

Fusing Indigenous Knowledge into the Curriculum A Project Summary

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A great and often violent controversy erupted in 1983 when the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the Lake Superior Band of Anishinabeg¹ reserved rights to hunt, fish, and gather within the territory they ceded in the Treaties of 1837 and 1842. The people of the State of Wisconsin had little understanding of tribal sovereignty or of treaties and the government-to-government relationships that they established. Tribal leaders, educators, and advocates sought and secured an educational solution to this problem.

In 1989, the state government passed a law requiring all persons seeking a license to teach in Wisconsin to have received instruction in the history, culture, and tribal sovereignty of the federally-recognized tribes and bands in the state (s.118.19(8) Wis. Stats.). Thus, The State of Wisconsin, and a few other states, recognize that American Indian information, knowledge, and intellectual philosophy are a necessary part of any citizen's learning base. All citizens need to know about the indigenous people that were here before Europeans, if for no other reason than to understand the rights and relationships that exist between tribal people and the U.S. government. Given the fact that American Indian tribal sovereignty and rights retained through treaty negotiations are incorporated into American case law and federal policies, it is imperative that citizens understand why indigenous nations have rights and a status that differs from that of other citizens.

In order to meet the state mandate, individual teacher education programs in the state university system are responsible for incorporating First Nations Studies information into their courses of study to ensure that all of their graduates will have received this instruction. To date, a systematic response has yet to emerge, and the individual campuses have been unable to develop the capacity to provide this instruction in all but the most perfunctory ways. Campuses' responses have ranged from a one-shot half-day workshop to a stand-alone one-credit class to nothing at all.

The model described here addresses this gap in several important ways. It uses an integrative approach to incorporate information about American Indians into the curriculum in a way that reflects a holistic tribal world view. It addresses several sources of resistance because it uses a democratic process characterized both by collaborative effort and individual autonomy to help faculty members develop the necessary expertise. It establishes a flexible process of guided inquiry through which students can build their understanding of salient issues and incorporate these understandings into their lessons as required under s.121.02(1)(L)4 Wis. Stats. Because it draws upon indigenous knowledge, it can facilitate the development of rich collaborative relationships with community members. Although it was developed from this specific context, it provides a systematic solution that may be replicated at any university around any diversity issue.

The WI fusion perspective assembles and develops new, fresh strategies for implementing cultural diversity policies that governments provide in its effort to make

education an inclusive equal experience for all children. The design features an efficient, effective and institutionalized way of imparting selected information through the strategy of fusion First Nations Studies (FNS) core knowledge into existing undergraduate education courses. The FNS knowledge is organized into four pillars of learning which provides base from which education professors draw upon for inclusion into their curriculum. The education professors are instrumental to the process in that they first learn the information, fuse it into their curriculum, and teach it to their students. Thus, American Indian knowledge becomes part of that basic stream of information reaching all elementary and secondary education students.

Traditional First Nations cultural beliefs and practices are premised upon notions of balance and interconnection. Fusion is an activity that promotes balance and interconnects two previously distinct entities. In other words, to fuse or instill an element or elements means there is a blending, merging, and union of each of the parts. The 'fusion' model described in this chapter incorporates First Nations education into teacher education in an effort to enlarge, extend, and augment the curriculum that prepares our future teachers. Such an activity meets the intent of State of Wisconsin policy Act 31 (s.118.19(8) Wis. Stats.) in an effective way by using the university's education department teaching pipeline.

The education department faculty are crucial players in the fusion plan in that they first learn First Nations Studies core knowledge and, then, fuse it into their existing curriculum. Students in the education department, in turn, learn from these faculty

essential knowledge for teaching in the elementary and secondary schools and First Nations Studies knowledge becomes part of that basic stream of information. It is then possible to incorporate this information into elementary and secondary students' normal educational environment in a natural and efficient way.

The model features an effective and institutionalized way of imparting indigenous knowledge through the creation and use of Four Pillars of Learning which provide a core resource base from which education faculty self-select reading and learning materials for fusing into their classes. In this process the education department (ED) faculty extend their pedagogical knowledge through interactive discussion with FNS faculty, after which the two groups agree to how to fuse new knowledge into ED classes. These techniques allow relationships to develop and grow between FNS and ED faculty through a culturally based teaching method embedded within the fusion process.

The fusion model also dovetails clearly with educational reform. With its stress on "invitation" and the honoring of current best practices, it focuses on building knowledge at the "grassroots" teacher level, which will have a systemic impact on a large number of teachers and students. It also runs counter to other heavy handed, "top-down" education initiatives that inundate our schools and teacher preparation programs such as high stakes testing and forced standards.

The Wisconsin fusion project is unique because it fuses First Nations Studies core knowledge – tribal history, sovereignty, law, and philosophy -- into the education

department curriculum. It represents a real effort to place indigenous knowledge and teaching pedagogy at the center of teacher education programs, thereby, making First Nations Studies an integral part of the learning process. The project offers an innovative model for indigenous education both at the national and international levels.