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What kind of learning? For what purpose? Reflections on a critical adult education approach to online Social Work and Education courses serving Indigenous distance learners

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Abstract

This article begins with a critical examination of adult education theory and practice and its engagement (or lack) with Indigenous knowledges and communities. In doing so, the article reveals the contradictions of early citizenry adult education that sought to bring educational programs to the people without a critical examination of the western hegemonic orientation of such programming. The critique then moves to a discussion of transformative learning within adult education emerging in the late 1970s. In tracing the evolution of adult education theory and practice, the critique asks the questions: “Access to what kind of adult education?, and” “For what purposes?” The article then moves to the present and explores contemporary distance education, with an emphasis on online learning that may be aimed at Indigenous adult learners. In particular, the article explores the possibilities of online distance learning to not only bring educational programming to Indigenous communities and thereby building upon the social justice imperative of accessibility, but also to design decolonizing curricula that engages Indigenous knowledges and upholds oral culture.

In both oration and writing, it is customary for Indigenous academics to situate themselves in relationship to the topic at hand. This article has two authors, one of whom is First Nations of Plains Cree and Saulteaux ancestry who completed graduate work in both Social Work and Education. As an adult educator, she has experience working with Indigenous learners in university and community contexts with a background in e-learning curriculum development

and instruction. The other author is of Mi'kmaq ancestry whose youth was spent moving between cities in three provinces and two states. He completed his undergraduate and graduate Social Work education as a mature student via distance education while living in a small town in Northern British Columbia. Drawing upon his front-line experience within child welfare, he became a distance education sessional instructor and Social Work curriculum developer. The two authors currently reside in Saskatoon where one works in the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan and the other works for the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Regina.

Both authors have devoted significant energy to distance education – particularly e-learning processes – as instructors and online instructional designers. Employing online and face-to-face instruction modalities, we have each taught numerous undergraduate Social Work courses with Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (both on-line and face-to-face) with M. Kovach having experience teaching undergraduate and graduate courses in Education. As Indigenous adult educators, the authors have sought ways to creatively adapt online technology to serve Indigenous learning approaches that encompass orality, the experiential, and community relevancy. Additionally, as people who have spent significant phases of their lives in small rural communities, we have both developed a deep commitment toward equitable access to education for those who live within the geographic hinterland.

Introduction

For those who cannot leave their community, distance education provides access to educational programs offered through conventional college and university settings. In reaching geographically distant learners, distance education has increasingly become an option for learners from remote and rural locales as Indigenous communities. Distance education provides an option for this demographic to obtain professional degrees without uprooting themselves from community. For those who do not leave their homes post-degree, these learners are well situated to be a professional resource in their community (e.g. social worker or teacher). This creates the benefit of having one less parachute professional that the community must rely upon to care for its citizenry. In accessing advanced training through distance, the learner does not have leave employment or community. Through increasing educational access with its positive spinoffs distance education facilitates social justice and operates as a democratizing force. (McLean, 2007). Critical adult education, and distance learning as a method, holds the value that all members of a society– not solely the economically, socially or geographically privileged – ought to have equitable access to education. But how do we define access? Is it simply about physical access to specific courses which deliver null curricula that is blind to the ideological and cultural bias held within it? Does equitable access to assimilative curriculum constitute social justice? Or is there more to it? Should not access be defined in its broadest form to maximize the potential of providing curricula that is meaningful and relevant to the socio-cultural-philosophical contexts that it serves? In considering an Indigenous context, we problematize the notion of access in online distance learning, and propose ways in which online instructional design methodologies can assist in broadening the notion of access. Further, we argue for the importance of those - be they Indigenous or non Indigenous - involved in distance education for Indigenous learners (either as course designers or instructors) to approach course delivery from a decolonizing perspective.

