



Integrative Science student, Alaina Jeddore, with a poster that she produced highlighting traditional knowledge about shellfish.

# TWO-EYED SEEING

## Building Cultural Bridges for Aboriginal Students

by Annamarie Hatcher  
and Cheryl Bartlett

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The educational gap between Aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians is the most significant social policy challenge facing Canada (Richards, 2008). Aboriginal people face multiple barriers which impact their ability to succeed in educational institutions. The greatest barrier relates to the forced removal of whole generations of Aboriginal children from their communities to residential schools in the period between the late 1920s and the late 1960s. This removal eroded language and culture and severed the links between individuals and their cultural and spiritual roots. The 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples concluded that many of the current challenges facing Aboriginal communities, including loss of identity, spirituality and language, can be tied to the residential school experience (Cappon, 2008).

As well as this burden of the past, Aboriginal learners face many current barriers ranging from the logistic challenges of single parents attending classes to the jurisdictional jungle surrounding the control of Aboriginal educational facilities and supports. Without an intense effort, "Canadian governments (Aboriginal

as well as non-aboriginal) will serve the next generation of Aboriginal students as inadequately as they have the current one." (Richards, 2008).

The Eurocentric consciousness of the Canadian education system needs to be sensitized to the colonial and neo-colonial practices that marginalize and racialize Aboriginal students (Battiste, 2002). These practices, often not recognized by teachers who were themselves raised in the Eurocentric system, include issues such as curriculum relevance, teacher proficiency at cultural border crossing, effective strategies to engage parents, students and supporting community members, and innovative ways to develop student assessments, facilities and teaching materials (Archibald, 1995).

### Racism

One of the most profound challenges for Aboriginal learners in the education system is racism. Cultural identities and worldviews are shaped by a continuous play of history, culture and power (St. Denis, 2007). Modern Aboriginal worldviews are coloured by a history of racism and colonization. Racism from educated people may be one of the biggest barriers to inclusion of Aboriginal traditional cultures into the education system (Michell *et al.*, 2008). Colonial education strategies and attempted assimilation into the Western culture have had a devastating impact on Aboriginal peoples who now have very high rates of incarceration, substance abuse and school drop-out rates. Many people are unaware of the extent of colonization and attempted assimilation in the past because settler history is sanitized in textbooks and Aboriginal history and culture have been superficially treated. This has done little to foster respect for the history of the Indigenous peoples or to empower First Nations children with a sense of pride in their past.

For many people, particularly those in the majority, social identities are invisible (Dlugos, 2006). Generally, non-minority people feel uncomfortable talking about racism. To develop a learning environment within which Aboriginal learners feel respected, teachers need to be able to discuss issues of racism in racially-mixed

groups (Battiste, 2002). Racism can become a "normal way of seeing" and it is possible to be critical of racism at the level of ideology but have "common sense racism" (Bannerji, 1987).

*The reality of common-sense racism hit me during my time living on a small island in the West Indies where I was one of the handful of year-round white residents. My eldest son had just started at the local high school and was keen to try out for the track and field team. The coach, interested in winning the trophy that year, told him not to try running. He told him that it was common knowledge that white boys could not run well.*

(A. Hatcher, personal experience)

All teachers and students have a racial identity, and in Canada (as well as many other countries) it is almost always the white European identity that dominates. It can be a significant struggle to give "equal time" in the classroom to the Eurocentric and the Aboriginal worldviews. The Eurocentric outlook can become dominant by difference (Fellows and Razack, 1998 as cited in St. Denis and Schick, 2003). Dominant identities such as "able-bodied" or "white" are recognized as normal by constructing outsider identities such as "disabled" or "aboriginal" (St. Denis and Schick, 2003). Dei (2005) describes racism as "about unequal power relations." It is also about how people relate to each other on the basis of defined social identities. This is evident in many education systems, where practices dominated by the privileges of "whiteness" are still prevalent despite all the educational rhetoric concerning multicultural pedagogy (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998).

