

Indigenous Knowledge Is Often Overlooked in Education. But It Has A Lot to Teach Us.

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Grand Entry at the Black Hills Powwow in Rapid City, S.D.
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As I sit at my grandmother's oval-shaped wooden table, I feel a warm summer breeze through the open window. I ask her again how to pronounce *iciyapi*.

"Ee-chee-yah-pee," she says in a slightly slower, but confident tone. I repeat the syllables in a much slower and deliberate voice. "Ee...chee...yah..pee."

"Good my girl, that sounds good," she says. She is teaching me how to properly introduce myself in our Lakota language, *Lakǰótiyapi*. I feel a deep sense of comfort knowing she has had this conversation before with dozens of young Lakota learners during her time as a Lakota language teacher in our community of Fort Yates on the Standing Rock Sioux reservation.

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I recently reflected on this memory as I once again sat at that same wooden table. That time the windows were closed, as the harsh prairie winds of late fall blustered outside. My relatives and I were gathered around the oval table, but my *unci*, my grandmother, was missing. She had started her journey just a few days before, and we were discussing her funeral arrangements.

For many, grief has a way of forcing us to contemplate and reflect on cherished memories with the loved one who has left us. The loss of my *unci*, a lifelong educator, my namesake, and one of the most important teachers in my life, and in the lives of many others, has prompted me to think even more deeply about how important it is for Indigenous Knowledge Systems to be not only included, but honored and affirmed in classrooms.

Indigenous Knowledge and Mainstream Education

Indigenous Knowledge Systems is a phrase that originated in Indigenous studies. I could describe it to you using academic terms such as epistemology, ontology, and axiology. But ultimately, Indigenous Knowledge Systems are the ways that Indigenous peoples make sense of the world around them, and how they recognize, value, share and use knowledge in their daily lives. The phrase is intentionally plural to honor the diversity of Indigenous nations, of which there are over 600 in the U.S. alone. Generally rooted in place-based knowledge, oral traditions and kinship, Indigenous Knowledge Systems reflect the unique experiences of each community, while sharing common traits.

Although I almost never used this academic phrase with my *unci*, we had many discussions about our own Lakota knowledge system and how *Lakḥótiyapi* was at the center of our knowledge, our culture and our way of life as Lakota people. In many of our conversations, we acknowledged how our ways greatly differed from the ways of knowing and learning found in mainstream education systems.

From a very young age, I recognized these differences. Having attended school off the reservation in a predominantly non-native community, I experienced first hand the differing value systems in school versus my community. This experience is common for many Indigenous students, but it wasn't until I became a teacher myself that I was aware of how deeply these value systems impact our actions and choices as teachers and learners.

In contrast to the highly individualistic and competitive ways of learning we find in schools today, Indigenous Knowledge Systems often promote learning as a cooperative, holistic and experiential process that values [relationality](#) and the sustaining of the collective. For many Indigenous communities, the goal of education has always been to nurture the wellbeing of the whole child, including their emotional, mental, physical and spiritual development. The purpose of education was, and still is, to instill in future generations the skills and knowledge necessary to live a balanced life, a life where individuals can use their unique gifts to contribute to the wellbeing of their relatives, which includes not only immediate family members, but the entire community and the animals, plants, waterways and land with which we depend on for life itself.

Learning from Indigenous Knowledge Systems

After nearly two years of teaching, I realized many of the systems and practices I cultivated in my classroom were deeply rooted in my Indigenous knowledge as a Lakota woman. Take relationship building for example. Only recently has mainstream education research realized that without authentic relationships rooted in mutual respect and understanding, meaningful and long

lasting learning is nearly impossible. But Indigenous communities have always understood its impact on knowledge transfer.

Indigenous ways of knowing and learning emphasize nurturing relationships not only with and among learners, but also with the larger community and the environment or place with which students spend time. All educators, whether they are Indigenous or not, can learn from these systems how to root their teaching and learning in community and place-based context.

In the past I have connected with people across the community who care about our children's education—parents, grandparents, caregivers, community members and tribal education and culture departments. Because I work with Indigenous students from tribal nations that are not my own, I approach these partnerships with cultural humility and willingness to listen. After building relational trust, local community members share resources and context on local issues and history that I use to create lessons. In the end, these lessons often build on the unique strengths and experiences of the students in my class, and learning opportunities that are genuinely meaningful to them.

I've seen educators share power with community members by inviting them to talk about their expertise directly with students, or by taking learners to specific places within their community. Through these reciprocal partnerships, my students and I have explored interdisciplinary lessons about our relationships to water in our local area and the use of neighborhood mural art to portray community values and history.

All these lessons were intentionally designed to promote place-based learning—that is learning that allows students to explore the places within their own community through inquiry and experiential opportunities. Indigenous education has always rooted learning within the environment. [Traditional Ecological Knowledge \(TEK\)](#) refers to a vast and evolving body of knowledge garnered by Indigenous peoples over thousands of years of relationships with their environment. This empirical knowledge was and is passed down to future generations as a means of survival. Learners clearly saw how what they were learning was useful and relevant to their everyday lives because it was often taught through experiential and observational lessons with older relatives. When we co-design our instructional activities and materials with learners and community members, whether we realize it or not, we're creating learning opportunities that honor and affirm Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

Healing From the Past

The irony of discussing Indigenous Knowledge Systems with my grandmother lies in the fact that she never got the chance to experience what it might feel like to have our Indigenous ways of knowing, learning, and being affirmed in mainstream education. She was a boarding school survivor and experienced a schooling that actively sought to destroy her Indigenous way of life.

Despite the abuse and cultural genocide she and countless other Indigenous students experienced in these schools, my *unci* never gave up her *Lak'hótiyapi* and the values embedded within that language. Even though she did not teach her children the language out of fear of making their

lives more difficult, she always instilled in them the values of generosity, compassion and humility and embodied our Lakota way of life through her everyday actions.

Nearly two centuries after the implementation of the federal [Indian Boarding School Policy](#), which continues to impact many people's lives, it is time that we bring Indigenous ways of knowing and being into the center of mainstream education.