Education for Tomorrow

A Biocentric, Student-Focused Model for Reconstructing Education

Michael Risku and Letitia Harding

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Michael Risku and Letitia Harding
University of the Incarnate Word, San Antonio, Texas, USA

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PREFACE

About This Book

> So if today I had a young mind to direct, to start on the journey of life, . . . I would, for its welfare, unhesitatingly set that child's feet in the path of my forefathers. I would raise him to be an Indian!
>
> Luther Standing Bear, *The Land of the Spotted Eagle*

Over the past few years, there have been many books on the market that have discussed indigenous ways of knowing, and bemoaned Western society's seeming lack of interest in anything other than scientific, fact-based knowledge. Equally plentiful are the writings of critical theorists who decry today's public education system as divisive and manipulated by those in power to ensure that *their* children have the educational advantages needed to maintain the hierarchical status quo, thus leaving not only the children of indigenous people, but also those of most minorities and the poor in a never-ending cycle of inequality.

In this book, we bring both of these topics together by first examining the ways that indigenous people and women of all cultures acquire and pass on knowledge, and the effects that enforced Eurocentric systems have had on that process. Next, we turn to public schools to explore the effects, both good and bad, that today's programs have on the distribution of opportunities afforded *all* children in the United States. For what are they being prepared? Finally, we apply the findings of liberatory pedagogies by offering suggestions for a revolutionary education system that highlights the need for all students to have the freedom and encouragement to look critically and rationally at their lives. With such freedom, students know that they can question their social status, and work toward equality, freedom, and change. This can be achieved by looking both back to the pedagogical methods of our indigenous ancestors, and forward to a time when all children, regardless of gender, or of ethnic or socio-economic heritage, are taught in such a way that every aspect of their lives is addressed, nurtured, and valued, not just their ability to either make money or to serve those who do.

Since its inception in 2002, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has been the focal point of public primary and secondary education in the United States. The opening paragraph of the document states boldly that its purpose is *to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education*.[1] These are, undoubtedly, noble sentiments that must be applauded. The reality, however, is that the education system in this country is still far removed

from offering all students an equal learning experience, and that the overemphasis on assessment has proven to be extremely profitable for testing corporations but a logistical nightmare for teachers. Teaching to the test has become the norm in many schools, especially those whose students are most in need of the help and attention that NCLB promises.

Today, the education system in the United States forces students and teachers to focus on the few aspects of life that are deemed necessary to succeed in Western society—and that, in and of itself, is not a bad thing. It is, however, tragic that ways of knowing that do not fall in line with the system are considered worthless and are actively discouraged. We are then left with young people who are prepared for assessment in reading, math, and science, but whose intuition, relationship with nature, and traditions of their forebears have been abandoned.

One of the main intentions of this work is to highlight the ancient ways of knowing that have been either discarded or forgotten or never known by most people living in the Western world, and to offer ways in which they could be reintroduced into our education system to form a new type of pedagogy which emphasizes the need to educate the whole child, intellectually, psychologically, physically, and spiritually, so that our young people can become citizens who would be considerate of every aspect of the world.

The study of indigenous epistemology is difficult in the United States; research and dialogue on the subject is in its infancy, mainly because many scholars deem it unworthy of study and too far removed from accepted Western thinking. Some Canadian scholars, on the other hand, have been more willing to recognize and value the importance that native people place on knowledge acquisition; thus, much of the fieldwork and research for this work was undertaken among that country's First Nations and Métis population.

Although a number of universities in this country emphasize that they have Native American writers as members of faculty (for example, Diné poet, writer, and librettist, Laura Tohe, is a professor at Arizona State University, and Diné poet and writer, Luci Tapahonso, holds the position of professor of American Indian Studies and English at The University of Arizona), many less acclaimed native scholars who are not creative writers but are studying or carrying out research on native issues within the United States university system find that, unless they adhere to quantifiable Western topics and methods of study, they often fail to see their work recognized or published. We hope that our work will, in some way, lead to more research in this important field.

With regard to terminology, the use of identifying terms such as indigenous, natives, Indians, Western culture, and civilization, comes from Western education, and we are painfully aware that the English language is *terminological quicksand*. Moreover, references to Western society, the Western world, or Western culture are not geographically based, but indicate the cultural system founded upon Greco-Roman classical influences. Specific terms may be more correct, but not as easily interpreted. Thus, for the purpose of being more readily understood by all readers,

we have adopted the commonly accepted usages, and we apologize for any breached sensitivities.