To begin, the discussion is situated within the theoretical continuum that is adult education. This theoretical context provides a springboard for the argument that critical adult education approaches, as influenced by Habermas and Freire, hold within them the theoretical tools to support, align and create space for curriculum design that upholds Indigenous adult learning approaches. The focus then moves to the relationship between critical adult education and distance learning, and how each has served not only each other, but arguably a prevailing cultural norm. Through critically exploring adult education in early citizenry education as offered by the Frontier College in British Columbia to examining current trends within University extension programs that have moved away from citizenry education in favour of a market-place demand approach (Cruikshank, 2001; McLean, 2007; Kang, 2007), we trace the power of dominant social, political, cultural, and economic forces influencing adult education. While critical adult educators have worked persistently to push back against the winds of dominant forces within western culture, there is an increasing awareness of the transformative work necessary to prepare space within adult education for non-western perspectives, including Indigenous knowledges. Adult education processes, even critical approaches, have tended to serve, and serve-up, western culture, be it conservative, liberal or emancipatory. However, critical adult education through its liberatory aims, and online distance learning through its technology-assisted methods, offer the potential to crack open the learning landscape, disrupt cultural hegemony within education, and thereby provide space for non-western learning approaches - as Indigenous adult learning theory - to emerge. The argument is for the reclamation and redefinition of access. The paper then concludes with a focus on methods, or “how to” engage Indigenous adult learning theory through examining: a) how adult education methods such as self-directed learning, experiential opportunities, critical reflection, and situated learning align with Indigenous adult learning approaches; and b) how online instructional design can serve Indigenous adult learning.

This is a theoretical discussion based upon secondary research sources. It integrates our experiences as Indigenous educators and distance (i.e. e-learning) instructional designers. Our theoretical perspective for examining this topic is a decolonizing theoretical framework. Born of critical theory, a decolonizing perspective is akin to critical pedagogy, feminist, and anti-racist approaches which “...focuses on an analysis of power relations between dominant and oppressed groups and assumes that structural social change will result when power relations are challenged” (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003, p. 370). However, a decolonizing approach focuses specifically on power relations inherent in the Indigenous-settler dynamic. This paper concerns itself with snapping the stronghold of pervasive western (albeit non-monolithic) learning theories, be they constructivist, critical, or behaviourist to create opportunities for Indigenous adult learning theory to surface. A decolonizing approach as a theoretical framework is best suited for the task. Arguably an anti-racist approach is equally suitable as it would provide a strong analytical framework for deconstructing how learning theories can work to privilege a particular ethno-racial ideological perspective through rendering it invisible, thus making it normative, while working to exclude alternative ways of knowing. However, a central task of this argument is to focus on ways in which distance education processes, as guided by critical adult education theory, can create space for *Indigenous* ways of knowing in specific, then – and herein lays the crux – to comment on what that looks like. Our decolonizing perspective assumes that a) an Indigenous adult education approach to learning is distinctive; b) existing western theoretical perspectives as found in transformative andragogy can assist in revealing

this distinctive approach to non-Indigenous constituents and subsequently to create a welcoming space for Indigenous adult education; and c) there exist andragogical tools (including technology assisted methods) capable of broadening access to include Indigenous learning theory in educational curricula.

Given that our focus is on two broad areas – adult education and distance learning – it is wise to offer some working definitions. We define adult education as inclusive of distance education. We recognize that distance education is also a method for delivery of non-adult education programs; however, there is a historic link between distance learning and education directed at adults. In tracing the historic roots of distance education in Canada, it has been stated that, “The emergence of distance education is generally considered to coincide with the rise of mail service. In Canada, Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, offered its first correspondence courses in 1889” (Faille & Umbriaco, 1999, p.5). This does not preclude that distance education has its own pedagogical assumptions, which may or may not be associated with adult education learning theory. However for this particular analysis, we have situated distance education as an educational delivery method (from text-based correspondence to asynchronistic online delivery) that has historic roots within adult education both within and beyond higher learning. Thus, when referencing adult education in this discussion, distance education is implied. The context is formal higher learning settings, specifically those environments which Grace (2000) refers to as “academic adult education” (65) or adult education that occurs within university settings for the delivery of credit courses. We also recognize that a range of learning theories abound within academia, some of which integrate adult education principles and some which don’t.

Adult Education & Distance Learning – A Contextual Background

Adult education is broadly defined. One definition of adult education references learning opportunities directed at adult learners. This definition may include learning opportunities available for adult learners occurring in a range of sites. These sites have been differentiated as learning that either takes place in formal settings (i.e., colleges, universities) via face-to-face or distance courses (increasingly online), or other sites of learning which take place in informal settings, such as around kitchen tables, in community centres or on the land. However, such a definition does not speak to adult education as a specific approach to learning with identifiable theoretical assumptions of how adults learn differently from non-adults. Neither does it get to the particular methods of instruction congruent with the former. Our working definition of adult education assumes that it is not only the learner and site – university education aimed at adult learners – that defines it as adult education, but also a specific theoretical and practice approach that falls within the ambit of adult learning theory.

