Four

Traditional Aboriginal Pedagogy

Even a cursory survey of the traditional First Nations’ world-view will confirm that their philosophy comprises a very unique metaphysical perspective (Medicine, 1987; Couture, 1991b). Like other ethnocultural communities, the Aboriginal people have always been concerned about passing on the truths they value to succeeding generations. At the time of first contact they had an elaborate method of transmitting valued knowledge in place which we know as the oral tradition. It is safe to say that the various First Nations even had fairly common methods of imparting instruction. Their belief system always premised on a deep underlying spiritual orientation that diffused physical, nonphysical, and personal elements into a connective unity.

Although the teaching methodologies of the various tribal configurations in North America featured a marked similarity, there were differences in skill emphasis. When a Huron mother needed to teach her daughters the art of farming and mothering, she emphasized different skills than the Blackfoot mother did who wanted her daughters to know how to clean and tan a buffalo hide. An Inuit man would be more concerned about his son’s potential ice-fishing skills than his ability to build, launch, and guide a Nootka canoe. There is no doubt, however, that in all Indigenous populations the process of teaching/learning was somewhat formalized and began during the child’s earliest days. Proper behavior patterns were instilled largely by indirect, non-coercive means (Miller, 1997: 18).

Methods of child discipline varied only slightly from one tribe to another. Usually stories with a moral were told to children who misbehaved and sometimes the youngsters were teased or made to feel embarrassed about their misdeeds. Miller (1997: 19) tells a Carrier story about four boys who humiliated an old woman and were punished by being relegated to a position in the sky as a constellation of stars. Ever after, when the people viewed these stars in the sky they reaffirmed this moral to their children, “Do not laugh at poor old people, but give them the driest log in your bundle.”

The concept of apprenticeship was central to traditional Native education. Elders gifted with medicinal knowledge often selected apprentices to
learn their skills and gain their knowledge. Those who held this knowledge let their proteges watch and learn and then participate in healing ceremonies in order for them to absorb and appreciate and later pass along this knowledge.

While scholars have explicated the parameters of these Aboriginal traditions from time to time, appreciation for their worth has not penetrated the pedagogical ranks of the contemporary teacher training milieu. This is unfortunate because an investigation of traditional Native pedagogy will reveal an inherent historical genius which has augured well for the maintenance of First Nations cultures through the centuries since first contact.

There are many illustrative historical accounts which substantiate the reliability of the Indigenous oral tradition. There are also many examples which show the written tradition to be found less than infallible. It is important to remember that the two traditions are not mutually exclusive, the written having grown out of the oral as a vital part of the natural progression of human civilization.

**Defining the Oral Tradition**

A common method of articulating the oral tradition is the intricately-devised deliberate process of verbally handing down stories, beliefs, and customs from one generation to the next. While this definition is technically correct, at the surface it glosses over the impact of the oral tradition when in certain circumstances it has the same effect as unwritten law. Among some plains tribes, when the tobacco was passed among a recognized group of elders it was understood that participants would be bound by the truth. Similarly, when a sweetgrass ceremony was enacted it indicated that a cleansing of the mind was the desire of the participants, and the way was prepared for honest and “pure” deliberation. Similarly, it was the purpose of the sweat-lodge ceremony to recoup spiritually; the outcome of the ceremony was determined by one’s attitude on entering the sweat-lodge. If the individual’s mind was clean, pure, and without malice, an inner cleansing and empowering could transpire. Participating in the ceremony without fulfilling this requirement could result in personal misfortune or affliction.

The oral tradition was not only a means by which to transmit cultural knowledge to succeeding generations, it was a way of preserving and interpreting truth for a specific time and place as well as for mediating elaborate ritualistic processes. This was not necessarily an uncomplicated procedure. By participating in ritualistic processes, powerful religious and moral sensibilities were evoked in the consciousness of the participants. Basic in this
context were root symbolic forms which encoded the fundamental meanings borne in the oral tradition and enacted in the ritual processes (Harrod, 1992). The fact that the oral tradition did not feature written forms should in no way be construed to suggest that its structures were any less complex, nor its spiritual and moral impact any less significant than that expected and promulgated through a written form.

**Dimensions of the Oral Tradition**

The fundamental knowledge store which most plains tribes wanted to pass on to succeeding generations included truths related to origins and migrations, and maintenance of the traditional lifestyle. At the very basic level were verbal accounts explaining creation, many of which are in circulation today. The Assiniboines, for example, believe that Lake Winnipeg was the great water where Iktůmni created the earth. The lake represents the centre of the world and they believe they were created there. One version of the Assiniboine creation legend goes like this.