It is important for readers to understand that the intentions behind this work are two-fold; first we wish to offer an overview of the importance of indigenous ways of knowing in today's world, despite society's persistent attempt to discredit them, and second, we are suggesting ways in which today's public education system could be enhanced by embracing the worldviews and needs of all its students.

Finally, the personal narratives that precede each chapter are the work of the first author.

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MTR

First, I would like to thank Michael for suggesting this collaboration; the process has been long, but well worth all of the efforts. I would also like to thank my family on both sides of the Atlantic for all of their support and interest in this project. I am particularly grateful to my husband, Richard, whose selfless patience has been the greatest gift.

LH

NOAA AND THE DEERFLY

A few summers ago, I was in Northwest Ontario, Canada, on a Native Reserve carrying out the initial stages of my search for indigenous wisdom and knowledge. I wasn't having much luck, so one day I decided to visit local Native mounds, hoping for some insight. The day was warm and sultry with severe thunderstorm warnings posted for that afternoon and evening; my weather radio accessed information services from both the United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and its Canadian counterpart. The forecast was important, because I had to travel a significant distance to and from the mounds by boat over a large stretch of water.

My mound tour was uneventful, except for the bugs, particularly the deerflies, so after a respectable time wandering through the woods, I turned toward the small interpretive center. Being hot and thirsty, I went into the café announcing to no one in particular how warm and humid it was and that surely it was going to storm soon. Besides a waitress, the small café's only other occupant was an elderly Native gentleman who was wearing a Detroit Tigers baseball cap. He was eating a piece of pre-bingo blueberry pie. A minute or two after my professorial pontification, he muttered, "deerflies bite?" After a moment of reflection, I told him "no." He said, "Hmm." There it was. Of course, at the time I didn't realize the significance of his gift to me.

The boat trip back to my island cabin was uneventful and the apocalyptic thunderstorms never materialized. The next morning, I walked down to the dock and was promptly bitten by a deerfly. I got it – the bite and the lesson. If there are deerflies around and they are biting, it will storm. The storms hit the area within the hour. Perhaps the old man only wanted to know if he could get home after bingo without getting wet, but I would like to believe that he was educating me, even though he said only three words. No Doppler radar necessary; deerflies don't show up on radar anyway.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> Objectivity requires an ability to stand apart – but there is no "apart." We are inescapably of the universe.
>
> John Broomfield, *Other Ways of Knowing*

That deerflies only bite before a storm is not lost knowledge, but rather knowledge that is being or has been ignored or disregarded as irrelevant. How many other examples are there of untapped knowledge that could benefit today's society and, on a larger scale, alter the way that Westernized human beings view the world and their place in it?

Since the days of Plato and Aristotle, scholars in the Western world have come to consider knowledge as being derived either from an authoritative source or through scientific objectivity; the latter being a way of learning that strips away all that is not derived deductively. Herein, however, lies a paradox; to be objective, researchers must shed their cultural lens and the cultural implications of their subjects: and by doing so, they are forced to ignore intuitively and experientially-derived knowledge, and the myriad educational or cultural outliers that they have been taught to deem irrelevant to scholarly investigation. Failure to siphon such data leaves them vulnerable to criticism that their research is "soft" and therefore not to be taken seriously within academic institutions. It is unlikely that any meteorology program teaches deerfly behavior.

Over the past twenty or so years the works of "new-age philosophers" such as James Redfield,[1] Carlos Castaneda,[2] and Colin Wilson[3] have gained a steady and significant place in bookstores and, indeed, on personal bookshelves throughout the Western world. It is perhaps hard to imagine how, or why, such volumes have touched modern, technology-dependent consumers, but Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy*,[4] that he had to self-publish as a paperback in 1993 before a hardcover version was produced commercially in 1994, has enjoyed enormous success both in the United States and abroad, including more than two years on the New York Times best seller list. By 2004, according to Redfield's website *Celestinevision.com*,[5] he had over 20 million books in print in over 50 languages.