The particular adult education approach with which we align is best described as the Freirean approach or critical pedagogy. This approach, often referenced as popular education or transformative learning, emerged from Paulo Freire’s literacy work with Brazilian peasantry. It was this experience that informed his seminal work, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which was published in 1972. *Problem-posing*, *concientization*, and *praxis* are terms associated with Freire’s critical pedagogy. As an educator, Freire was greatly aware of the socio-economic disparities between groups of people. His pedagogy held within it “an emancipatory agenda to

be implemented through the co-intentional pedagogy of education (teacher-students) and the oppressed (student-teachers)” (Pietrykowski, 1996, p. 83). Paulo Freire was a significant educational theorist of the 20th century who succeeded in moving beyond the bounds of formal learning to engage with those historically oppressed (Hodgkins, 2008) and without access to formal education. He drew upon existing theories to formulate a theoretical approach to education, with identifiable methods (e.g., dialogue and critical reflection), which had, at its core, social justice. A contemporary of Paulo Freire, Jurgen Habermas, a German philosopher and sociologist, was equally influential within the development of critical adult education, though not as an educator per se. Influenced by Marxian thought and associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory, Habermas identified three domains of learning – *the technical*, *the practical*, and *the emancipatory*. The first involved technical or empirical knowledge; the second (the practical) concerned itself with communicative action or that which is involved with human interaction and discourse; and the third, emancipatory, focused on critical self-knowledge (Mezirow, 1981). Together, Habermas and Freire were instrumental in defining an adult education approach that integrated principles of social justice, with both emphasizing the union of theory and practice so as to enable people to analyze and problematize their experience and thereby to reveal the contradictions inherent in their world (Pietrykowski, 1996).

Within critical adult education, there have been feminist, anti-racist, and decolonizing pedagogies to name a few (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). Critical adult education has long been linked with citizenship education in the maintenance of civil society. As Jarvis (2005) states, “Civil society plays an important role in giving voice to the concerns of citizens and delivering services that meet people’s needs” (p. 11). A central purpose of adult education, both within centres of higher learning and without, has been the engagement in “continuing education for civic responsibility and individual growth and development” (Grace, 2000, p. 75). Perhaps one of the most powerful tools of critical pedagogy is the use of critical reflection and dialogue which prompts opportunity for inclusion of voice. bell hooks, in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), offers, “Who speaks? Who listens? And why? Caring about whether all students fulfill their responsibility to contribute to learning in the classroom is not a common approach in what Freire has called the “banking system of education” (p. 40). However, even with the potentiality of critical adult education approaches to not only improve access, but to also deliver an educational experience that promotes active citizenship and voice, challenges still remain.

The first challenge for academic critical adult educators (increasingly inclusive of distance educators) is to remain true to a “structural analysis perspective” (Cruikshank, 2001, p. 71) that is alert to the socio-economic stratifying potential of post-secondary education: i.e. Who gets access? And why? An equally fundamental challenge then becomes the politics of accessing a culturally relevant education: i.e. Access to what kind of education? And why? From a decolonizing theoretical perspective, the latter looms large. For as critical educators who work toward finding place and space for Indigenous ways of knowing, we often – even in critical dialogue – come up against the worldview rub. This has everything to do the pervasiveness of dominant society to which even critical educators are subject. For distance educators who hold a critical adult education perspective this is becoming a predominately significant issue as online education in higher learning is increasingly becoming a viable option for Indigenous learners in remote or rural communities.

