

mamatowisin: teaching and learning as spiritual praxis

Introduction:

As an indigenous teacher, I struggled trying to find personal meaning and connection in higher education. Institutionally, it was assumed that teaching and learning would follow an unspoken epistemology (way of knowing) that emphasized the accumulation of information, analysis of this information into parts, and the separation of knowledge from lived experience. For me, it generally meant plodding through the cerebral terrain of vast amounts of information thought to be part of "academic rigor."

The mechanics of this way of knowing did not align with my Indigenous, holistic view of the world shaped by the integration of mind, body, and spirit. During many sleepless nights, I wondered if I could separate and categorize my way of knowing to fit into this "hidden curriculum." Was I asking the impossible when I aspired to transcend the hidden curriculum of separation embedded in this academic canon? I felt like Tinman in The Wizard of Oz.

I could not find my heart in what went on in the classroom until I taught a course entitled Indigenous Spirituality and Philosophical Thought. It was an upper division course with a mix of students from across the spectrum of disciplines, beliefs, ethnicities, and physical abilities. My goal was to teach this course using an integrative approach by weaving the various disciplinary approaches into a holistic experience--an experience of the mind, body, and spirit. In many respects the classroom would now reflect my innermost convictions about life. We were going to practice what is described in Cree as *mamatowisin*, [1]"the capacity to tap the creative life forces of the

inner space by the use of all the faculties that constitute our being—it is to exercise inwardness." (Hart, p. 7)

Teaching with mamatowisin:

Integral to this practice of mamatowisin I needed to know the inward journeys of each student as they were processing the course content. It required a type of reflective practice with instructional strategies to reveal the hidden mysteries of the heart. I needed to know what inward shifts were taking place? What were the students thinking? What were they feeling? How were they processing and understanding core concepts? I decided to have the students write short papers (1-6 pages) where they were to personally respond (in writing) to key questions related to the readings, lectures, videos, and classroom discussions. There were three parts to these responsive writings:

- In Part 1, they were to paraphrase key ideas and concepts from the readings. (This section would be graded.)
- In Part 2, they were to respond to key questions based on the readings. (This section would be graded.)
- In Part 3, they were to reflect and comment on their personal reactions to the readings. (This section was not graded.)

Part 3 was of most interest to me because it revealed the students' innermost responses to the concepts and ideas in the course and it offered me an opportunity to communicate with each student as I answered questions or concerns, they had related to course content. It was a confidential exchange between teacher and student. It required an inward look for the teacher and student. It was from these exchanges in Part 3 that I realized the students were being challenged

to “see with a Native eye” while suspending their own Western worldview that viewed human beings as dominant over nature and separate from nature.

In short, it was critical for each of my students to learn to see the world differently. It was critical for them to view themselves as integral to nature and to suspend or transform their worldview from one that was dominant over or separate from nature. Otherwise, they would misunderstand and misinterpret the Indigenous nature-based ceremonial and ritual practices, which were integral aspects of the course content. Increasingly, I began to understand and realize that my students had to traverse new conceptual terrain, which was personal, oral, experiential, holistic, and conveyed in narrative or metaphorical language.

I recall many classroom sessions when we were all caught up in *mamatowisin*, where the heart is aroused. The atmosphere is electric. A student is typing, her braille machine clicking at a faster pace as the room gets caught up in the moment. The person signing for the hearing-impaired student is equally excited. It is a classroom setting that allows spontaneity yet encourages the reflective pause as one ponders newly formed ideas.

Students practicing *mamatowisin*:

These teaching practices may be foreign to some of you as readers so I thought it would be helpful to see some examples of students' writings. In this example we were studying the rites of passage that marked the ceremonial transition from being a child to being an adult. I gave students readings on the rites of passage of the Kwakiutl People (from the Pacific Northwest) and the Diné People (from the

Southwest). After the students read the assigned readings related to these rites of passage, we discussed them at length in class using video, interactive lecture with Power Point, and small and large group discussion formats.

Not wanting them to regurgitate this specific information related to these ceremonial rites of passage, I asked the students to describe in a reflective journal format (6 typewritten pages) their rites of passage. They were to highlight their major, life-changing events and personal experiences that served as their "rites of passage."

Their responses were amazing. One of the students (English major) wrote 85 pages in her journal entry! She told me her entire life story with a note letting me know that I could stop reading at the end of page six. I was spellbound. I could not stop reading!