The writings of Carlos Castaneda, notably *The Teachings of Don Juan*,[6] also need to be taken seriously. This is not because they were all best sellers and wildly popular among the general public, but because their meaning is anything but simplistic, and most academics seem unwilling, or unable, to critique them. Colin Wilson's novel, *The Philosopher's Stone*,[7] albeit somewhat less popular than the aforementioned works, provides a fascinating vision of human potential that few can imagine, and suggests that an extraordinary untapped power resides within humans.

The popularity of this group of authors may lie in their ability to make important philosophical ideas accessible and interesting to the general public by including cultural-based thinking in their sphere of knowledge, and thus positing new theories that include pre-literate knowledge as a way of knowing. While authors such as these have endured their share of ridicule and derision from "learned" critics, many readers conclude that their message ought to be heeded. After all, they of all writers seem to have provided the general public with alternative worldviews for the future, and a grounded sense of purpose that many people of Western society have lost as they engage in the constant struggle to keep up with technological progress and the pressure to achieve.

At the other extreme are the "academic philosophers" who reach only a select few**.** An interesting article, entitled "The Care and Feeding of the Reader,"[8] in the September 14, 2007 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* shows that of the almost 1.5 million books sold in the United States during 2006, only 483 sold more than 100,000 copies. The article's author, Rachel Toor, comments that very few of the 483 had been written by academics, and of those even fewer were actually read, because "…many books by academics are, frankly, nothing more than data dumps. Their authors assume that information is enough."[9] Yet these are the people who define and control what is considered knowledge. So why is it that non-academics are able to connect with their readers more successfully than those who dedicate their lives to garnering and disseminating knowledge? According to Toor, writers who succeed in reaching a wide audience do so because they care about their readers enough to ensure, not just that they are informed, but also that they find pleasure in reading the text.[10] The writers of best sellers are not writing to ensure tenure or promotion, or to be able to add a line to their curriculum vitae. They are writing because they have a story to tell, or perhaps because they feel that they have an answer to a societal problem.

University professors, whose audiences are often limited, make sparse mention in their scholarly texts of knowledge derived through non-Western ways. Some would also say that by using language that is exclusive only to fellow scholars, the educational elite is ensuring that they determine how knowledge is derived, what is worthy of learning, and how it will be taught. Non-academics could be forgiven for thinking that the system is designed intentionally to exclude the general public. That would explain why the new-age philosophers are considered by those in the academic world to be *outliers*, despite their significant popular success, and why they are, for the most part, not only ignored as Western research demands, but also, and even worse, scorned and discredited throughout the temples of empiricism. But the phenomenal success of *The Celestine Prophecy* and *The Teachings of Don Juan* series surely suggests that scientifically-derived knowledge is failing to serve *all* the needs of Western society. One main difference between the traditional academic writing and the work of the so-called *outliers* is that the latter embraces divergent means of acquiring knowledge; traditional and non-traditional, ancient and modern, deductive and inductive.

Of equal concern, however, is the knowledge that the educational curriculum in United States schools is, to a large extent, determined by these same academics, and

thus promotes only information or subjects that they value. Of course, the political system of the country also plays a large part in determining what will be taught in schools, because the politics of public school funding and the ideology promoted in the curriculum are closely linked. The result is that young people in the United States are herded into an education system that is designed to favor one type of student; the English-speaking, relatively wealthy American with no special needs, and whose parents have been able to choose to live in an affluent school district. At school, these students have access to the latest technology and textbooks, experienced teachers who are *highly qualified*[11] to teach in their particular field, athletic facilities to ensure fitness, and ample counselors to provide scholarship opportunities. At the same time, they tend to have parents who have the educational background, determination, and time to encourage and support active learning, and a peer group that shares their educational goals. These young people expect, and are expected, to become tomorrow's leaders, thus continuing their parents' legacy and sense of entitlement.

On the other side of this educational divide are young people whose experiences with the educational process leave them with few skills and even fewer career options. For these students, school offers little hope for the future; the schools are often under-funded (there is no wealthy Parent Teacher Association (PTA) here), the overall standard of teaching is poor (experienced and effective teachers have the freedom to chose their workplace, and tend to prefer the security and comfort of affluent school districts), parents usually have neither the education nor the means to support their children's aspirations, and, importantly, their peer group does not want them to succeed ("crabs in the bucket" syndrome).[12] Unfortunately, this is the daily reality for many minority students. While people in this country talk incessantly about multiculturalism and the benefits of a diverse society, the education system continues to favor those of Northern European descent—the very people whose societal norms have been dictated by Greek and Roman doctrine and methods of teaching. Native people, minority citizens, and immigrants from other parts of the world, especially those who are not native English speakers, are often marginalized because their ways of learning and prior knowledge are not consistent with traditional scientifically objective methodology.