Western Hegemony and Redefining access in adult learning

How then has the influence of critical adult education, inclusive of distance learning, been reflected in the definition of the term ‘access’? And how have dominant social, economic, and political norms helped to maintain a culturally hegemonic notion of access? The origins of adult education in Canada give us some insight into these questions. One institution of particular interest is Frontier College. Frontier College is identified as one of Canada’s first adult education institutions. It was inaugurated in 1899 and its’ focus was on “bridging literacy and citizenship education to the labouring immigrant men of the remote logging, rail, and mining camps at the Canadian frontier.” (Walter, 2003, p. 44). Alfred Fitzpatrick, the founder of Frontier College, was influenced by the Social Gospel movement and the Labour Church which focused on economic and social justice for labourers. Infused with Marxism and Christianity (Antonides, 1985), the mandate of Frontier College was to provide access to “urban citizenship education and rural extension to the neglected arena of the resource frontier” (Walter, p. 45). Fitzpatrick encouraged university students to travel to immigrant labour sites (as logging camps) to run classes for the immigrant workers who were working in the camps (Schugurensky, no date). While Queens University in Kingston is said to be the first university to offer distance education through correspondence (Faille & Umbriaco, 1999), Frontier College as a formal learning centre offering distance learning is interesting because of its educational mandate. Frontier College set forth “a nationalizing curriculum including instruction in “intelligent English,” the structure of government, the geography and history of Canada, and Canadian ideals of a democratic society” (Walter, 2003, p. 46). From Fitzpatrick’s perspective, the ideal Canadian democratic society was one which upheld the cultural values of the Anglo-Saxon settlers. While the intent was to increase access by taking education to the people, the adult education citizenry curriculum was largely assimilative with its Canadianizing mandate directed at immigrant workers (Walter, 2003). It was curricula that worked to nullify the cultural beliefs that the immigrant learners brought with them. At the time, it was considered social justice citizenry education, but it was assimilative and it was an agent of the Canadian state’s nationalizing agenda.

In the early 1900s extension divisions of universities began to emerge. As McLean (2007) notes, the University of Saskatchewan was one of the first universities in western Canada to provide extension services. This was a response to the province’s demographics at the time, when the majority of the population in Saskatchewan lived in rural areas with many residents active in farming. In 1907, the University of Saskatchewan was offering off-campus courses that dealt with ““Better Farming,” “Homemaker Short Courses” and “Canadian Youth Vocational Training Workshops” (Faille & Umbriaco, 1999, p.5). The courses were geared toward those involved either directly in farming or those rural residents supporting the agricultural based economy. Welton, who studied early extension services at the University of Saskatchewan, found that the offered courses responded to the needs of its public – being defined as Saskatchewan settler society involved in the farming economy – while simultaneously integrating a critical perspective in its pedagogy. Welton referred to this as fostering “a critical-rational discourse” (as cited in McLean, 2007, p. 8). Given that only a small minority of the Saskatchewan population were enrolled in university courses in that period, the provision of extension programming served both political and practical purposes. “At a time when only a tiny minority of the population attended university, the practice of extension gave essential political

legitimacy to a new institution founded with taxpayers dollars” (McLean, 2007, p. 13). The University of Saskatchewan’s extension program and Frontier College are two of many examples of early Canadian adult education delivery that increased physical access to the general public by taking education to the people while at the same time, largely providing curriculum that was serving the colonial state.

Between the early 1900’s and the 1960’s adult education through extension programming experienced a boom in Canada. The pluralism and social action of the 1960’s supported the value of taking education to the people. However, toward the end of the 1960’s the method of extension education began to shift as universities became increasingly technology driven (Grace, 2000). Citizenry education, albeit of a western kind, continued, but times they were changing. From method to philosophical orientation, there would be significant shifts within adult education in the latter half of the 20th century. Even those who espoused a critical pedagogical perspective were not free from the social, political, economic, and cultural shifts of the time. This period saw a move towards a more pronounced individualism within Canada and the United States that impacted adult education theory within North America. In particular, theorists as John Mezirow and Malcolm Knowles became associated with a more self-reflective, self-transformative approach that tended to centre the individual more than the collective.

An influential American adult education, John Mezirow drew upon the critical pedagogy of Habermas and Friere to develop an adult learning approach – *transformative theory* – in 1978. It centred upon “critical reflection, or critical self-reflection, on assumptions and critical discourse, where the learner validates a best judgment” (Mezirow, 2006, as cited in Kitchenham, 2008, p. 105). Implied within this approach to adult education was outreach to learners, and an understanding of the adult learner’s situated context, with a desire to make a connection with this group of learners. Then, as now, these methods held particular value for adult and distance learners. However, critical adult educators have critiqued Mezirow’s work. The over-arching criticism is that Mezirow’s transformative theory emphasized the psychological and the individual, rather than the social and collective (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). Mezirow himself commented upon the shift from the collectivism of the 1930’s to the individualism of the 1950’s in America, and the resultant shift from the sociological to the psychological orientation within adult education. However, as Collard and Law state, even with this critical reflection, Mezirow’s transformative theory was “largely devoid of the socio-political critique that lies at the heart of that tradition (1989, p. 105). Similarly Malcolm Knowles, who introduced andragogy to America in 1970 came under attack for a mechanistic approach to adult education that moved away from a collectivist, political purpose to focus more closely on individual needs.

