

Land as teacher: understanding Indigenous land- based education

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Indigenous land-based education has implications for science, culture, politics, language, environmental stewardship, land rights, reconciliation—and the future of the planet.

For anyone who seeks an understanding of what Indigenous land-based education is, it may be instructive to begin by grasping what it is not. If your mind went straight to “taking the classroom outside” or “outdoor education,” bingo: that’s what it’s *not*. Or at least, that’s not *all* it is—not by far. A multi-faceted concept, Indigenous land-based education doesn’t lend itself to simple one-sentence definitions, and does mean different things to different people. It brings together layered concepts like the importance of language and the geography of stories, cosmologies and world views, land protections and rights, relationality and accountability, a connection to reconciliation, and much more.

It can offer significant benefits to Indigenous people by providing culturally relevant education, promoting opportunities for inter-generational knowledge transfer, and creating safe spaces for healing and learning. And by changing the relationship that many non-Indigenous people have with the land, it has the potential to lead to a healthier Earth for all.

Dr. Amy Parent, Noxs Ts'aawit, is Nisga'a from the Nass Valley of northwestern British Columbia and describes herself as an uninvited guest to the territories of the Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh and Musqueam peoples. She is also an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. Indigenous land-based education, she says, is a process that centres respect, reciprocity, reverence, humility and responsibility as values connected to the land through Indigenous knowledges—a very different view from the Eurocentric mindset, which has long understood land as a resource and object to serve human uses, much to the detriment of our living world. By its very nature, Indigenous land-based education has the capacity to create transformational opportunities for all Canadians to learn about the many ways in which our education, economic, social and political systems reinforce colonialism.

Or to put it more simply, says Parent, it teaches us that land is not a resource. Rather, “she is a dearly beloved, revered relative who is in crisis right now.”

Dr. Alex Wilson, Opaskwayak Cree Nation, leads the Indigenous land-based graduate program at the University of Saskatchewan. Her view of Indigenous land-based education is relational and focuses on understanding how knowledge connects to and comes from land, including water, sky and everything connected to them.

“Indigenous land-based education is its own paradigm based on Indigenous worldviews and beliefs and the passing on of knowledge to one another and to the next generation,” she says. “It is also a form of understanding our place within, and our responsibility to, the wider universe.”

Outdoor ed—or basically just “doing activities outside”—is at one far end the land-based education spectrum (with the Indigenous component removed), says Wilson. However, while being outside is obviously essential to getting acquainted with the land, just going outside is not enough. From there, the spectrum widens

to recognize the importance of teaching about the land to create global citizens who will care for the Earth. There is also a place on the spectrum for place-based education. But the latter is still mostly about location, not necessarily about the spiritual and cultural knowledge that has been part of it or created through it.

At the other end of the spectrum, where Indigenous land-based education is understood in terms of its deepest and most expansive potential and meaning, it gives context to the knowledges that arise from the land as well as from a specific nation, says Wilson. It encompasses the preservation of culture, language and philosophy, and addresses the ramifications of colonization and “epistemicide” — the severing of Indigenous knowledge systems as a consequence of policies designed to limit or cut off access to food, sacred places, culture and language.

Along those lines, Chris Googoo, a member of the We’koqma’q First Nation now living in Millbrook, Nova Scotia, points out that sometimes, even Elders don’t realize that their stories are teaching science. He says it’s important to recognize that colonization served to suppress this awareness.

“Whenever we wanted to share knowledge, if it went against certain values in the science world or in certain ideologies — Catholicism being the main one — our knowledge was considered a kind of blasphemy at the time,” he says. “We were either shunned or reprimanded somehow when we shared it, so our Elders have learned not to share their knowledge. What we are required to do now is to create a safe environment where people can not only heal from the journeys of their parents and grandparents, but where we can bring out those memories, those stories, that science that we have done research on for thousands of years in a living lab.”

The importance of language and stories

As chief operating officer of [Ulnooweg](#), which offers economic and community development support in Atlantic Canada, Googoo works to exemplify the values of the people he represents by expressing them in ways of being and knowing, culture, traditions and language in every way in which Ulnooweg does business. He says regionality is a crucial feature of Indigenous land-based education.

“If somebody is out west, they can’t talk about our Indigenous knowledge in our own regions, and neither can we talk about theirs,” he says. “The Indigenous element of land-based knowledge is regional.”

Regionality ties into language and the geography of stories — a particular interest of Thomas Johnson, Executive Director of the Eskasoni Fish and Wildlife Commission in Nova Scotia and a member of the Eskasoni Mi’kmaw Language Initiative group. Johnson says authentic Indigenous land-based knowledge is embedded in language and in the stories that transfer knowledge passed down from our ancestors.

“Storytelling is an ancient technique used to retain information and an important part of Indigenous traditions,” he explains. “It’s important for us to talk about these stories of the ancient past that were meant to be told in the Indigenous language, because if we don’t, they will die.”

