

Creating community in digital learning spaces as embodiment of Indigenous self-determination

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Abstract

This paper discusses Indigenous peoples' educational experiences with digital technologies in Canada, with references made to Australia and the USA. While COVID-19 has intensified many existing inequities and placed strong focus on abilities to exist in online spaces, Indigenous peoples took to the online world and have been carving out sovereign online spaces for a long time. This article focuses on the ways in which Indigenous peoples have engaged in digital spaces. It provides examples of Indigenous models in these virtual learning spaces, discusses how they draw on Indigenous frameworks, and demonstrates how Indigenous approaches to pedagogy are reflected online. One notable example of this is the revitalization of language. Throughout this paper I provide a reflexive account of my own experiences working in post-secondary contexts where engagement with Indigenous pedagogy has been central to online learning experiences. This paper shows that Indigenous pedagogy and approaches are used effectively to enact self-determination in these digital learning spaces.

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Introduction

COVID-19 led to the closure of universities worldwide. This impacted over 2 million postsecondary learners in Canada as postsecondary institutions moved online (Schrumm, 2020). For many Indigenous learners in Canada, the pandemic exacerbated educational inequities which continue to permeate education systems in light of Canada's historic and devastating residential schools (UNESCO, 2020). Milloy (1996, p.13) describes this system, which was designed to assimilate Indigenous peoples, as "part of a most extensive and persistent colonial system."

Today, Indigenous communities use various approaches and technologies, including engaging with social media platforms, to manage life under COVID-19. Given the emphasis on online proficiency that has been placed on activities under COVID-19, it is important to reflect on Indigenous peoples' engagement with technology as they assert their rights to digital self-determination and sovereignty (Lewis, 2019).

The pandemic and the move online may have impacted Indigenous students in unique and specific ways (Williams and Myers, cited in Kataoka, 2020). Davidson and Jamieson (2018, para 2) refer to the damaging impact of the "legacy of residential schools and a history of discrimination." Shaheen-Hussain, Shoush, Bulle and Dosan (2020 para 2) call for reflection and introspection during the pandemic since, under Canada's Indian Act, it was compulsory for Indigenous parents,

for generations, “to surrender their children to these schools, in which death rates for Indigenous children were 24 to 69 per cent and school graveyards were as common as school playground.”

The pandemic brings to the forefront even more the profound and deeply entrenched injustices, and their long-term impacts, which have been imposed on Indigenous peoples. For example, the ongoing systemic oppression of Indigenous children and youth is demonstrated in the child welfare system, which continues to take Indigenous youth away from their families at an abhorrently alarming rate. This and other forms of structural and systemic oppression, which have been targeted at Indigenous people for centuries, are key parts of Canada’s settler colonial state and of all of its institutions, including higher education. Kolopenuk (cited in Mae Cook, 2020 para 5), explains how “colonial policies have historically been at the root of Indigenous peoples being disproportionately affected by outbreaks of disease, and government policies of starvation in the late 1800s and of assimilation and institutionalization into the 20th century.”

Williams and Myers (cited in Kataoka, 2020) discuss the need to critically and consciously raise awareness of the ways in which Indigenous students might be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the move online. This disruption, reorganizing and restructuring of educational systems, also provides opportunities to examine ways in which Indigenous students can be fully supported. COVID-19 is magnifying some of the challenges that Indigenous communities have experienced historically and continue to experience in the present. Therefore, Indigenous youth are looking to their Elders for guidance (see Williams and Myers cited in Kataoka, 2020, para. 3).

Indigenous Elders have emphasized the crucial need to preserve long-term knowledge so that future generations can continue to learn Indigenous ways of knowing (Battiste 2005). One way that Indigenous communities are carrying out this work is through the use of technology, and this has been happening for a long time – well before COVID-19. For example, the Keewatinook Internet High School, with grades 9-12, in Canada has been operating since 1999, and it has formed collaborations with several First Nations communities. This school's vision is "Weaving Education from Traditional and Technology" (Keewatinook Internet High School, 2020). In this innovative Indigenous educational model, the retention rates in the online programme are reaching 90% in many communities (Potter, 2010).

Indigenous peoples' use of technologies, when broadly considered, raises questions of sovereignty and survival, and how Indigenous communities have used digital environments over time to advance their collective interests. Another question that Indigenous peoples' use of digital environments raises is the way in which virtual spaces can reproduce existing educational inequalities and inequities because 'technology is not neutral' (Ali, 2020, p. 19). The building of relationships and community is significant to Indigenous teaching and learning approaches and practices.