The changes in the social, political, and economic climate and the corresponding influence on adult education theory resulted in two divergent approaches to adult education – a) the citizenry, social justice approach; and b) the market demand approach. Critical adult educators view the increasing shift toward a “market education model” as highly problematic (Cruikshank, 2001, p. 70) and would like to see a return to a citizenry-based approach. However, the market model approach is pervasive. The increasing corporatization of universities, and the ‘efficiency, cost-saving potential’ of current distance education practices, particularly with online course delivery, has led to an arguable perspective that distance education (divorced from critical adult education) has been appropriated by corporate culture.

Further, extension units as revenue generators for universities are not new (Einsiedel, 1998) and as a source of income, adult education that meets consumer demand has become valuable. Within adult education, there has been a critique of this market model approach (Cruikshank, 2001; McLean, 2007; Cram & Morrison, 2005). As mentioned previously, this critique has led to a questioning by critical adult educators: “Access to what kind of education?” “For what purposes?” While this is an overview of the tensions within adult education, it provides an opening to critique the cultural norms embedded within the curricula that is being served to community – particularly those populations which may hold alternative cultural perspectives, such as Indigenous communities.

Critical educators have historically been active agents for social justice with respect to economic and social disparity through emancipatory learning approaches. Despite this activism however, there has been less visible dialogue (outside of cultural discourses) on the implications of culturally value-laden curriculum when there is more than one cultural worldview in operation. While, from our vantage point, there can be no argument that an on-going critique of the market model approach to adult education and a return to citizenry-based, social justice curricula is a worthy struggle – particularly in education – there remains a need to critically reflect upon adult education and distance learning, and its role, as culturally assimilative agent. We must move beyond the false dichotomy that currently separates a structural analysis of the power relationships within the colonial dynamic from discourses on culturally imbued Indigenous thought. As David Abalos has argued, there is a need to address both cultural hegemony and colonialism within transformative education (as cited in Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). With an ever increasing number of diverse adult learners accessing post-secondary education (many through online means), we must ask: “What does citizenry based, socially just curriculum look like in the 21st century?” Regardless of the ability to provide increasing access to remote and distance learners, and regardless of how successful university-based adult educators are at integrating Habermas’s liberation objectives, if we do not burst the western bubble in our critical discourse on this question, we remain shackled to serving-up colonial curriculum and are at risk of becoming a 21st Frontier College. And that is simply not social justice from the perspective of many oppressed peoples.

There is a need to re-claim critical adult and distance education, to remember its origins and construct new possibilities given the learners that it has the potential to serve. This context, this remembering, is necessary to utilize some fundamental principles of critical adult education (e.g., critical reflection, experiential, situated learning, praxis), which have historically inspired distance education delivery to broaden the notion of access. Critical adult education, as a learning approach, is well situated to influence instructional design and instructional methods, that can further serve foundational principles of social justice and create space for divergent worldviews within its curricula. The current technology available to online learning can broaden and redefine access by expanding transformative possibilities that include Indigenous adult education approaches to learning which uphold orality of Indigenous worldview(s) and create opportunities for Indigenous community-situated learning.

Indigenous learning approaches, adult education and online instructional design

Practices of adult education have historically emphasized contextual knowledge as a basis for content, experiential learning as sharing of story, and learner relevant activities (as self-directed learning opportunities) to prompt engagement (Knowles et al, 2005). Guided by a critical approach, these practices are congruent with methods necessary for a participant-centred learning experience that promote social justice. This approach supports a definition of educational access that is identifiable by its ability to create meaningfulness for the learner group. Such practices offer entry points for non-western perspectives, including Indigenous worldview(s), to enter and be affirmed within a formal learning setting. Distance learning can be a conduit for redefining access by offering an Indigenous adult learning theory congruent with Indigenous learning methods. This discussion focuses on the use of online instructional design that utilizes electronic course management software architecture currently available to online distance learning programs (i.e. Blackboard or Moodle) as significant assets in this regard.