As the students deepened their understanding and spiritual praxis, their writing became much more descriptive and metaphorical. What they were experiencing was beyond the linear and cognitive. It encompassed more than mere understanding and cogitation. They were entering *mamatowisin*. Here is one excerpt from a student's journal entry on his rites of passage:

"These personal journals are like lancing an infected boil; the psyche leaks all over the page. Suddenly there is the attempted suicide, half-truths about heroin and opium, death of a friend. The rites of passage are often stained with pain. I have a certain animosity towards confession and the alleviation of guilt, probably because of my background in the United Pentecostal Church. Because this course is focused on spirituality, I've decided to tell three separate stories, each with a definingly different spiritual frequency. These aren't "rites

of passage" but they do reflect seasons of spirituality, transitions, the dying and being born, the putting down and picking up."

Next is a poem written by another student who chose to participate in an Inipi ceremony, also known as the "sweat." It's a ceremony where one physically and psychologically detoxifies and is embraced in the "womb" once again. It is a "rebirth." This November night was white with snow and quite cold, but it clearly was transformative for this student.

The Home Journey

1

"This time I entered from the East after a road that was strange to my hands a mood of an already started ceremony proving sweetly, my inner side. A rare evening conspires with my heart to move in unison.

And there was something in the way twilight played in me melodies I didn't know I had. In the darkness I hear the sounds of mother earth, the rhythm that generation after generation of rape by the stranger thought to be Quetzalcoatl have not erased."

11

"Wakan Tanka, mother earth, great spirit, allow me to take communion with you, to transcend, to become you. Let me rest in the warmth of your womb in the micro cosmos of which I am part.

Heal my wounds for my journey has been long and the battle debilitating. Allow me to be born again in the midst of your sacred fire so I can reconnect with all other nations as one."

"I exit from the West sandwiched in the brief moment between the acts of physical and spiritual realms I let spirals of sacred smoke rise from my body to the starry sky. I let a tear go down while the world resounds in my chest as I realize I've finally come home."

The final exam also required the students to personalize the meaning of Black Elk Speaks written by John G. Neihardt who spent years interviewing Black Elk—a Lakota Medicine Man. The book is highly reliant on the Lakota cultural context with poetic and metaphorical language that details Black Elk's visions as a child. The students were to extrapolate Black Elk's visions and/or life story to some aspects of their lived experiences. Here is an example of a student, who was physics major and a jazz musician, who submitted an original composition based on the required reading of Black Elk Speaks. A very abbreviated excerpt is included below.

"The introduction consists of a short melody that represents the voices that Black Elk hears. Eventually, these voices carry him to the clouds. When he gets there, he encounters the horses. There are twelve notes on the chromatic scale, so there is one note per horse in the four chromatic scales (twelve horses for each of the four directions). Then those horses turn into all kinds of different animals. This is represented by the chromatic scales turning to major scales on their descent. The reason I chose music is because music is intrinsically related to cycles and connection [like Black Elk's visions]."

This student further elaborates on how the music tree of notes used in his composition is reflective of the "tree of life" Black Elk refers to in his book. The Tree of Life is a central symbol in Black Elk's vision and a

representation of the Lakota people and their relationship with the world.

These writings and assignments of which I shared short excerpts were not the exception. Students embraced the opportunity to expand their horizons, to listen to similar journeys from their peers, and, above all, they enjoyed being in relationship—embracing their humanness and the other than human world. They had “finally come home.”

In general, my rubric was simple. The guiding assessment questions were:

- Was this written response a true measure of the student's understanding?
- Is it a cyclical measure of how far the student has “traveled” in his/her inward journey of the heart—a truly reflective/ spiritual practice, encouraging a lifetime commitment and transformation?
- Above all, does the writing reflect *mamatowisin*?

In conclusion, I learned the effectiveness of instructional strategies that integrate mind, body, and spirit. Rather than following the strictures of the hidden curriculum, these instructional strategies were integrative where the students felt seen by each other, they were safe and could reveal their vulnerability while deeply connecting their life experiences to their learning.

Such integrated practices are reflective of the perennial wisdom of indigenous peoples. As I continue to explore the different facets of teaching and learning, I know that creative instructional formats will continue to reveal the hidden dimensions of the human heart and will

gradually impact systemic change from the inside...as we practice
mamatowisin.

[1] Hart, M. A. (2010) "Indigenous worldviews, knowledge, and research
paradigm." *Journal of Indigenous Voices in Social Work*, 1 (1), pp. 1-16.