditional western education systems are wide-ranging and increasingly well-placed. Classroom teaching has failed to accommodate First Nations knowledge and ways of transmitting that knowledge. As well, what is defined as "official knowledge" has primarily reflected the ideas of male members of the dominant culture, thus excluding women as well.

The changes we propose require more than revising existing curriculum. Rather, they call for a "revisioning" or rethinking of the fundamental questions about what constitutes knowledge and who possesses the expertise to articulate that knowledge. This requires changes in what is taught, and in the structure and values of the classroom as well. It also involves a shift in the balance of power in classrooms and institutions, and greater involvement of the larger community in the design and delivery of programs.

We do not, however, advocate a complete rejection of the existing system.[2] What we propose is a redistribution of power within existing structures to strike a balance between cultural/gender values, goals, and ideals. This approach reflects the views of Yukon First Nations elders who desire the incorporation of Yukon-specific historical and cultural content into the college curricula. They also advocate the inclusion of traditional teaching and learning methods, the involvement of First Nations educators, and the assurance of equality and balance between cultures in the classroom.

In the northern Canadian context, power relations in education have been manifest in the colonial nature of formal education. First Nations people have not been consulted in the planning of their education and what is taught (and how it is taught) has little to do with their cultures and societies. The colonial nature of the educational process in many locations has been well documented (see, for example, Chambers; Perely).

"Northern peoples had one way of educating their children and the southerners had another."

> Northern peoples had one way of educating their children and the newly-arrived southerners had another. When societies with radically different approaches to all forms of social practice rub up against one another, the social fabric of each may wear thin. Eventually, Western institutional and social practices—of which education is simply one—were to dominate. This domination has torn the social fabric of aboriginal societies in the North. (Chambers 48)

Historically, the exercise of power by the dominant group has meant the exclusion of First Nations people from participation in public schools and segregation into residential institutions. The purpose of these institutions was to force the assimilation of First Nations children into non-Native culture and society. While Aboriginal cultures persisted in spite of such practices, their negative impact in the North and elsewhere has been well documented (King; Bull). Many students who attended residential schools "... suffered serious crises in their personal and cultural identities as a result of their residential school experience" (King qtd. in Chambers 50).

While separate institutions are no longer the norm, exclusion and segregation have continued through privileging western, print-based knowledge over the oral traditions which are central to First Nations cultures, and the exclusion or marginalization of First Nations culture from academic content and process. Traditional First Nations teachers, most often the elders who are carriers of knowledge, are usually not viewed as "qualified" because they do not hold recognized academic degrees. As well, attempts to create a more "inclusive" environment have generally resulted in teaching *about* the culture, rather than teaching from *within* the culture (Kawagley and Barnhardt). This has filled some of the "gaps and silences" (Keefe), but has not addressed power imbalances in educational institutions.

The consequences of these various practices have been manifold. One such consequence has been the "high attrition and low achievement of First Nations people in the present educational system" (MacDonald 107). Compared with other Canadians, Aboriginal Canadians are less likely to complete high school and consequently less likely to carry on to post-secondary education. This pattern is evident in the Canadian North and across the globe (see Kawagley and Barnhardt; Keefe; MacDonald).

With the advent of the women's movement, questions have also been raised about the educational marginalization of women and girls. Much like First Nations people, women, too, have been excluded from certain types of schooling because traditional structures have favoured middle and upper-class white males. Reynolds notes:

> This continues to occur because the distribution of power within educational bureaucracies is based on traditions that have a long history and are supported by existing structures that have remained relatively resistant to attempts at change. (272)

In the Canadian North and elsewhere, this exclusion has taken the form of separate schools or separate courses/programs of study.[3] More recently, exclusion has been evident in limited curriculum content about women's lives and experiences, and in a lack of feminist analysis. As with First Nations curriculum, attempts at reform have often resulted in teaching about women, rather than teaching from a feminist perspective. Obviously, women's studies courses and programs have been the exception. Nonetheless, many advocates of women's studies note that feminist scholarship has not been adequately integrated into the general curriculum (Elenes). As a result, women often feel alienated in the academic culture. They may "lose" their voices, and fail to become completely engaged in the academic enterprise. And, while women are entering and graduating from post-secondary institutions in increasing numbers (Reynolds) they remain underrepresented in many post-secondary pursuits and occupational categories.