However, prior to proceeding there is a need to clarify what this discussion is not. This discussion is not about how online curriculum design can uphold western adult education approaches that may make sense to Indigenous people; rather it is about how critical adult education creates space for methods of instruction that flow from an Indigenous adult education approach, hence an Indigenous worldview(s), *and* how technology can help. As discussed in the previous section, critical adult education can create space by offering a critique of the pervasive, culturally hegemonic curriculum served-up by western learning centres. We now will focus on how Indigenous adult learning approaches can emerge in online learning environments by exploring the following: a) the centrality of Indigenous adult learning theory or relational pedagogy; and b) the use of technology for upholding specific Indigenous methods as an aid to increasing cultural and community relevancy. (It must be noted that this section speaks to instructional design, however the importance of adequate instructors and support staff in distance learning cannot be understated.)

Indigenous scholars such as Marie Battiste have identified that there is a distinctive art and science of teaching from an Indigenous perspective, and that Indigenous people have a distinctive pedagogy (2002). Numerous Indigenous scholars concur that Indigenous culture holds within it a distinctive approach to sharing knowledge based in orality (Bastien, 2004; Hart, 2002; Youngblood Henderson, 2000). Indigenous worldview(s) comprises a non-human-centric understanding of the world, where thought and knowledge lives in all energies (human or not) (Deloria, 2004). It is a relational approach built upon oral culture. As Kim Anderson(2004), an Indigenous adult educator positions herself, she sees herself as a storyteller with the purpose of using stories to help Indigenous students to move forward. Silver, Klyne and Freeman (2006) describe Indigenous adult education as being a holistic, philosophical approach that is mindful of the holistic being of the learner, wherein “learners are regarded not just as students but a people outside the classroom” (p. 76). This approach is important because many Indigenous learners hold pain that is exacerbated by life in a colonial paradigm.

Diouf, Sheckley, and Kehrhaan (2000) point out there is a remarkable similarity between “conceptual frameworks set forth by Western theorists” (p. 42) within adult education, although these are described in varying terms such as: reflection, dialogue, experiential learning, and

active learning. They argue that these methods may not differ across cultures, rather cultural norms may influence how these methods are contextualized to a specific culture (Diouf, et al., 2000). How we take up these methods is exceedingly important. Experiential, reflective, and dialogic learning influenced by a cultural worldview that is a non-human centric and collectivist will engage a different learning experience, and subsequent meaning, than that which is influenced by a worldview that is otherwise. In reflecting upon Indigenous approaches to learning in university settings Jeff Lambe (2003) makes the point that Indigenous and mainstream approaches are different, but they can overcome this historical, epistemological and pedagogical divide if there is a willingness to accommodate each other. Many adult educators have grappled with the notion of providing Aboriginal content and, given sufficient resources, now feel hesitantly comfortable with including materials (e.g., videos, readings) on Aboriginal perspectives into their curricula. However the issue of how to incorporate Indigenous methods in the classroom is less clear. It is here where online learning may provide a solution.

Online learning has the potential to assist in broadening the notion of access by approaching instructional design from an Indigenous adult learning theory and using technological capabilities to integrate opportunities for upholding oral culture. From an instructional design perspective the integration of multi-media possibilities with technology assisted capabilities (social software often known as Web 2.0) provide opportunities for a holistic instructional design not solely based on textual content, rather a blended approach of visual, textual and oral connectivity.

McLoughlin and Lee comment on the potential of online technologies that promote collaboration across virtual communities (online learning, blogs, wikis, etc.) to assist diverse learners through their ability to customize the learning experience (2007). Current technologies available to online learning programs, as Moodle or Blackboard, hold within them the possibility to honour non-western pedagogical approaches that serve marginalized peoples – as Indigenous peoples. Through the design of learning modules within electronic course management software, and the ability to upload audio and video clips, a designer can incorporate resources that capture traditional knowledge holders and others (e.g., elders, teachers, community people) sharing knowledge via oral testimony. This is not simply about “bagging digital data” for content, but about the relational process undertaken to receive these teachings, and upholding the method itself – storytelling – within the instructional methods of the course. Integrating Indigenous knowledge as transmitted through the orality foundational to the collective Indigenous cultural identity is a decolonizing method. Providing further methods that allow students to engage and support such forms of knowing creates a dynamic relational force for knowledge exchange. Such an approach is akin to that set out by Te Waka Pu Whenua Maori Adult Education centre, whose philosophy is that the integration and dissemination of Maori knowledge is less about “regarding indigenous knowledge as a static store of information, such programmes engage with a dynamic process of creating knowledge from the experiences and beliefs of the elders or other members of the community” (Rao & Robinson-Pant, 2006, p. 216).