Many observers of indigenous people and their ways of knowing and accumulating knowledge have learned and, thus, continually insist that before people can take part fully in all aspects of humanity, they must integrate additional ways of learning into every facet of their lives. And, if education is the means by which young people become knowledgeable and useful members of society, their course of study must integrate both Western and native ways of knowing. This can be achieved by adopting a unified approach to education that equips students with the tools to embrace not only empirical science, but also the many less easily defined criteria that indigenous people have known for millennia and are necessary for a better future.

The subsequent chapters in this book will look at: how people, both indigenous and Western, gain and use knowledge (chapters 2–5); how harmful a forced education system can be (chapter 6); the different ways that people use language

to communicate and learn (chapter 7); and the alienating effects of separating people from their knowledge base and culture (chapter 8). In the final three chapters (9–11), we will suggest ways in which the present Western education model, which is, by all accounts, failing our children, should be replaced by a new system that educates every aspect of every child. A plan that calls for a total rethink of our education system seems to be a tall order and will be discounted by some as a preposterous notion, but most of us know that our present system is broken and that our children deserve much better.

THE BUTTERFLY TREE

I recall that in my youth I often wondered why at certain times of the year all the Monarch butterflies suddenly started flying south. This wonder was recently revisited when I realized I live near a "butterfly tree." Most evenings I walk my dog near a pond in south Texas, and I have found that for just a few evenings each fall, a particular tree next to the pond becomes alive with hundreds, if not thousands, of butterflies. Astonishingly, the surrounding trees have no butterflies. This tree, or its location, is special, but the mystery is, how do all the butterflies in the area not only find it, but also know that it is theirs? Surely there are many such trees that serve as hostels for the Monarchs during their long journey, and as evening comes, butterflies go to them, but it is the accuracy of their navigation that is fascinating. As I watch, these beautiful insects are not wandering around looking for a place to rest; they simply fly from all different directions directly to this particular tree. My observations help me to recall the sacred connection between animal and place. There was a time when I had seemingly forgotten, but no matter where my wanderings lead, something always reminds me.

I was taught to hunt and fish as a child and learned that both were important rituals within my community. As an adult, I am always struck by how much more attuned I am to my surroundings after only a relatively short time in the woods. I certainly see and hear things during the first few days, but as time passes, my sense of hearing, seeing, and intuiting increase profoundly as my city-born dullness dissipates. It is as if a fog has lifted. The very presence of the natural world seems to wash out the sensory pollution of the modern materialistic society.

For those who live in a city with a large population, the grime is thicker and takes longer to cleanse. I live in a large city and, although near an extensive green area, I am always aware of constant ambient noise—even during the so-called quiet times of the day. During rush hour, there is a background din that must surely take its toll on the senses. When I retreat to the woods of the Minnesota-Canadian border region, I am always surprised by the silence and by the slow pace of life. The first few days are busy, but once I have completed my post-arrival tasks, it is difficult to overcome feelings of boredom and inertia. That is surely a product of my modern way of life. Unfortunately, not only has Western culture taught us to be continuously occupied, but also today's society suggests that if we are not multitasking, we are underachieving. This constant activity has, however, made us unaware and unresponsive to our natural surroundings. The prime danger here is that our educational process is teaching us how to be in the world but not a fully integrated part of it. Fortunately for me, my early upbringing taught me to value my connection with nature, and so the longer I stay in the woods, the more comfortable I become with my place in the natural world.

CHAPTER 2

INDIGENOUS WAYS OF KNOWING

> There is a way in which the collective knowledge of mankind expresses itself, for the finite individual, through mere daily living . . . a way in which life itself is sheer knowing.
>
> Laurens van der Post, *Venture to the Interior*

Indigenous people traditionally acquire knowledge from two spheres; via an axis from above, that is, from the spirit world, and from the earth below. Within this system of learning, science, art, and religion are integrated, and education brings knowledge of how to live and how to be moral. This is a simple model of being human. Culture and education are enhanced through critical consciousness, but they are not liberatory; on the contrary, they are acquired through community life and thus strengthen social bonds.