### A Colour-blind View

A common practice is to deny that racism exists by using approaches such as adopting a colour-blind view which appears virtuous and perpetuates the notion that colour does not matter because we are all really the same. This highlights ways in which minority groups are similar to the norm (usually the dominant white group), indicating that the value of these other groups is



irrelevant. Blindness to the influences of race in people's lives has a powerful effect on schools in Eurocentric societies by keeping white people from learning about the role that their privilege plays in personal and institutional racism. If white teachers want to challenge the authority of the Eurocentric worldview, and build an anti-racist, socially just and global curriculum, they need to acknowledge their power and privilege (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003).

*... Without addressing this part of the problem, well-meaning whites can remain bystanders who unconsciously and indirectly support racism through their own blindness and inaction. (Bell, 2002, p. 238)*

Denying racial identity (i.e., saying that we are all the same under the skin) trivializes the effects of power, and waters down the daily effects of white privilege. The dominant racial identity (white) can thus be considered the norm against which others are judged (i.e., non-white) (Bhabha, 1994). The fundamental promise of capitalism is that everyone has equal opportunity and hard work pays off. Thus, lack of success may be ascribed to laziness or low intelligence, a way of blaming the victim. This attitude changes when teachers become effective in cultural border crossing. A respectful recognition of the student's Aboriginal heritage will help de-fuse the destructive influence of racism.

Education for Indigenous students should help them connect with tribal consciousness and the traditions that animate their spiritual selves (Battiste, 2002).

*When the Mi'kmaq spirit is alive, racism does not affect you because you are comfortable in your own skin. You respond with tolerance and compassion, not aggression. (Albert Marshall Mi'kmaq Elder and Advisor, Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources, Jan. 16, 2009)*

### Educational Multiculturalism

Educational multiculturalism is a nonhierarchical approach that gives "equal time" to many cultural perspectives. A respectful recognition and celebration of Indigenous culture in school is of benefit to all students, regardless of ethnicity, as a preparation for their entry into inclusive workplaces or post-secondary education. The great challenge is to find a respectful way of comparing Eurocentric and Indigenous ways of knowing and including both in contemporary education (Battiste, 2002).

The effects of Eurocentric educational systems on Aboriginal students are largely due to differential treatment according to race. Although many more Aboriginal teachers are being trained in Canada now than in the past, more are needed and Aboriginal culture needs to be reflected more in the curriculum (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2009). Students often fail to establish a group cultural identity because the school environment does not highlight their cultural distinctness. The group cultural identity is a strength for many Aboriginal learners and a means to ensure engagement within the school community. Under the current Canadian curriculum-based education, Aboriginal students are assimilated into the mainstream culture and can lose part of their Aboriginal identity. If ethnicity

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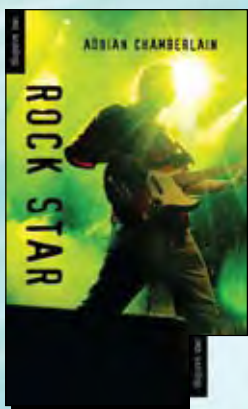


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and equality are to survive in the classroom it is crucial to celebrate cultural distinctness (Ogbu, 1982; Philips, 1983).

Two Indigenous scholars, Battiste and Henderson (2000), summarize the structure of Indigenous ways of knowing: (1) knowledge of unseen powers in the ecosystem, (2) knowledge of the interconnectedness of all things, (3) knowledge of the perception of reality based on linguistic structure or ways of communicating, (4) knowledge that personal relationships bond people, communities and ecosystems, (5) knowledge that traditions teach specialized knowledge related to “morals” and “ethics” and (6) knowledge that extended kinship passes on social traditions and practices from one generation to the next. When the two cultures meet in the classroom, often the Aboriginal worldview is assimilated or “colonized.”