Community as a theoretical framework

This article is informed by Indigenous peoples' understanding of their world, and it draws on an/the Indigenous lens of community to understand the critical importance of relationships to learning. This embodies Elders' epistemologies, which are central to Indigenous people's lives. Cajete (2015, p. 27) writes that community is inherently holistic since community engages the whole

person and the links between people. According to the Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat of New South Wales, Australia (2018), the concept of community refers to shared relationships with one another and is significant to Indigenous people (p. 1).

Whether in person or online, building relationships is part of Indigenous ontology and epistemology. Drawing on community as a theoretical framework helps to make sense of the critical need to understand Indigenous perspectives in providing supportive community-based learning spaces for Indigenous students in the virtual world. Indigenous students are expected to navigate colonial higher education systems that often exclude Indigenous scholarship. A theoretical framework grounded in community is an Indigenous paradigm. As Lewis (2016) notes, using an Indigenous worldview of time and sustainability often calls for decisions to be made while thinking seven generations ahead. This reflects the Anishinabek worldview of thinking of the generations of communities in the future. As the world moves significantly to the era of digitization in education, it is vital to think about Indigenous pedagogy in a virtual world. According to Winter and Boudreau (2018, p. 44), “Indigenous peoples’ local, context-specific ... knowledge is compatible with digital technology.” Historically and currently, Indigenous peoples have been, and are, navigating local and globalized contexts to connect with communities all over the world to advance their rights, balancing what unites them internationally with what makes them unique and distinct locally. Indigenous peoples have developed communities in every context.

A sense of community creates and nourishes relationships, and enhances community engagement for Indigenous learners. Many Indigenous scholars call for culture-based knowledge as foundational learning for Indigenous learners (Cajete, 2015, p. 23). Community is where learning

and sharing knowledge happen. Learning is intricately connected to the land for Indigenous people. The virtual world demonstrates how sovereignty in terms of land and territory is applicable to what Winter and Boudreau (2018, p. 44) term “visual sovereignty” or “screen sovereignty.”

Indigenous foundations of knowledge intersect with community. This helps to establish a basis for understanding why community remains critical to Indigenous learners today and will remain significant in the future. Given that Indigenous knowledges are often suppressed and contested within institutions of higher education, centering relationships and building virtual spaces fosters community which connects to Elders, lands, Indigenous peoples, and their worldviews. It centers the personal, community, and political contexts of both how and by whom knowledge is constructed. In this paper, I apply this understanding to Indigenous pedagogy through virtual spaces, where digital technologies can be used to connect, support, engage and mentor students. In what follows, I outline some of the ways digital technology is being used more relationally by Indigenous people engaged in learning, both before and during COVID-19.

Indigenous innovations in digital spaces

Prior to COVID-19, there were high growth rates in education technology and online education programs (Li & Lalani, 2020, para 6; Greenwood et al., 2011, pp. 4-6). Additionally, Indigenous people have become increasingly active in cyberspace (Greenwood et al., 2011, p. 6). For Loft, Jackson and Swanson (2016, p. 194), cyberspace “is a networked territory, that has always existed for Indigenous people as the repository of collected and shared memory.” In speaking of the Australian context, Rice, Haynes, Royce and Thompson (2014) write that Indigenous people in

Australia have used social media to transmit intergenerational knowledge, which may improve personal, family and community relations between the young and old generations (pp.13-14).

The Indigenous Connectivity Summit 2019 report states that Indigenous communities across North America and globally are pursuing creative methods to connect to the internet. However, they continue to face unique challenges to connectivity, and are often left out of critical policymaking processes (p. 2). Despite often being excluded from policy processes and decision making, Indigenous people have found innovative ways of making meaning and creating spaces—both physical and virtual—to carry on their knowledges. L'Hirondelle (2016) writes that connection to land makes Indigenous people Indigenous, and Indigenous peoples' use of digital technology makes this digital space theirs (p.152). This means sovereignty is enabled when Indigenous peoples make their own critical decisions about their lives, whether on or offline.