In a reflection paper he wrote for the Canadian Commission for UNESCO entitled [The Geography of Stories](#), Johnson explains what happens when the links between culture, territory and language are lost. He describes Kluskap’s journey, a Mi’kmaq legend that recounts some of the travels of Kluskap, who has been considered a teacher of the Mi’kmaq people. While there are many versions of the stories, Johnson’s paper describes the Cape Breton version of Kluskap’s journey through the Bras d’Or Lake, a large inland sea in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.

It is difficult to do justice to the story in a short summary. However, the long and short of it is that Kluskap has a series of adventures that result in either encounters with or the creation of a number of the landscape’s noteworthy features, such as a cave, a set of five small islands, a prominent stone on the shoreline and outcroppings of rocks. These were all given Mi’kmaq names connected to events in the story, such as Petawlutik (Table Rock), where Kluskap has their dinner, or Pli’kan (Cape Split), where Kluskap uses a paddle to dig out the channel that forms Minas Basin in the Bay of Fundy.

Johnson writes that even though the Mi’kmaq language was shaped and created by this landscape, many elders and others in the area today have never heard of some of the words from Kluskap’s stories. Being disconnected from the land has led to the loss of the language—when the connection to the land is what is actually required to maintain that reciprocal relationship and feeling of interconnectedness.

“Losing the majority of our speakers was a direct result of what happens when a disconnect occurs between the Indigenous language and the land,” says Johnson.

Indigenous land-based education aims to remedy this disconnect by reviving the reciprocal relationship between Indigenous people and the land. It also encompasses several kinds of learning—about the land, about the history of the land and about how First Nations as a group interacted with the land. In fact, Johnson says the concepts are so closely intertwined that at one time, there was no need to even call it education. “It was just a way of life,” he says. “You lived it on a daily basis. You didn’t even realize you were being educated. You were one with nature. There was a deep love and respect for nature and all that it had to offer.”

It’s political

Recognizing the connections between Indigenous land-based education and language is fundamental to understanding the concept, agrees Parent.

“We were put on a land that looked like us and given a language that sounds like the land, with the words to describe the land and all of its beings,” she says, honouring the late Woody Morrison of the Haida Peoples, who first expressed it that way. “Woody said every land has its own Magic. So if you have a name from that language, then the land and the trees know you by that name. A soul name is a name, and the wind carries it to the tops of the highest mountains and over the waters.”

As a result, she says, naming practices are indivisible from Indigenous land-based education; regionality -- what Parent refers to as “locality” is key.

Adding to the complexity, Indigenous land-based education is inseparable from what Parent calls “really uncomfortable conversations” about our entanglements as Canadians in colonial violence, environmental degradation, the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral homelands and the perpetuation of cultural genocide. It invites us, she says, “into a process where we begin discussing and addressing questions of land reclamation, reparations, Indigenous sovereignty and jurisdiction (or Canadian sovereignty on Indigenous stolen lands) while supporting land-based practices that will sustain Mother Earth.”

This ties into language and place names, she adds. For example, in B.C., the majority of lands were never ceded, “yet the landscapes were violently remapped, redrawn and renamed to reflect new toponyms that upheld the glory of European empires and the so-called ‘good deeds’ of their patriarchal forefathers,” she notes. “These toponyms silence Indigenous land-based names and erase them from Canadian historical records, curricula and public memory, and they redefine the land through a Eurocentric lens as an object and a resource.”

In comparison, says Parent, Indigenous land names powerfully signify the continued presence and recognition of Indigenous laws, history, governance and sovereignty since time immemorial, in keeping with the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s final report](#), and the [Commission’s Calls to Action](#), which emphasized that the state has an obligation to provide an education that supports Indigenous sovereignty.

“And we know there is a strong connection between the re-establishment of Indigenous land-based names and the revitalization of Indigenous languages and culture.”

Kinship, land protection and responsibility

A major global benefit of Indigenous land-based education may be its potential to lead to better environmental protections by changing people’s relationships with the land—a development that could have important implications for a world that is struggling with climate change, biodiversity loss and significant, steadily worsening environmental degradation.

For example, Wilson believes land-based education is part of climate change education—and a necessary part of that is about relationality and accountability. “Land protection is just a huge, huge part of that,” she explains. “If you understand—through our kinship structures or the way the language is structured—that parts of the land or animals are literally related to you, then you have a different kind of relationship with the land: you have something more like a familial relationship, where protection is naturally a part of it. I think that's really important.”

Googoo adds that it's about creating a feeling of harmony and a deep connection with the Earth—an ideology that goes beyond basic religion. “I'm talking about words like intuition, sixth sense, an intimate connection with Mother Earth—it's 'up here' where you can't even really understand it, because it's hard to understand a thousand years of scientific method.”

The reconciliation connection

Googoo ties reconciliation into these ideas using the example of going out into a forest and hugging a tree: a full understanding of the experience requires both western and Indigenous knowledge.