Iktůmni (not to be confused with the Creator), made the waters and the land. He also made heaven as well as day and night. After he made all the universe he created fourteen humans, but he did not want them to multiply immediately until they found a good dwelling place. He then selected seven fowl and ordered them to dive into the bottom of the sea and bring up some mud. The birds were unsuccessful and soon floated to the surface dead. Iktůmni then sent down the muskrat, the mink, the beaver, and the fisher, but they too were unsuccessful. They too died in their attempt to bring up mud. However, Iktůmni found a little mud in the claws of one of the deceased animals and used it to create the earth. Then he added some lakes for a water source.

Iktůmni taught the people everything they needed to know in order to survive on the earth and told them to multiply and prosper. The fourteen people were divided into seven couples and in time they became the ancestors of the Seven Council Fires of the North American Indians. (Healy, 1983: 1-2)

A cursory analysis of the story reveals a number of significant truths to be appropriated by the listeners. The Assiniboine Nations saw themselves specially made by Iktůmni. The tribe was created in a special place and for a special purpose. The creation process constituted a medium of Divine caring for the Assiniboines. The selection of the various forms of wildlife in the creation process underscored the importance of several different numbers including the sacred number four.
Another origin story emanates from the Tsuu T’ina (Sarcee) Nation in Alberta who originated from the Beaver First Nation further north. As a result both the Beavers and the Tsuu T’ina have their own versions of how this transpired. The Tsuu T’ina interpretation suggests that the original division occurred many years ago in midwinter when the Beavers were crossing a frozen lake stretching east and west. When the people reached the middle of the lake a older woman noticed an animal horn protruding from the ice. Out of curiosity, she pulled on the horn, the ice trembled and groaned, then broke open in a wide crack. Half of the tribe was left on either side of the crack and both groups fled the scene out of fear. Those on the north side returned home to their historic hunting grounds while the southern group kept going until they reached their present locale. They henceforth became known as the Tsuu T’ina First Nation (Dempsey, 1978).

Structure of the Oral Tradition

The content and institutional structures of the oral tradition historically relied on several basic motifs. Among the Blackfoot, Crows, Cheyennes, and Arapahos, for example, four specific motifs were used – solar, astral, animals, and plants. In the first two types, the heavenly bodies played a significant role, particularly as sources of transcendental power. Animals often mediated powers to humans that were associated with their unique characteristics – speed, vision, wisdom, or cunning. They also employed in adventuresome and comic tales related for entertainment purposes (Underhill, 1965). Plants played a less dominant role, albeit among the Crows, for example, the cultivation of tobacco was connected to their origin story. For them the ritual of the Tobacco Society is a reenactment of the creation story which renews the people and their world (Harrod, 1992). Consider the following summary of their creation story.

One day Old Man Coyote was staring across the vast waters and he suddenly felt very lonely. As he scanned the waters he saw two red-eyed male ducks paddling towards him. As they approached he enquired of them as to whether or not they had seen any other living beings. They gave a negative reply so Old Man Coyote got an idea.

“You both swim and dive,” he said. “Why don’t you dive down into the waters and see what you can find?”

The ducks obliged. One of them stayed with Coyote and the other did as was suggested. After some time had lapsed the diving duck appeared with something in his mouth. To Coyote it looked like a tree branch or
root. He then asked the duck to dive down a second time and the bird obliged, this time he came up with mud in his beak.

"Now that is something we can use," Coyote observed enthusiastically. He then fashioned an island from the mud. The ducks were excited at Coyote’s manoeuvres and one of them exclaimed.

"Wouldn’t it be nice if the island were not so bare?" Coyote then took the root that the duck had brought up and made trees, grass, and other plants from it. Now the island looked good. As the three of them were admiring the island, Coyote decided it would look even more beautiful if he added rivers, and valleys, and canyons.

Now the ducks glowed with pleasure, but Coyote was still not satisfied. "I am lonely," he said. "I need company, someone I can talk to." Then he took some mud and made men. Then he made women for the men, to be companions for them.

"Can you make companions for us too," the ducks asked. So Coyote made some female ducks for them. Now, finally, the earth was beautiful and everyone was happy. (Hoxie, 1989: 13-15)

Emergence of Written Forms

Traditionally the oral tradition was well-suited to a fairly conservative human tradition that was given only occasionally to and relatively minor shifts. No human civilization can function without some element of change, however, and the oral tradition was appropriately flexible to accommodate this societal need. By contrast, when the written tradition emerged, and then enhanced with the invention of the printing press, it lent an element of false security to human civilization. The printed page was immediately viewed as constituting a “provable” record, even a legal foundation by which to affect future developments. Now it was possible to refer to recordings of past happenings without having to consult the elders; history in this sense, “spoke for itself.”