Indigenous or aboriginal people have traditionally been hunters and gatherers, but the majority of such people today neither hunts nor gathers. Throughout the world there are still some indigenous people who follow their ancestors' way of life, but few have managed to remain nomadic. For those who do maintain an itinerant lifestyle, it is common that they have contact with, and utilize, resources from outside their culture. It is extremely rare for indigenous cultures today to avoid contact with people outside their group, but a small number do prefer to inhabit areas that are isolated from modern society. For these people, the greatest threat to their way of life is modern man's invasion of their territory as he seeks to satisfy his insatiable need to acquire more and more land. Yet, it is from the small populations of those who do preserve the ways of their ancestors that we get a true glimpse of people whose lifestyles are totally different from our own Western *civilized* model. The following pages offer examples of indigenous people from whom we can gain insight: they are the Mashco-Piro of Peru[1], the Sng'oi of Malaysia[2], the Bushmen of the Kalahari[3], and the Australian Aborigines. While most of these people are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain their autonomy, we were heartened to hear that in the spring of 2008 the Brazilian government released aerial pictures of a previously unknown tribe, along with claims that there may be as many as 50 uncontacted tribes remaining in Brazil and Peru.

Indigenous people who have succeeded in maintaining a distance from the modern world retain ancient practices and ways of knowing that most of us have long forgotten, and now can only imagine. But if we are prepared to set aside skepticism and open our minds, we can learn much from these people and from the few who have been privileged to meet them. The rub, however, is that documentation of these

meetings is inevitably recorded through a cultural lens and so must be regarded as interpretative. Nevertheless, any insight into the lives and knowledge base of people who have remained true to the way of life of their distant forebears has to be better than total ignorance of these branches of humanity.

People of Western cultures have a tendency to see indigenous people as "others," and to assess their practices and beliefs with a conscious or unconscious bias that stems from their own culture and education. Moreover, not only do we consider them as distinctly "other," but we also often see their practices and beliefs as bizarre or alien. Yet it is through their uniqueness that most can be learned. Of great concern, however, is the seemingly unstoppable encroachment of modern humans upon these cultures—and its devastating consequences.

In 2005, the government of Peru began working to develop a series of "transitory territorial reserves"[4] to protect nomadic indigenous communities who roam the Amazon jungle. Unfortunately, because of the many economic interests in the proposed areas, the engines of bureaucracy have almost ground to a halt and little progress has been made. The Amazon rainforest area houses the greatest number of isolated indigenous people in the world. Among these are the Mashco-Piro, one of the area's indigenous groups who, since the oppressive days of the rubber barons, have resolutely defended their traditional way of life by voluntarily distancing themselves from other cultures. The proposed area lies within the 2.7 million hectare Alto Purús National Park[5] and offers the Mashco-Piro, of whom there is thought to be no more than 800 (and even that number is considered by some to be extremely optimistic), the freedom to maintain their traditional ways and, most importantly, to avoid the outside world. The Mashco-Piro, according to anthropologist Linda Lema Tucker, "are nomads who move freely through the forest, subsisting on what they are able to gather, hunt or fish. They have survived like fugitives in order to protect themselves from the outside world, which they continue to see as a threat,"[6] and that threat is real. Logging, both legal and illegal, tourism, and missionary work are just some of the many activities that bring Western people close to the Mashco-Piro, and the encounters have proven to be fatal at times for both sides. The indigenous people have been known to attack and kill loggers who have encroached upon their settlements, and, of course, non-indigenous people bring deadly diseases into the area with devastating results for the indigenous groups. According to sociologist Tarcila Rivera, who works with the Peruvian government's Center for Indigenous Cultures, there are laws to protect the "uncontacted" as they are sometimes called. Unfortunately, however, because of their lifestyle, they are seldom considered to be like regular Peruvian citizens and are thus "…outside the protection offered to the rest of the citizens."[7] Sebastiao Manchineri of the Association of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin bemoans the fact that, "[t]he economic system does not respect cultural diversity, and indigenous groups who have voluntarily isolated themselves are considered obstacles. …Without the help of their governments, those communities wishing to live apart from 'civilization' will become extinct, and there is nothing we can do about it."[8] The most recent threat to