It is important to acknowledge that there are significant differences between the experiences of women and First Nations people (as groups) in their encounters with educational institutions. However, there are significant parallels. In both cases, the educational settings reflect a dominant culture that is, in some sense, "alien" to both women and First Nations people. What is taught and how it is taught reflect dominant paradigms, which have generally failed to take the different perceptions, knowledge, and learning styles of women and First Nations people into account.

If educational institutions are to meet the needs of *all* students, the content and structure of our schools must be changed. As Gaskell *et al.* state:

> the experiences of women (and of First Nations people, working class people, visible minorities and other disadvantaged groups) must be incorporated into the curriculum. [Students] from all these groups must come to feel that schools are for and about them, not just for and

about privileged white males. (104)

What is required is what we have chosen to call a "revisioning" of northern education, or what has also been called a "paradigm shift" (Kawagley and Barnhardt)—a "different sort of education" (Keefe 3).

The creation of a course entitled "Women in Indigenous Societies" at Yukon College provides one example of how this task might be accomplished. The course brings together the issues of culture and gender and is a core component of the women's studies program offered at the college. As well, the college is working to integrate the wisdom and worldview of First Nations through the appointment of a Vice-President First Nations (VPFN) and the creation of a number of programs specifically for First Nations students.[4]

If institutions are to meet the needs of all students, the content and structure of our schools must be changed.

Rather than adopting the "individual-as-expert" approach usually used in curriculum development, course development involved a collaborative approach. Under the direction of the VPFN, a group of First Nations women provided direction on course content, format, and delivery. Some of these women later taught segments of the course. All the women involved were informed, taught, or groomed by elders for their role in this field.

From its earliest conception, it was recognized that the course must be grounded in Yukon First Nations culture and history, yet employ a global perspective as well. The essential elements of the course were identified, including the need to understand traditional and modern roles (e.g., political, family roles), and a commitment to balance, healing, and wellness. A great deal of emphasis was placed on oral tradition as the foundation of the course.

The objectives for the course include (1) to empower students on an individual level, as well as to motivate them to work toward community change; (2) to teach the roles of indigenous women via oral traditions; (3) to provide a cross-cultural education for non-native students; (4) to inspire students to think about issues in a different way; and (5) to inspire students to seek out their own stories and to further their own learning outside the classroom.

Ingrid Johnson, a Yukon First Nations woman, was contracted to prepare a course outline, syllabus, and reading list. Under the direction of the group, the course was designed and subject to the review of the development committee, the college, and other institutions over a period of months. To reflect the important aspects of the process, a set of principles was included in the course syllabus, and became a central reference point in the presentation of the course. These principles are as follows:

- "principles of the circle" will be adapted for use in the class;[5]
- the course will be based around oral history. An environment of respect, listening and sharing will be maintained;
- the role and value of stories in traditional society will be emphasized;
- while the course focuses on women, it is important to remember the balance between men and women in indigenous societies; and
- a correlation between First Nations women's studies and mainstream feminism is not to be assumed.[6]

Clearly, this approach to curriculum development and delivery constitutes a paradigm shift. Rather than engaging in the "top down" process that generally takes place in such activities, this one took a "bottom up" approach. This is a much more egalitarian method than is generally used and reflects the idea that "knowledge is meant to be shared—not owned and not imposed" (Charter 57). It also allowed the community to define what constitutes knowledge, and how that knowledge should be transmitted. The circle and the emphasis on open communication permitted the incorporation of traditional First Nations and feminist principles of sharing, cooperation, and respect. As well, it allowed an emphasis on oral tradition—an emphasis that would likely have been overlooked with a more standard approach.