As an aside it is useful to keep in mind that while this view is somewhat overstated, so is the belief that the written record is free from interpretations geared to time and place. In addition, the printed page has produced some unforeseen side-effects, not all of them necessarily positive. House (1992), for example, contends that the printed page beget nationalism in the capacity that written forms of propaganda influenced people to perceive of themselves as belonging to an entity beyond specific geographic limitations. By reading about their broader identity, they could feel part of something more
expansive than their local tribe. They could even be stirred to die for their larger ethnocultural community or nation without even experiencing face-to-face contact with other members of their wider fraternity (Friesen, 1993: 67).

**The Utility of Legends**

Traditionally, one of the primary avenues by which children were educated among First Nations was through the use of legends. Legend telling, however, was supplemented by other established institutional practices such as rituals, ceremonies, and symbols. The stories were very old, passed on from one generation to the next through the use of traditional language emphasizing valued concepts (Knockwood and Thomas, 1994: 15). The storytellers, usually grandparents or elders, emphasized living harmoniously with creatures of the land, sea, and air or, as the Sioux would say, “all our relations.” Even plants were said to have spirits and were regarded as relations and like all living phenomena, were potential teachers.

Legends dealt with spirituality, the origins of things, the performances of medicine men and medicine women, and the bravery and singleheartedness of warriors (Ewers, 1989; Grinnell, 1962). They conveyed a vast range of cultural knowledge including folkways, values, and beliefs including the fundamental metaphysical presuppositions that determine the very ground of a particular cultural pattern. As a primary construct of the oral tradition, the telling of Indian legends constituted a vast cultural storehouse and served as a primary tool for cultural maintenance and tribal history. Even today legends may be considered a major part of Aboriginal oral literature and each form is somewhat unique to the particular tribal cultural configuration to which it belongs. Indian stories are pictures of Indian life drawn by Indian artists, showing life from their point of view.

It should be noted that although relating legends was a mainstay of elder-ship, not all elders were recognized storytellers. In fact, in many First Nations there were distinctions about elder functions. Some elders were blessed with knowing tribal secrets in the form of stories, rituals, ceremonies, and Indigenous knowledge. They shared their knowledge when it was time to do so with selected audiences, starting with young children. Later on they would elaborate the more intricate details of their knowledge with hand-picked young men and women who were to be entrusted with the responsibility of passing on the sacred knowledge. The elders recognized that education of the young was concerned with character formation, the making of human beings. As Akan (1992: 194) states:

> Children who do not yet have a good sense of morality are believed to be incomplete human beings. To be wholly human means to have a good
sense of right and wrong and be able to act on that knowledge. For a tra­
ditional Saulteaux teacher and parent, this carries a tremendous respon­
sibility because it means giving the children a good spirit.

Although their roles are not as clearly specified today, traditionally there
were elders who had recognized gifts pertaining to medicinal knowledge and
they were approached when someone fell ill. There were also elders who pos­
sessed skills in counselling; they were sought out if an individual had a prob­
lem to discuss, or planned to get married, or needed a dream or vision inter­
preted. Wisdom elders were also sought out by band councils when major
decisions had to be made involving the entire community. Elders were gen­
erally regarded as human storehouses of valued knowledge, skills, and wis­
dom. They knew about the seasonal cycles of edible and medicinal plants,
and the relocation habits of migrating birds, animals and fish. They knew
about weather patterns, and they knew which hunting and trapping methods
worked best in regard to whatever prey was being sought.

Legend Typology

The study of Indian legends can be a source of enriched learning, illus­
trative of the sophistication of pre-Colonial First Nations education.
Traditionally, legends were told for a variety of purposes and in at least two
specific settings, formal and informal. The latter often took place at the spur
of the moment when it appeared appropriate to entertain or perhaps to repri­
mand someone. Also, sometimes on a winter evening when the people had
stretched out to rest for the night a storyteller would begin a tale. Clark
(1988) suggests that it was good to tell stories in the winter because the
nights were so long. Some tribes feared telling stories in the summer because
the animals and birds, the chief characters in the stories, would hear people
talking and might be offended by what they heard.

Among Crow storytellers, on a long winter’s night, a narrator might
expect to get an occasional response from this listeners, failing which he
assumed that they had fallen asleep and he would stop talking (Lowie, 1963).
Unlike casual storytelling, the more formal aspect of the art was preserved
for deliberate moral or spiritual instruction. Some legends or myths were so
sacred as to have their telling restricted to the celebration of an event such as
the sundance. On such occasions, only recognized or designated persons
could engage in their telling.

In analyzing the composition of Indian legends it is possible to identify
at least four types specifically in operation among plains tribes. Although the
legends may be differentiated for the purpose of analysis, there was also con-
siderable overlap in their structure and use. The major types include: (i) *entertainment legends*, which were often about the Trickster (sometimes called Napi, Coyote, or Iktûmnî), and related primarily for the purpose of amusement; (ii) *teaching legends*, which were employed for the purpose of dispensing information about natural phenomena or tribal beliefs and customs; (iii) *moral legends*, which were intended to suggest to the hearer that a certain behavior should be enacted; and, (iv) *spiritual legends*, which could be related only by an Elder or other approved individual at a designated time and place.