This has been clearly demonstrated in recent virtual land-based educational programs. In 2020, at one university in eastern Canada, the course on land-based pedagogy became virtual (U of T News, 2020). Students were able to go out in the community in which they live and learn about, and build relationships with, the land. They did this by engaging on the land, making connections, reflecting on their sense of place, and sharing their experiences virtually. Similarly, in Australia, Prehn, Peacock, Guerzoni and Walter (2020) showed how Indigenous postsecondary students learn from Elders through virtual tours of the country and ancestral lands. The virtual tours of the country were found to have brought positive responses from students in their learning about Indigenous lifeworlds. Students reported experiencing a range of encouraging sentiments, pointing to having

‘loved’ and ‘really enjoyed’ what was described as an ‘excellent’, ‘informative’, and ‘very very moving’ [sic] course (p. 14).

Language vitalization is a significant part of Indigenous identity, and Indigenous people have found ways to continue to learn and share their language with each other. A holistic approach to digital technology can support Indigenous language and cultural resurgence. Digital technologies can be used to regenerate Indigenous stories which are embedded in Indigenous worldviews, languages and ways of knowing that have strengthened communities since time immemorial. Smoker Broaddus (2020, para. 7) explains, for instance, that lessons are often streamed via Facebook, with both lessons and oral traditions being uploaded to YouTube. In this way, Indigenous communities are sharing both their traditional and contemporary knowledges through the use of technology. Likewise Elders and Cultural Knowledge Holders are providing Cree language lessons from home and posting them on Facebook. And, in Montana, educators from many Indigenous nations are teaching and leading language classes for their students to continue their learning beyond the classroom setting (Broaddus Smoker, 2020).

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, Indigenous people found creative ways to connect and build community. In my own pedagogy I have drawn on Indigenous methods of teaching to inform my approach. For example, while drawing on Indigenous circle pedagogy for virtual class discussions, engagement and relationships as pedagogy, I found that students have reacted positively when Indigenous teaching methodologies are introduced and engaged with in respectful ways. Currie and Kaminski (2017) explain that the use of circles is a foundational approach to

First Nations pedagogy, and that online course management systems can help to provide applications that can be used to apply the circle process within the virtual learning environment.

In my online teaching practices, I view Indigenous digital pedagogy as involving processes which reflect Indigenous worldviews. For instance, fostering a sense of community in the online learning environment through sharing helps to develop trust and build reciprocal relationship among students and their peers, and with me as the instructor/facilitator. I also found it useful to be accessible to students through virtual office hours to build connections with students, further fostering a strong sense of community and of a culturally responsive environment. Relationships are built through engagement with group work and discussion forums, and directly through relationship building activities (Currie and Kaminski, 2017).

Conclusion

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission report (TRC) of 2015 called for transformative structural changes in education, while centering Indigenous pedagogy. Technology is not new to Indigenous people, and L'Hirondelle (2016, p. 166) suggests that having an awareness regarding Indigenous "pre-contact ingenuity as inventors and technologists" is important. Fiddler (2008) discusses the United Nation Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) as a building block that reaffirms Indigenous collective rights and freedoms to using digital technologies. In this context, technology is linked with Indigenous self-determination. Gaertner et al. (2020, para 16) see "cyberspace as another plane for the work of kinship to be done on new scales of time and place, providing powerful constellations of affinity and relationship." Beaton (2018, p. 3) states that digital technologies can support decolonization work.

Access to technology can be a challenge, and the lack of access is often a result of the systemic inequities faced by Indigenous peoples. But Indigenous people have created, developed and engaged with technology since time immemorial. When Indigenous people gather together online to teach and share their ancestral languages, they are engaging in acts of sovereignty, and of Indigenous self-determination. They have been engaging in these types of acts long before the COVID-19 pandemic.

As I have shown in this paper, this Indigenous-centred, relational approach to technology has continued through the shift to online learning. The use of technology by the students at Keewatinook Internet High school illustrates the bringing together of communities to continue to learn, and this shows how critical it is to Indigenous people to have control over their children's education. Providing support in order for Indigenous people to stay in their community, and to continue their learning there, is also an example of Indigenous governance and innovation through technology. This aligns with the high school's own mission, and as well the forming of relationships and the building of communities are key to Indigenous peoples, which is a crucial part of Indigenous knowledges and worldviews. Relationship as pedagogy connects with Indigenous worldviews and is exercised in Indigenous digital spaces. Indigenous forms of technology are adaptable and non-static, as are Indigenous cultures and the use of technology changes over time. This current situation provides an opportunity to rethink and reflect on how technology, innovation and higher education are viewed, to enhance access and to recognize the creativity and ingenuity of Indigenous peoples.

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