Integrating the use of teleconferencing software program such as Elluminate, an online software program, which allows for computer assisted face-to-face interaction, provides a further opportunity for students to interact orally without having to be geographically proximate. In a recent course on Indigenous educational leadership led by one of the authors, Elluminate was

used to connect the class comprised primarily of online Indigenous students, for a face-to-face session. Half the class gathered in a classroom at the University of Saskatchewan, while the other participants were participating via their home computers in various distant localities including Lac La Ronge and Edmonton. The software was particularly powerful in allowing students to share stories with each other, although they were not in the same physical location. As such groups of students may be participating within their own home contexts, the stories (and subsequent teachings) are often alive with an immediate community perspective. Using networking programs such as Elluminate in conjunction with online courses offered through Blackboard or Moodle is a means to expand inter-student connectivity options, beyond the asynchronous textual posting dialogue option.

The integration of activities within each module is another way to integrate Indigenous approaches to learning. Within online learning environments, the capacity to upload pictures and video clips provides opportunities to consistently integrate learning resources that are not text-centric throughout the course (granted, one must be cognizant of local privacy regulations). This technology provides an opportunity for presenting voice and knowledge through alternative means. In another recent online course, the group had a weekly unit focused on residential schools. The assignment was to prepare a collaborative visual representation of the experience of residential school. Students found online or created digital photographs and posted these to the class in a specified format. They also wrote a line or two commenting on the visual image. At the end of the session, the instructor incorporated the pictures into a slideshow presentation, which became the unit summary. It was a powerful activity.

Incorporating orality into assignments is a way to honour Indigenous culture. Providing space for experiential opportunities for students to document interpersonal reflections on community as an assignment is a solid way of creating opportunities for students to engage with community members. With the technological capabilities that are available to most learners (e.g., digital camcorders), students can submit these presentations for evaluation. Through software programs (e.g., Elluminate) this can also be done in real time. In instances where the presentations are recorded, the presentations can be reviewed by students as part of a critical reflection assignment. The use of distance education as method of instructional delivery, presents a great opportunity for flexibility in customizing instruction and delivery in manner that is congruent with community ways of knowing. However, it must be noted that such curricula requires both time and resources. Distance education curricula such as this cannot be developed off the side of one's desk.

Through creating access through online adult learning programs, students in remote and rural communities are able to remain in their community (Ives and Aitken, 2008; Cook, 2008). By designing online curriculum from an Indigenous adult education approach, such programs will further broaden the notion of access by providing a meaningful educational experience to the geographically distant learner in a manner which upholds as opposed to negates their particular culture. By enabling learners-in-community to continue living their lives without the disruption of having to move to a large city, the stories, knowledge, analysis, and synthesis that they bring into to the virtual classroom will be imbued with culture.

Concluding Thoughts

This paper explored the partnering of critical adult education and distance learning as a response to the needs of Indigenous learners. In doing so, it asks that critical adult educators persist with critiquing cultural hegemony, and then either assist or step back. In stepping back, there is room for Indigenous adult learning theory to emerge, at which time critical educators can assist by become powerful allies. By so doing, they can examine the implications of adult education, and distance learning in the promotion of a broader notion of access as it increasingly involves itself in reaching Indigenous learners in remote and rural areas. Welcoming Indigenous content into curricula is a way in which formal educational institutions can respond to the needs of Indigenous communities. This effort creates an impact within the community beyond the institution and works to create awareness of Indigenous worldviews and cultures; in mixed virtual classrooms it promotes relationship-building through creating opportunities for decolonizing conversations; and it provides spaces within curricula for students to learn important cross-cultural skills. As post-secondary educational institutions explore ways to move beyond endorsement to actively meeting the needs of Indigenous communities, diversity, such as Indigenous adult education approaches, and e-learning for off-campus distance delivery, holds powerful potential.

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