On examination it will become evident that the first type of legends, entertainment legends are often highly amusing even to nonIndian listeners. The primary character is often the Trickster, a sort of half-human, half-god-like character with supernatural powers which he can use at will. John Snow (1977: 10), former Chief of the Wesley Band of the Stoney (Nakoda Sioux) First Nations has referenced the story of Iktûmnî and the fox.

One day Iktûmnî finds a nest of duck eggs by a lakeshore and decides to make a meal of them. Carefully he makes a fire, cooks the eggs, then goes for a walk before partaking of his meal. As he walks around the lake, he meets a fox who appears to be limping. Grinning wickedly, Iktûmnî challenges the fox to a foot race around the lake to where his cooked eggs are waiting. He teases the fox by telling him about the waiting meal, convinced that he can easily outrun the wounded animal.

Surprisingly, the fox agrees to the race and suggests that he will run around the treed side of the lake which Iktûmnî knows is actually the long way around. The Trickster quickly agrees and takes off at an easy pace. As soon as he is out of sight, the fox abandons his faked injury and races off to eat the eggs. When he is finished, he puts the shells into formation so they look as though they are ready to eat. When Iktûmnî arrives he assumes that the poor fox has not yet made it around the lake. "Poor dumb fox," he chortles, then sits down to eat. He quickly discovers that empty shells are all that's left of his anticipated banquet. Now he knows he has been taken in by the clever fox.

Naturally, Iktûmnî is very angry, but there is nothing he can do. The fox is long gone. "Just wait till I see that fox again," he mutters, and goes off to his next adventure.

Trickster stories often involve playing tricks, that is, the Trickster plays tricks on others and they play tricks on him. The Trickster has an advantage on his unsuspecting audience, however, since he can deploy his special powers on a whim to startle or to shock. He has the capacity to raise animals to life and he may even die now and then, but in four days he always comes to life again. In the Assiniboine story of the Trickster and the bear, the Trickster
deceives the bear into thinking that if he enters a sweat lodge which the Trickster has built the bear will improve his vision. Once lured inside the Trickster proceeds to kill the bear and then prepares to cook the meat. He orders two birds to get him a proper cooking utensil (which takes the birds four tries and provides an interesting diversion), and then gathers the animals of the forest together for a feast.

During the festivities the Trickster has an argument with the rock on which he is sitting about the choice of desired meat cuts. The Trickster wants the head of the bear but so does the rock. The rock then decides to stick itself onto Trickster’s bottom who then cannot move. When the animals discover this they run off with all the bear meat. Trickster is finally jarred from the rock by two hard-flying birds who on his order bump him from his station – on their fourth try, of course. He then sets out to retrieve his meat. He is about to give up when he discovers an otter sitting in a tree branch eating bear meat. When the Trickster orders the otter to drop some meat into his open mouth beneath the branch, the otter agrees to this, but asks the Trickster to close his eyes. When he wearies of the chore of feeding the Trickster, the otter drops a sliver of wood into the Trickster’s mouth who promptly chokes and dies. On the fourth day he comes back to life and continues his adventures by travelling in a different direction.

When this legend is told the individual storyteller may embellish certain scenes according to whim. Aside from being amusing the story incorporates several principal aspects of Plains Indian culture – the bear, the sweat-lodge, the relationship between the Trickster and animals, and reference to the sacred number four. In this sense the story could also be delineated as instructional, or at least confirming of certain cultural components.

The second type of legend, teaching legends, often utilize animal motifs to explain why things are the way they are. For example, the Nakoda child may enquire about the origins of the seasons and another Trickster story may ensue. Among the Nakoda Sioux of northwest Canada, the account of how winter originated may go something like this. One day the animals got together with the Trickster to decide what the season should be like and how long it should last. The beaver suggests that the length of winter in terms of months of duration be determined by the number of scales on his flat tail. The animals consider this to be excessive, but since there is no voiced alternative, the suggestion is taken. The result is that the winter lasts so long that most of the animals barely survived. The poor squirrel ends up crying so hard that he develops white marks around his swollen eyes which remain to this day. Thus another meeting is called and this time the rabbits suggest a shorter winter season. The frog demurs, insisting on a six-month winter. The other animals disagree and one of them slaps the frog so hard he falls into the near-
by pond. He thrives in that location to this day. Then, after another lengthy
discussion the frog’s suggestion is taken and the six-month length of
Canadian winter is established.