The challenge for the teacher is to empower the Aboriginal learner to see and interpret the world through his/her eyes, not the eyes of the “other” (after Sefa Dei, 1996). Inclusive education does not mean replacing one hegemony (Eurocentric) with another (Aboriginal). This is the underpinning of a concept called Two-Eyed Seeing, brought forward by Mi’kmaq Elder Albert Marshall (Bartlett *et al*, 2007; Hatcher *et al*, 2009). The educator is in the position to provide the tools to empower the Aboriginal learner through Two-Eyed Seeing, despite the dominant Eurocentric paradigm. Aboriginal students become more than seekers of knowledge; they become active participants in it, a fundamental principle of the Aboriginal Worldview.

### What is Two-Eyed Seeing?

Two-Eyed Seeing is to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western ways of knowing, and to use both of these eyes together. By concentrating on common ground and respecting differences, we have begun to build a transcultural bridge between these two ways of knowing. The Two-Eyed Seeing approach mindfully avoids knowledge domination and assimilation. Crucial elements include a co-learning philosophy, connection with culture and community, a psychologically-safe classroom, and Aboriginal pedagogy.

Two-Eyed Seeing is a way to incorporate minority cultures into all classrooms. Both worldviews are significant to the students and deserve equal treatment. Innovative curricula, classroom practices, delivery methods and assessment procedures will offer students more opportunities to succeed in the dominant culture without losing their own. These innovative teaching materials and techniques cross cultural bridges and weave back and forth between worldviews. The relative importance of the traditional versus the dominant culture is actively debated among the Innu in Labrador

*—as one elder told his grandson, the traditional culture is necessary for the spirit but the dominant culture is where one makes money.* (Densmore, Lisa. Personal Communication, 7 April, 2006. As quoted in Jong, 2007)

Many different ways of knowing co-exist on our planet and a post-colonial agenda requires that bridges be built among them (Kawagley, 1995). Cultural modes

of perception and understanding are deeply embedded and self-perpetuating. The Indigenous worldview contains deep and subtle wisdom, which Mother Earth needs, but which is difficult for those with a Western culture to practise authentically because they generally do not have the underlying beliefs, values and cultural connections to nature and each other. Many cultural concepts simply are not transferable to other cultures (Hatcher *et al*, 2009).

*We are not aware that we act within conventional sets of rules ourselves. We assume instead that the way we behave, express ourselves, and interpret others is the way all people do it. All cultures operate within this myopia; it seems to me, not even suspecting that others may have developed very different rules.* (Ross, 1992, page 5)

### Inclusive Education: The Teacher’s Role

*We need teachers who can weave back and forth between the knowledges.* (from interview with Albert Marshall, Mi’kmaq Elder and Advisor, Unama’ki Institute of Natural Resources, Jan. 16, 2009)

Teachers are a product of their own culture and consequently bring cultural baggage to the classroom. The challenge for non-Aboriginal teachers is the relinquishing of their own control as they respectfully listen to another viewpoint (Ogbu, 1982). This is a complex challenge; deconstructing and displacing the Eurocentric hegemony of “whiteness” and collaborating in the exploration of knowledge rooted in unfamiliar epistemologies (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003).



Traditional drumming is welcome in the classroom.

Culturally competent teachers can contribute significantly to the success rate of Aboriginal students. They can foster greater understanding and appreciation of the diverse cultures in our society with all students. They can improve the communication and critical thinking skills necessary to facilitate intercultural dialogue. They are good intercultural communicators who can maintain varied forms of communication including the mode important to them and the mode important to the student. This cultural competence may come from



being raised in the culture (i.e., Aboriginal instructors). It also may come from experience crossing the cultural border. Along with cultural competence comes cultural humility, which is the development of a respectful partnership with diverse individuals, groups and communities. Two-Eyed Seeing is a form of cultural humility.