The greatest challenge in the preparation of the course was integrating a western text-based format with a traditional First Nations worldview grounded in oral tradition. To meet the requirements of the First Nations women and the institution, it was necessary to include both. The course, as a result, is still strongly text-based. Nonetheless, oral tradition plays a central role in content as well as process, and is integrated in assignments and evaluation.[7]

Other obstacles include the challenge to institutional power. Institutions need to be willing to reconsider what constitutes education and who should be involved in curriculum development and delivery. A related challenge concerns the amount of time involved in undertaking the process we describe. Because considerably more time is invested in a process such as this, the institution must be willing to sacrifice efficiency for accuracy and relevance.

The issues of culture, gender, and power come together in the curriculum development project we have described. These issues are not simply about the place of women and Aboriginal peoples in college curricula, they are about power, equality, and the place of previously marginalized groups in the nation and in the world. With the settlement of northern land claims and the implementation of self-government agreements, indigenous peoples are working to transform educational

These issues are about power, equality, and the place of marginalized groups in the nation and in the world.

infrastructures and practices to make them more compatible with their own world view, identity, and history (Kawagley and Barnhardt). Similarly, the feminist movement and women in academia are working to bring about educational changes. As Gaskell *et al.* observe, feminism seeks to give a voice to women, and to allow women to examine their own experiences, instead of always examining the experiences of men.

In her discussion of post-secondary education in northern Canada, Hilyer observes that:

> Education is a dynamic process, involving individuals, groups, and the society in which they live ... a process which is shaped by the past, and at the same time, one which must be refined continuously to support a vision of the future. (316)

The "past" which shapes northern education is an exclusionary one, but the vision of the future is transformative. The course development approach we have described provides one model for this transformation, a model for teaching *within* rather than *about* the culture. It exemplifies the promise and possibility of change, and provides direction for incorporating the knowledge and values of women and First Nations people into academic institutions, curricula, and processes. More importantly, it provides a model of how educational institutions can become sites of empowerment rather than the sites of marginalization they have formerly been.

The authors wish to acknowledge the work of the many women who contributed to the development of the course described.

Shari Buchan is a sociologist and the coordinator of the Women's Studies Program at Yukon College in Whitehorse.

Ingrid Johnson is an Inland Tlingit woman from Teslin, Yukon. She recently completed her MA in Anthropology and currently teaches the "Women in Indigenous Societies" course at Yukon College.

[1]It is important to acknowledge that there is no agreement on the definition of education, nor on its purpose. Some view education as the acquisition of job skills, while others see it as an activity to help one "become a good person and live a good life" (MacDonald and Keenan qtd. in MacDonald 107). Whichever of these definitions prevails within an institution is itself a manifestation of power.
[2]There are debates both within the First Nations communities and the feminist communities as to whether the needs of First Nations students and women can best be met within existing institutions, or whether separate institutions are required. For a discussion of various approaches to control of education undertaken by Aboriginal peoples, see Barnhardt. For a discussion of separate education for women, see Cannon.
[3]See, for example, Moore's discussion of St. Mary's Academy in Dawson in the early 1900s, where sex segregation was evident in public schools and native residential schools.
[4]The revised Mission Statement of the college specifically states that one of the values of the college is to "integrate the wisdom and worldview of First Nations." For a further discussion of some of the developments at Yukon College concerning the integration of First Nations worldview, see MacDonald.
[5]The principles of the circle reflect traditional First Nations values as described by Charter, as well as feminist values as described by Healy.
[6]This was necessary to address the concerns of indigenous women throughout the world who have expressed dissatisfaction with mainstream feminism on a number of levels. "Feminist theory has tended to emerge from privileged women whose perspectives and experiences rarely include knowledge and awareness of the lives of marginalized women and men" (Cassidy *et al.* 33).
[7]One of the assignments in the course was to complete an oral history project. Students also had the option of completing an "oral term paper."

References

Apple, Michael. Preface. *Power and Contradiction in First Nations Adult Education.* By Celia Haig-Brown. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995.

Barnhardt, Ray. "Higher Education in the Fourth World: Indigenous People Take Control." *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 18.2 (1991): 199–231.