The origin of winter story again incorporates familiar elements of First
Nations’ cultural lore, namely, that living creatures have a role to play in the
ongoings of the universe. Parenthetically, we learn why the squirrel’s eyes
appear the way they do, and why frogs live in ponds, clearly side-benefits of
the legend. In addition the story confirms the length of the winter and there­
by comprises a means of explanation, particularly to youthful listeners, why
things are the way they are.

The Micmac story explaining the nature of the loon’s call involves
Glooscap about whom many such stories are related. It seems Glooscap gives
loon a unique call, quite different than the other creatures. Loon is a deep div­
ing bird, but one day he overdoes it and gets caught on the weeds at the bot­
tom of a lake. When the loon calls for help, Glooscap knows immediately
who is beckoning him and he dives down to help. Then he restricts the loon
to shallow diving only, which henceforth explains that particular behavior
pattern on the part of the loon (Norman, 1990).

The third type of legend, moral legends, comprise a more complex con­
figuration of functioning than both entertainment and instructional legends.
These stories were traditionally related in formal settings only by individuals
approved as storytellers. The subject matter of these tales is much more
impending as, for example, the story of the blind man and the loon. The story
varies among plains tribes with the central character being of either sex. In
the Stoney version, the legend is based on a man and wife who are separated
from their people when their tribe relocates. The man is blind and cannot
hunt for himself. His wife does not love him. Still, she finds a buffalo for him
to shoot, helps the man point his bow and arrow at the animal, and he fires a
successful shot killing the buffalo. The wife informs him that his shot missed,
then she takes their child and abandons her husband to secretly cut up and
dry the meat for herself. In the meantime the blind man consults with the loon
who tells the man to dive deeply into a nearby lake four times and his sight
will be restored. The man does as he is told and his sight is restored on the
fourth dive. As a payment for his advice the loon requests that the man then
find his wife and cut off her breasts and bring them to the loon. The man
complies with the command and then rewards the loon with a claw necklace
which the loon wears to this day.

The lesson implied in the legend is obviously that selfishness and lying
to one’s mate are punishable forms of behavior. Parenthetically, the legend
also informs the audience about the origins of the loon’s necklace. In a
Dogrib version of the story the loon requests that the man kill his wife, and
in a West Coast version the story concerns a blind old man and a wicked old crone. A Tsuu T’ina version posits the setting of a blind medicine man and his wife, with the latter not convinced of the merits of her mate’s wisdom. Starvation besets the tribe, and hungry, dangerous wolves skulk surround the camp looking for food. The medicine man appears helpless and ill-equipped to advise on how to rectify the situation. Finally, the blind medicine man calls on his guardian spirit, the loon, and then tells his wife to show him where to aim his bow and arrow toward the enemy wolves. She does so and he shoots the biggest wolf thus providing food for the camp. The medicine man’s powers are restored and he thanks the loon with a claw necklace.

According to some contemporary Aboriginal elders, it is not appropriate to propagate Indian legends containing violent scenes or brutality to uninitiated audiences. It is feared that outsiders might misjudge the intent of the legends and misunderstand or make erroneous assumptions regarding Aboriginal traditions. Traditional legends sometimes do incorporate cruel or violent behaviors, for example, the Stoney version of the loon story which involves cutting off the woman’s breasts as punishment for her misbehavior to her husband. NonNatives may regard this scene as standard fare in Aboriginal storytelling without appreciating the content of the tradition. They may conclude that this kind of cruelty was an acceptable form of punishment for disrespectful mates in First Nations societies. One way out of the dilemma is to be reminded that almost every culture has an element of unorthodoxy in its folklore, for example, Bible stories, Aesop’s fables, and Grimm’s fairy tales, all quite matter-of-factly incorporate accounts of people being put to death. Why pick on the Indian folklore? Parallel with elders’ concern it is interesting to point out that the “legends” of modern times as seen on prime time television every night of the week may be interpreted by succeeding generations as illustrative of a very violent culture.

The fourth type of legend may described as a spiritually-impacting story, but it would be inappropriate to discuss such tales in this context because the accounts are considered the personal possessions of certain respected individuals. Respecting this preference on the part of First Nations is a recent perspective, probably indicative of a growing sensitivity toward and appreciation for the ways of the Indigenous People. Decades ago, spiritual stories were recorded and published by anthropologists, for example, the well-know Blackfoot Lodge Tales (Grinnell, 1962), but this practice has since ceased. In respect of this perspective no spiritual legend will be related nor summarized here.

Several years ago it was our privilege to work with a team of Stoney educators on a legend-publishing project. At the outset it was made clear to the team by tribal elders that members of the project group were not qualified to
deal with sacred or spiritual legends. Some elders even questioned the concept of publishing legends in the first place though the intent of the project was to provide published materials as requested local school curricula. It was explained to the elders that the project team saw their role only as that of procurers and translators. They did not perceive their mandate in any sense as editors or "explainers." The project group promised not to change the intent or meaning of any of the legends which they recorded as related to them by elders. In the oral tradition, of course, changes in story form occurred during the telling though this privilege was allotted only to recognized storytellers. In this project that time-honored tradition was held in abeyance since the process was to record and print, not to tell legends. Added to this was the importance of recognizing that probing into the content of spiritual legends is a very delicate activity. After all, many legends represent the arena of sacred teachings among the tribes. This fact required that the various dimensions of the project be conducted with appropriate respect.

