

Indigenous Knowledge: Understandings & Considerations

Note to educators: These are general guidelines to help educators ensure they are being respectful in their approach to Indigenous Knowledge and Knowledge Holders. How educators implement these will vary based on their location, school, and local communities. The purpose of these guidelines is to help educators develop lessons and activities that are free from biases and misconceptions.

Indigenous Peoples are the guardians and interpreters of their culture, traditions, and knowledge systems.

Indigenous traditional knowledge, culture, and languages are connected to the land.

Indigenous Peoples have the right to exercise, control, and protect their culture, intellectual properties, and knowledge.

Indigenous communities own their unique knowledge and have the right to control their own community knowledge.

Be sure to follow these guidelines:

- Respect and reciprocity. Create a relationship that is based on sharing and mutual benefit for everyone involved.
- Seek permission first. When considering using knowledge or teachings in the classroom, educators must always have permission from the person (e.g., Elder) or community from which the information is coming to ensure accountability. The source of knowledge must always be acknowledged and referenced.
- Build a relationship with Knowledge Holders (e.g., Elder) in your traditional territory. This is foundational for ensuring respect and building partnerships. With an established relationship, educators will be able to access information and local knowledge that is also based on reciprocity and reconciliation. Building relationships will foster an inclusive and respectful learning community.
- Acknowledge the traditional territory.
- Projects must involve the community that owns the knowledge.
- Community should be approached as a partner in learning.
- Educators who request access to a specific community's Indigenous Knowledge must fully inform the community of the intent of use.
- Disclose the origin of all Indigenous Knowledge accessed and used.
- Exercise extreme caution when using the internet as a resource as there are many inaccuracies and misrepresentations circulating. When looking at resources, always check to see whose voice is telling the story or providing the information.

A Note About Appropriation:

According to Scafidi, the author of *Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law*, appropriation is defined as, "taking intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, or artifacts from someone else's culture without permission."

To elaborate: "It's most likely to be harmful when the source community is a minority group that has been oppressed or exploited in other ways or when the object of appropriation is particularly sensitive, e.g. sacred objects."

Within this definition, it is important to define culture as including the language, dance, song, ceremonies, rituals, medicines, clothing, sacred items, etc. of a group of people.

Appropriation looks like...	Appreciation looks like....
Wearing a "Native" costume for Halloween	Learning about different types of regalia
Using tribal names for sports teams	Learning about origins of sports (lacrosse)
Constructing dreamcatchers with dollar store kits	Inviting an Elder in to share knowledge on dreamcatchers

Questions to Ask Yourself if You are Unsure...

- Who is profiting?
- Is it appropriate?
- Is the object or item used for special occasions or ceremony of First Nation, Métis, or Inuit Peoples?
- Does it have spiritual significance?
- Have you received permission?
- Have you received teaching from an Elder or Knowledge Keeper?
- Is it intellectual property?

Relevance of Appropriation in Science

In the world of science, we think about the transmission of knowledge. It is important to be acutely aware of the intent and use of Indigenous Knowledge. The development of knowledge from an Indigenous lens recognizes and respects the fact that sometimes knowledge takes years to accumulate. In addition, certain areas of Indigenous knowledge require specific permissions that need to be granted by the carrier prior to being shared. This speaks to responsibility in knowledge transmission. These interactions are often face-to-face through certain protocols that are community specific. Understanding this concept of knowledge transmission also allows one to have a solid understanding of the importance of fostering local relationships.

Indigenous Traditional Knowledge and Intellectual Property Rights

According to the Indigenous Traditional Knowledge and Intellectual Property Rights document, “the importance of protecting and preserving indigenous traditional knowledge has been recognized in several international instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the draft United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the International Labour Organization Convention No. 168, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.”

The document also offers five principal areas of concern with regard to the protection of traditional knowledge and practices:

- Unauthorized copying of works by Aboriginal groups and communities
- Infringement of copyright of individual artists
- Appropriation of Aboriginal themes and images
- Culturally inappropriate use of Aboriginal images and styles by non-Aboriginal creators
- Expropriation of traditional knowledge without compensation

Furthering Your Understanding on Appropriation

A simple definition of appropriation is a starting point; however, this alone leaves an uncertainty and wondering at both a societal and individual level. As individuals, we begin to question whether or not we have appropriated another’s culture. Why, today, are these questions arising? All Canadians, especially those in education, are included in decolonization. In many cases, appropriation occurs as a result of ignorance; however, there should be no excuse. Teachers need to be educated in passing on this knowledge. People are becoming more aware of injustices. In becoming more cognizant of reducing our ignorance, there are a series of steps we can work through as we decolonize our thoughts of appropriation.

1. The first stage is to identify one's positionality. It is suggested that teachers develop the skills to engage in the difficult issues related to privilege, oppression, discrimination, social justice, and positionality. Critical pedagogy is the willingness to act to make change. Part of the relationship building is looking at oneself.

Positionality is your beliefs, values, opinions, reality, and biases, which constitute your understanding and perspective(s) about, in, and of the world. It also includes your ancestry, heritage, knowledge paradigm, and individual through to the collective history of your people. All people have varied perspectives and practices of knowing, doing, being. Some of those perspectives via ethnocentrism have oppressed, excluded, ignored, and exploited others' knowledges, perspectives through, for example in the case of Indigenous Peoples, colonization, resource, land, and knowledge theft and/or appropriation.

Reflecting on our own views, biases, history, family perspectives, etc., should compel us to position ourselves. Will we be able to discuss these issues in a non-judgmental and safe manner with our students/youth? We need to question our realities. Understanding ourselves compared to other cultures and lived experiences of all people can help us determine our position. We need to figure out our own struggles with racism, privilege, and oppression. This brings us to the second stage.

2. The second stage is to define and recognize the power of oppression and privilege. What are we taught? Our education system teaches us to rise to the top; be the best you can be. You aren't successful unless you pursue post-secondary education. Power and strength are at the top of a pyramid. Thoughts and beliefs are socially constructed and we fall into these beliefs. Education maintains us at a status quo. For instance, picture the arrangement of our classrooms. For years, we've organized our desks into rows, we've put our students in uniforms; we give grades and do standardized testing, with the provincial standard being the B; we work in factories in repetitive work; etc. Be the same. This sameness is of the dominant society. All aspects of our lives have been affected by colonization; positionality allows us to see that we have either benefited from the exploits of colonization or we have suffered.

St Denis (2007) calls attention to the dominant society as coming to believe that skin colour places value and worth on humans. Yes, many dimensions of advantage systems exist. Who do they exist for? Who do they benefit? McIntosh (1989) states, layers of power and advantage are dependent upon situational life contexts – your career, place of residence, income level, and education level, amongst others. The layers of power come from your positionality and this power is inherent in all relationships.

People often don't realize they have privilege until they learn about it. When you learn you have it, the question becomes whether or not you will do something to make a change? For some, they turn to denial. Guilt most commonly surfaces when 'white' people realize the involvement of their race in deplorable acts of hatred toward First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Peoples, specifically the genocide, residential schooling, sixties scoop, enfranchisement, Bill-C31, Indian Act, and cultural bans against Indigenous Peoples here in Canada.

3. Learning about and understanding Canada's colonial relationship with First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Peoples in the past, present, and future is the third step. It can't be stressed enough that we must acknowledge the similarities and differences between and across all groups of our Indigenous Peoples here in Canada. The issues of past and present are beyond the scope of our work here, but as educators, it is truly essential for us to understand the several social justice issues facing First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Peoples today, their land and resources.

Working through these steps takes time. We will all be at different stages of our understanding and in formulating our perspective of appropriation and appreciation.

Reference

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