Bull, Linda. "Indian Residential Schooling: The Native Perspective." *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 18 (Supplement) (1991).

Cannon, M. "No Boys Allowed." *Saturday Night* (Feb. 1995): 18–24.

Cassidy, B., R. Lord, and N. Mandell. "Silenced and Forgotten Women: Race, Poverty, and Disability." *Feminist Issues: Race, Class, and Sexuality.* Ed. Nancy Mandell. Scarborough: Prentice Hall, 1995. 32–66.

Chambers, Cynthia. "Worlds Apart: Educational Inquiry North of 60." *The Northern Review* 12–13 (1994): 47–69.

Charter, Ann. "Integrating Traditional Aboriginal Teaching and Learning Approaches in Post-Secondary Settings." *Issues in the North, Volume I.* Eds. Jill Oakes and Rick Riewe. Ottawa: Canadian Circumpolar Institute, 1996.

Elenes, C. Alejandra. "New Directions for Feminist Curriculum Transformation Projects." *Feminist Teacher* 9.2 (1995): 70–75.

Gaskell, J., A. McLaren, and M. Novogrodsky. "What is Worth Knowing? Defining the Feminist Curriculum." *Gender in the 1990s: Images, Realities and Issues.* Eds. E. D. Nelson and B. W. Robinson. Scarborough: Nelson Canada, 1995. 100–118.

Healy, T. "The Learning Circle and Group Contract." *Teaching at SFU Update* 8.1 (1996): 2–5.

Hilyer, Gail. "Higher Education in

the Northwest Territories." *Higher Education in Canada: Different Systems, Different Perspectives.* Ed. Glen Jones. New York: Garland Publishing, 1997. 301–323.
Kawagley, O., and R. Barnhardt. "Education Indigenous to Place." *Ecological Education in Action.* Eds. Gregory Smith and Dilafruz Williams Albany: SUNY Press, 1997.
Keefe, Kevin. *From the Centre to the City: Aboriginal Education, Culture and Power.* Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1992.
King, A. R. *The School at Mopass: A Problem of Identity.* Toronto: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967.
MacDonald, Linda. "Some Thoughts About the Flood and First Nations Education in the Yukon." *The Northern Review* 12–13 (1994): 106–116.
Moore, C. *Representation and Remuneration: White Women Working in the Klondike Goldrush (1897–99) and the Decade Following (1900—10).* Unpub. Masters Thesis. Toronto: The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1994.
Perely, David. "Aboriginal Education in Canada as Internal Colonialism." *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 20.1 (1993): 118–128.
Reynolds, Cecilia. "The Educational System." *Feminist Issues: Race, Class and Sexuality.* Ed. Nancy Mandell. Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1995.

Gail Geltner is a Toronto artist, photographer, and teacher. Her illustrations have appeared in publications throughout North America. A book, What You See, *containing two decades of her work was published by Second Story Press in 1992. Her recently completed photographic document entitled* The Other Family Album: A Chronicle 1970–1995 *was exhibited in New York City in 1996.*

AIDA FARRAG GRAFF

Where Have the Words Gone

Hidden in the recesses of her mind
Was the memory of someone saying
That no matter how sick the body
A mother tongue always resurfaced
To help you through the final exit.
But into what language was she born
Whose infancy was rocked
To lullabies from different lands?

She spoke so many tongues
That none was hers now
As she lay in her bed.
She couldn't tell the nurse
What kind of dragon
Was coring her guts.
She had lost her many tongues.
They had melted deep into the furrows of her brain
With the onslaught of the ice-age.

At times she felt
They were playing hide and seek
She and her many tongues.
But that was years ago
In a green unfractured land,
Where children played on concrete courts
Under the watchful eyes of shrouded nuns.
You couldn't really play hide and seek there
Under their ever watchful eyes.
You could only play in groups,
And never, never, in twos or fours.

So where have the words gone
Where have the children gone.

Aida Farrag Graff is a Commissioner with the Ontario Human Rights Commission as well as a Research Associate at Victoria College, the University of Toronto.