In one southwest tribe the relating of spiritual legends required very elaborate procedures. The services of the elder had to be requested four days before the scheduled delivery and "payment" (gift giving) for the telling arranged. The elder prepared for the event by fasting and offering tobacco. Further, there was a designated time for telling sacred legends and during four specific four days during the winter solstice, "when the sun stands still," no payment was required. Relating a scared legend could be arranged on other winter nights but payment was required. Under no circumstances, however, could the sacred legend, nor any part of it be told in the summer (Underhill, 1965).

Parameters of Legend-Telling

The cultural repertoire of every traditional North American First Nation has legends about the origins of things (Knudtson and Suzuki, 1992). Their religious systems have evolved from their basic beliefs about the universe and most such systems were so historically remarkably elaborate and complex that it was beyond the power of their participants to explain them fully to outsiders who, in turn, lacked the necessary sense of appreciation (that is the culturally-innate "urge to know"), that was required to comprehend what was being related. Traditionally, origin legends were not told related to just anyone who asked. In many tribes the property aspect of origin stories carefully safeguarded their maintenance. Selected individuals would learn a legend by careful listening; then, on mastering the story, would pass it on to a member or members of the next generation, perhaps slightly changing aspects of the story to suit their own moods, experiences or perceptions. The
amendments might centre on a different choice of animals or sites referred to in the story preferred by the teller.

A tribe's origin belief or myth was central to the entire religious system of most traditional First Nations, and often based on these assumptions: (i) everything in the universe, including people, has spiritual power, or life force; (ii) all spiritual forces are interconnected; and, (iii) mankind has a responsibility to that interconnection. The earth, which is the basis for such connections and which provides life to all is sacred (Josephy, 1989). Thus sacred legend-telling comprises instruction in spiritual education at its most significant level.

Telling entertainment legends was usually a public venture, for these stories might be related by almost anyone at any time. Since Aboriginal tribes rarely corporally punished their children they often found it useful to hint at the inappropriateness of undesirable behavior by telling somewhat ridiculous stories of some animal which engaged in some such act, hoping that the child would catch on that their misbehavior was the object of the telling (Underhill, 1965). In this sense entertainment legends also became instructional.

**Legend Supplements**

Legends comprised only a part of a tribe's spiritual system which also included ceremonies, rituals, festivals, songs, and dances. These cultural attachments often involved physical objects such as fetishes, pipes, painted designs, medicine bundles, and sacred places. Familiarity with these components comprised religious knowledge, and everything learned was committed to memory. Viewed together, these entries represented spiritual connections between people and universe which, with appropriate care, resulted in a lifestyle of assured food supply, physical well-being, and the satisfying of the needs and wants of the society and its members (Josephy, 1989).

The structure of Indian legends follow an entirely different format and procedure than similar stories in EuroCanadian culture. There is a great deal of overlap among legends of varying plains tribes, for example, but often two versions of the same story in the same tribe might have only the same beginning in common. Then each version would digress. The stories could be told in almost identical language for a few paragraphs and then be changed to suit the narrator. The digression is designed to accommodate the style of the narrators who are at liberty to incorporate their personal everyday experiences in the telling. Fundamentally, however, legends primarily constitute the fluid aspect of pedagogical accompaniment to more deeply-entrenched institu-
tional forms of traditional Native society. Hence, their utility has always been viewed as more functional because of a long-standing tradition of allowing a greater degree of flexibility in form than their parallel, more structural cultural counterparts.

The Implications of Process

With the announcement of a Canadian multicultural policy nearly three decades ago, interest in cultural nuances on the part of the various national ethnocultural communities has surged (Comeau and Driedger, 1978; Anderson and Frideres, 1981). Parallel with this development is a renewed interest in First Nations history and culture which may also spawn new understandings of and appreciation for cultural diversity. But here any similarity to other ethnocultural groups ends because the situation of the Aboriginal peoples in Canada is in many ways quite different from that of either Canada's Charter nations of Canada or the more recently-arrived immigrants, though the latter have opted for many of the same maintenance techniques.