Flexibility is the key to successful cultural border crossing (Aikenhead and Jegede, 1999). To successfully cross cultural borders is to shift from being one person in one context to being another person in a different context without losing self-identity. The cultural borders could be from the world of white middle class to that of an Aboriginal student who lives on a reserve or the world of an Afro-Canadian woman in a white male-dominated workplace. We can feel at ease in one world and not the other. Ease is due to several factors: being a fluent speaker, agreeing with the norms of that culture, being humanly bonded with people in that culture, or having a sense of shared history (Aikenhead and Jegede, 1999). The presence of only one factor can cause one to feel at ease.

### Inclusive Curriculum

*Education affects who you are as a person. It empowers you when your own culture is validated, when you see it used. Teachers need to present who they are (the students) as a valid part of the knowledge.* (from interview with Albert Marshall (Mi'kmaq Elder and Advisor, Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources, Jan. 27, 2009).

One of the significant barriers to the success of Aboriginal students in school could be the Eurocentric curriculum. Canada's education systems have largely ignored Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy. Eurocentric philosophy is based on a noun-based language. Battiste and Henderson (2000) state that this "creates a detachment from that which is known, so that knowledge does not inform or create meaning" (p. 123). It is now clear that the exclusive use of Eurocentric knowledge has failed the First Nations children (Battiste, 2002). In much of that curriculum, Aboriginal people are often viewed as subjects to study rather than active creators of knowledge. Students need to see Aboriginal knowledge reflected in the curriculum. The Eurocentric (or Western) approach is largely based on hierarchical, linear thinking. In the Indigenous worldview, knowledge and the learners are intimately connected, in contrast to their separation in Western thinking.

Courses have been developed for many school systems, including Nova Scotia, that include Black history and culture. The development of similar courses for Aboriginal history and culture has not progressed as far. However, this type of inclusion may not be enough because it often takes the form of a few sessions dealing with minority themes and tokens such as "multicultural dinners," leaving the minority learner grafted onto the existing order and continuing to underachieve. The celebration of Black History and Mi'kmaq History Months within schools sends mixed signals for students. It is good to recognize and highlight these cultures but choosing a particular month to do so presents them as "add-ons" implying that the dominant culture is the norm. A superficial treatment of culture can reinforce stereotypes (Archibald, 2008). A pedagogy sensitive

to cultural differences moves way beyond the superficial treatment of culture as food festivals, dances and concerts. Celebration of all cultures should occur in a respectful, meaningful way over the whole school year.

How can Aboriginal knowledge be incorporated into programs and curriculum for the benefit of all learners, and particularly Aboriginal learners? Aboriginal learners are not a homogenous group. They can be First Nations, Metis or Inuit from all geographic areas and from First Nation's Reserves or an urban area. They may be "traditional" and strongly interested in preserving their cultural traditions or they may not be "traditional," and primarily interested in succeeding in modern consumer-based society. Because of this diversity, programs, supports and structures must be flexible.

Educators must tap the cultural capital that students bring from their communities. This forms the foundation for a co-learning Two-Eyed Seeing approach in the classroom. Context is powerful in the "pedagogy of the home." School curricula need to incorporate local traditional knowledge, in consultation with the Elders. Reflexive learning takes place at these intersections between teachers and community Elders as new understandings are constructed (Barnes, 1976).

### Summary

Aboriginal students face many challenges that affect their performance in school. Challenges related to the educational institutions include issues such as racism, curriculum relevance, lack of teacher proficiency at cultural border crossing, lack of effective strategies to engage parents, students and supporting community members, and lack of innovative ways to develop student assessments, facilities and teaching materials. Educational multiculturalism using a Two-Eyed Seeing approach is a nonhierarchical approach which gives "equal time" to many cultural perspectives. A culturally competent teacher can contribute significantly to the success rate of Aboriginal students by fostering greater understanding and appreciation of the diverse cultures in our society with all students, and improving the communication and critical thinking skills necessary to facilitate intercultural dialogue. Culturally-relevant teaching will be transformative, equipping students with the educational capital to deal with contradictions between the norms privileged in the school and the reality of the students' out-of-school experiences.

Editor's Note: A list of the references cited in this article is available upon request.

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