

Sustainability in FNS 225 Introduction to First Nations Studies: The Tribal World

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Each semester, I teach two sections of FNS 225 *Introduction to First Nations Studies: The Tribal World*. The course itself is organized around Shared Core Values of the Tribal World (Christensen, 2004, 2013, 2014). Many of those who choose to enroll in this course do so because it addresses two of the university's general education requirements -- Ethnic Studies Perspective (ESP) and Sustainability Perspective (SUSP). To our students, the Ethnic Studies aspects of the course are readily apparent but it is less clear that students themselves connected traditional teachings about various aspects of life with principles of sustainability. In order to ascertain whether students themselves recognized that they were learning about sustainability, I posed a broad question to them as part of their final exam.

Throughout the second half of the semester, the course examined several aspects of traditional cultures that connect to sustainability to varying degrees. The selection and sequencing of the topics reflects an attempt to reinforce a holistic rather than categorical understanding of culture and to foster relational understanding of these elements. The second half of the course opens with discussions of The Sacred and Creation and Identity, subjects which establish key differences between the Tribal World and Western cultures. Within the Tribal World, broadly speaking, everything has a spirit and a purpose to fulfill. Readings and discussions about plants and animals highlight these traditional teachings and highlight relationships reflected in both the Ojibwe and Iroquois Creation Stories. In both traditions, human beings are created last, and instead of being commanded to subdue and have dominion over Creation, people are taught to be humble and to recognize their complete dependence upon

other orders of life. These ideas are further explored in an applied context by examining scientific and cultural perspectives on treaty rights and the land ethic that contemporary cultural traditions associated with hunting, fishing, and gathering in the ceded territory. Many of the examples in the discussion of traditional philosophy tie back to the acquisition of traditional environmental knowledge, and one of the class meetings connects these concepts to contemporary school contexts. Traditional teachings about spirituality further reinforce the importance of relationship to place, to plant, animal, and other beings with whom that place is shared.

The final exam was designed to assess students' mastery of these concepts, and their recognition of the relationship to sustainability. Working in self-selected small groups, students collaborate to complete an oral and written portion of the exam. The prompt for the essay noted that the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay's Select Mission Statement includes "promoting environmental sustainability" among the ways in which it "enriches the quality of life for students and the community" (University of Wisconsin-Green Bay Select Mission Statement, Approved by the UW System Board of Regents, September 2007). It then directed students to "Develop and defend a definition of sustainability based on Tribal World teachings from the second half of the course: concepts of the sacred, creation and identity, teachings about plants and animals, land ethics and treaty rights, world view, philosophy, and spirituality." Further instructions direct students to draw examples from the course readings and videos watched in class.

Instead of the expected range of responses representing a continuum of quality, there was a pronounced split between those demonstrating strong mastery of the concepts and those clearly falling short of the mark. A small subset of the essays, four of fifteen, was outstanding, and

showed clear connections between principles of sustainability and traditional tribal world teachings. The majority, nine of fifteen, struggled to articulate key concepts fully and did not provide evidence from the readings to support their points. While this appeared to varying degrees in several of the essays, one group framed their discussion by simply invoking romantic stereotypes of Native peoples as the first environmentalists. In this respect, students who had seemingly understood key cultural concepts were unable to apply them outside of the initial classroom context.

The best responses were grounded in specific cultural contexts and drew conclusions based on clear, well-chosen examples. One group began by discussing the Ojibwe creation story and their traditional teachings about plants, animals, human beings, and their relationships to one another that emerge from the story. They connected these teachings to particular beliefs, to stories illustrating the spiritual nature of these relationships, to the importance of traditional and contemporary ceremonial actions showing gratitude to these relatives, and to broader understandings of natural law in a contemporary context. The authors concluded by explaining that “the Ojibwe people teach that to be sustainable is to be harmonic; thus, human beings must not selfishly exploit other life forms, but rather accept their role within the whole creation and respect the other orders of life” (Purpicious, Fall 2014 FNS 225 Final Exam, p. 2).

A second outstanding response perhaps illustrates the divide in the quality of the responses. Instead of presenting their essay as an extended definition of sustainability, Cellophane Clear offered, “In Tribal World teachings, sustainability is an emergent property from a way of living informed by an ocean of understanding for natural systems and human existence that is constantly expanded by a holistic worldview, and practiced by the individual, family, community, and nation through The Sacred” (Cellophane Clear, Fall 2014 FNS 225 Final

Exam, p. 1). In addition to a good discussion of environmental sustainability, this essay also included a solid definition of social sustainability. The authors explain that “social sustainability surfaces when cultures retain and improve values that establish active, meaningful, positive connections that encourage each tier and member of society to be internetworked and interactive” (Cellophane Clear, Fall 2014 FNS 225 Final Exam, p. 3). The course did not include direct instruction about these aspects, so it became apparent that perhaps the best responses involved students who were drawing upon understandings developed outside of FNS 225 to analyze course content and make connections to sustainability.

In considering course revisions based on these results, I made only minor revisions to the sequence of topics, moving the discussion of Worldview and the Iroquois Thanksgiving Address up to emphasize the connections to the Creation Story. I changed or added to the readings to highlight relationships between concepts and connections to sustainability. I added additional traditional Iroquois teachings from Oneida scholar Carol Cornelius and Mohawk scholar Tom Porter, both of whom were already part of the course. In order to highlight cultural continuity, I added essays commenting on and applying those teachings in contemporary contexts from Seneca scholar John Mohawk, another author students already encountered as part of the course. Similarly, I drew upon more of *The Ways of Knowing Guide*, a booklet published by the Toronto Zoo featuring teachings on environmental knowledge that are based on Ojibwe and Iroquois traditions. The guide is outstanding and I had not exposed students to the full range of ideas that it offers. I also chose new selections from Melissa K. Nelson’s *Original Instructions: Indigenous Teachings for a Sustainable Future*, a collection of essays based on addresses delivered at the Bioneers conference between 1990 and 2006. Based on these adjustments, I expect students will exit the course with a deeper understanding of traditional cultural teachings

from Ojibwe, Iroquois, and other cultural traditions from within the Tribal World and a better understanding of their relationship to contemporary conversations about sustainability.