Historically, Aboriginal peoples possess the right of first occupancy. Geographically, they have always occupied a different continent from that of the newcomers (First Nations have always been occupants of North America), who have manufactured the nation's multicultural policies. Culturally, the Indigenous people have maintained a unique philosophical stance, namely that of respecting the balance of nature, with technological advance being assigned a subordinate or corollary status. In economic terms, the First Nations now occupy the lower levels of income groups in Canada, which has made it difficult for them to wield a significant power base. Legally, they are the object of special laws which identify them as a separate group and set them apart from the larger society (Berry, 1981). Though these unique characteristics set the Native peoples apart in significant ways, the reality of the need for employing workable cultural maintenance techniques connects them indubitably with their fellow Canadians. How the successful transition from the oral tradition to more technologically-influenced methodologies will eventually come about will need to be initiated by First Nations. It is they who understand their traditions best though the struggle to have those ways understood and appreciated is probably still a long way off. Like most everything else, their preferred format for the teaching/learning process is still perceived by nonNatives in European-influenced ways.

Adherence to the oral tradition implies an entirely unique set of parameters by which to evaluate pedagogical procedures. At first glance the differences between oral and written forms of communication appear evident, but
a more intense examination reveals a series of more subtle, far-reaching differences. Small wonder that these differences were not appreciated by the first explorers, fur traders, and missionaries. Nevertheless the potential benefits to be gained from contrasting the two approaches, with a view to gaining possible reciprocal advantage appear promising. This approach may even have implications for the improvement of contemporary pedagogical approaches. Perhaps now, with the First Nations cultural renaissance fully underway, nonNative educators will be prepared to listen and learn (Friesen, 1997). The possible learning opportunities may be sketched in three specific ways.

In the first instance, it must be underscored that the knowledge content of the traditional First Nations philosophy and lifestyle, which has quite consistently been successfully passed on to succeeding generations, must be viewed as a whole. It is viewed as comprising a series of interconnections. There is no perceived break in the line of development of “truth” through time; there is no segregation of essence, that is, no difference is noted between material and metaphysical qualities; and there is no breakdown of any kind between sacred and secular realms. This contrasts dramatically with any contemporary breakdown of “truth” which implies that only the secular domain is a rightful object of state-sponsored pedagogical scrutiny.

Traditional Native education reflected “all of life,” that is, every element of their cultural lifestyle was incorporated into the teaching and learning process. Curricular motifs were drawn from everyday encounters with the creature world that supplied all of the tribe’s needs. Legends, which were a primary vehicle of transmission, incorporated a wide range of teaching objectives – instructional, moral and spiritual, with a whole series of intertwined lessons to be learned during the relating of any particular tale. Unless our current perspective of legitimate knowledge spheres is expanded to include the spiritual domain, we shall have yet another case of “never the twain shall meet.”

A second component of traditional Indian pedagogy was its emphasis on societal change and individuality. The curriculum, in the form of rituals, celebrations, and legends, changed as tribal customs were amended in response to impending circumstances. These changes were subsequently anticipated and modified by individual enactments and in relating cherished legends. The recognition of possession pertaining to such sacred items as legends, medicine bundles, pipes, painted tepee designs, etc., assured a certain established form of protection for the curriculum in so far as these were the property of elders alone. They alone, having been awarded the privilege of tribal trust through an unspoken but formal method of selection, held in their hands the metaphysical comprehensions of the tribal destiny of their people.
Though not unaffected by change, this office guaranteed a stability to the tribe and to the various operations necessary for its survival. By contrast, our contemporary ever-changing society has little patience for stability. New modes of styles, habits, “media truths” and ways of thinking are constantly being sought.

A third factor has to do with the subject of evaluating performance. In the classroom of the First Nations student, evaluation was traditionally a matter of personal accountability between teacher and pupil. Student performance was judged by the instructor who might in one instance be a storyteller and in another the primary actor in an elaborate ritual. Subsequent enactments by students would indicate their degree of readiness for possible leadership in the community. By the same token, student performance would reflect the teacher’s ability to teach. No one could refer to achievement on any form of standardized test because evaluation was based on actual performance. An elder might be consulted about possible tribal relocation, the feasibility of a hunt or advice concerning enemy confrontation, and the “proof was in the pudding.” If the advice was sound, the results inevitably would benefit the tribe. Conversely, if the advice proved to be inappropriate, certain measures could be taken, not necessarily on an immediate basis, but they could ultimately result in as drastic an action as a portion of the tribe breaking away from the main body to form a new band.

For the First Nations student in pre-colonial times, a successful educational experience implied commitment to a lifetime of learning, perhaps eventually translating individual talents to a specific teaching mode. If the stamp of approval was awarded by the tribe, the individual might be assigned an enhanced measure of responsibility or awarded a specific honor. As Chief John Snow of the Stoney Nation put it, “When a revelation becomes open to you, you will become a special person to our tribe” (Snow, 1977:12). Contemporary educators could learn from this. A great deal of time is spent in educational circles today extolling the virtues of individualized learning, yet we continually find convenient excuses (like inadequate financing), to explain why this virtuous objective cannot be attained.

The efficacy of the unique philosophical orientation of the First Nations has been vindicated through time as their beliefs, customs, and traditions have prevailed against the onslaught of a European-inspired cultural campaign to wipe out their very existence. With the passing of time this resistance has strengthened to become a bulwark of renaissance of traditional Indian ways (Cardinal, 1977; Lincoln, 1985). Perhaps, as the campaign picks up speed, nonIndian observers will take the opportunity to benefit from this very old and unique perspective. Not the least of areas to be affected by this sharing of ideas might be the arena of effective teaching.
Today there is a resurgence of interest in the old ways and elders are again being called upon to teach the young. Battiste and Henderson (2000: 87) demand recognition of the fact that Indigenous people have the right to exercise and transmit their own knowledge and heritage as legitimate subject matter. They also emphasize that both Native and nonNative worlds can derive great benefits from this knowledge and heritage. The old ways can build self-esteem for Native youngsters and widen the horizons of EuroCanadian thinking. Witt (1998: 270) cautions that any program targeted at enhancing individual self-esteem through language and culture programs must be founded within the stronghold of that culture. Basing a healing and self-esteem agenda on a different cultural process is like saying that Native culture and spirituality are not valid. By the same token, merely adding Native components to the content of an altogether nonNative curriculum will only increase acculturative stress on students.

Many Aboriginal elders believe that language is the key to learning traditional knowledge. Kirkness (1998a) insists that the majority of Aboriginal people in Canada are adamant that Native languages must be protected, preserved, promoted, and practiced in daily life. Fettes and Norton (2000) insist that the federal government establish a program for Aboriginal languages within the Department of Canadian Heritage instead of funding piecemeal incentives. They suggest the that latter be replaced by provincial and territorial funding agreements. This is not likely to happen unless the EuroCanadian body politic who elect governments begin to understand and affirm the value of Indigenous language and knowledge. That will only happen when First Nations themselves become agents of cultural transmission and begin to integrate the richness of their cultural repertoire into the Canadian mainstream.

There is also good news. Today, teaching elders are beginning to combine the cultural lessons they offer to the young with language learning. Native youngsters are taught about their heritage in traditional ways – through story-telling, modelling, and on-the-job training. A first thrust is for them to become aware of the historical process inflicted by the EuroCanadian education system on various generations of Aboriginal people. This awareness can assist in the development of a positive self-identity. Because education is a primary socializing agent in the community, one of its main goals needs to be the development of programs that will promote positive self-identity for students (Antone, 2000). When this is attained, it may be possible to gain a healthy appreciation for the old ways.

As the Indigenous peoples struggle to regain some semblance of relevance in the educational experiences of their young, it may be stated with some degree of confidence that some progress has been made in Native edu-
cation over the past few decades. Improvements include better facilities, local control of schooling, counselling services and support groups. In many cases Native teachers have been trained to work in their own communities, and school curricula have been revised to include more culturally relevant content. As Tsuji (2000) cautions, other important considerations should also be noted. In addition to being concerned about what is to be taught, educators should be alert to when something should be taught. This variable is important to any educational program that stresses cultural relevance as the what and how factors. Other items to factor in include the realization that learning occurs throughout the year, not only when school is in session. Learning does not only occur in the confines of the school year; it happens at home, in the bush, on the trapline or during a hunt. All human experiences must be considered as having learning potential.

The bottom line for Native education is that it must be tailored to fit Aboriginal needs. If Native education is to have an identity of its own, then its formulators must make a conscious decision as to whether or not to mimic nonNative models. Otherwise they will simply find themselves targeting and realizing nonNative values, lifestyles, philosophies, and outcomes (Marker, 2000).

There is also good news on the post-secondary front. Although the tendency for Native students to pursue post-secondary education is of fairly recent origins, progress is being made. Aboriginal students only began to attend post-secondary institutions in any significant numbers during the 1970s. By 1981, the Canadian census revealed that two percent of the Aboriginal population held university degrees, compared with 8.1 percent of the nonAboriginal population. By 1990 the percentage of Native people holding university degrees rose to 2.6 percent compared with 12.6 for the nonNative population. When the Royal Commission of Aboriginal People appeared in 1996, it indicated that 4.2 percent of Aboriginal people held university degrees compared with 15.5 percent of nonAboriginals. Data shows that 21 percent of Aboriginals had completed a college certificate compared with 25.5 percent of nonAboriginals. In the following years these statistics kept rising; the number of Status Indians and Inuit enrolled in postsecondary institutions almost doubled between 1988/89 and 1997/98, rising from 15 572 to 27 100.

What is needed now is assurance from Indigenous elders that university educated Aboriginal youth will be sufficiently acquainted with First Nations’ ways to be able to integrate that knowledge into the Canadian mainstream.