“You'll feel the tree's energy, there are chemical and electrical reactions that occur and connect us to it. We see it, and we have proven it scientifically. That's two-eyed seeing, for me,” he says, referring to *Etuaptmumk*, the Mi'kmaq idea of looking at things from two different perspectives and trying to reach a common ground.

“And I think that's a validation of both sides—that science validates Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous knowledge validates science. I believe that's where true reconciliation occurs: when one respects the other's knowledge. We have lots of theories that aren't accepted yet, but it's getting to a point where we are being asked to bring Indigenous knowledge into the public education system.”

Land-based education supports reconciliation by breathing new life into languages and cultures at risk of disappearing, teaching students about the history of residential schools, empowering them to develop their own connections to the land, and giving them the tools to protect and fight for it. It is a chance for Indigenous people to “reclaim and regain” their traditional territories just by being outside, says Googoo.

“It's sort of like you're planting a flag, but you're actually planting a tree and giving back what Mother Nature had put there in the first place. This feeds into our narrative about the need to respect the treaties and traditional territories, not only in Atlantic Canada but elsewhere. It allows so much opportunity to teach not only Indigenous people, but non-Indigenous people about treaty relations and allyship.”

While reconciliation is primarily a settler responsibility, Indigenous efforts supporting decolonization necessarily challenge the dominance of Western thought, including about land. Colonization, says Wilson, imposed binaries that must be dismantled for progress to continue. She teaches a course called Queering Land-Based Education at the University of Saskatchewan that addresses these ideas, which she says arose when, in her research and teaching experiences, she began to identify patterns where people were simply recreating colonial constructs (but outdoors) in their land-based practices. She realized there was a need to examine and understand how land-based education could address the binaries imposed by colonization.

“That’s where queering comes in,” she says. “Not so much in terms of being inclusive of LGBTQ2S+ people, although that’s a part of it, but also understanding that because there’s such diversity in nature, that for any kind of binary that exists in humans’ minds, you can probably find something in nature that undoes it—or ‘queers’ it. I use the term queering rather than decolonizing because it centres a positive—like queering—rather than centring colonization and trying to undo it. This approach is generative, regenerative and life-giving rather than life-taking.”

Looking to the future

Although land-based education is not uniformly on offer at school boards across Canada yet, particularly in urban settings, interest in it is growing and spreading. Wilson says many school divisions—particularly in the Northwest Territories and northern Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta—have begun offering it in various forms. There are many examples of individual schools or entire systems that centre land-based knowledge as their core curriculum.

Indigenous land-based education holds the potential to create a new generation of Canadian citizens that have never been seen before by immersing them in a respect-based worldview of the land from their earliest days. It’s a positive example of what the future may hold as we try to tackle complex global environmental challenges.

Recently, Parent—in her role as a faculty co-director of the Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw M.Ed. program—had a chance to work with several Skwxwú7mesh leaders who were instrumental in creating [Aya7ayulh Chet](#) (Cultural Journeys), a kindergarten-to-grade-6 program built around Indigenous land-based education in Squamish, B.C. The program is the outcome of a collaboration between the Skwxwú7mesh Nation, the Sea-to-Sky School District and the Stawamus Elementary School parent advisory council. In addition to supporting land-based educational practices in the Skwxwú7mesh language, the school welcomes non-Indigenous students.

“We are creating citizens of Canada to be like no others before them,” says Joy Joseph-McCullough, associate education director for the Skwxwú7mesh Nation, who was instrumental in developing Aya7ayulh Chet (Cultural Journeys). “The students will have an understanding and empathy that they will hold in their minds and hearts due to the spiritual and cultural teachings they are learning through the land. They will have a new lens. Imagine if one of them gets into politics and becomes a prime minister of Canada?”

Recounting a story about a little red-haired boy with freckles who was in the program, Joseph-McCullough describes a phone call the cultural teacher, Charlene Williams, received from the boy’s mother one day. Her son had been explaining that “in our Skwxwú7mesh way, this is how we do things, Mom.” The mother was concerned because in her mind, her son was not Skwxwú7mesh, but was speaking as though he was.

“She said, ‘I don’t know how to tell my son he is not Skwxwú7mesh.’”

Joseph-McCullough was adamant about supporting the parent because she knew land-based education was new. She recalls advising the family: “Culture is what you practice, and he is practicing our Skwxwú7mesh ways, so this has become his culture. We don’t have to take this from him. He can work through this, and figure it out as he grows older.”

Later, the mom called again because the young boy was so drawn to the Skwxwú7mesh ways that all he wanted for Christmas was a woven cedar basket.

“She asked one of my staff to teach her, so she could give her son what he wanted for Christmas,” Joseph-McCullough says.

Ultimately, says Wilson, the best way to understand Indigenous land-based education is as a way of teaching and learning that has existed since the beginning of humans—and while it may not be new, the context we’re in is, and it is giving Indigenous land-based education an increasingly critical importance.

“We’re at a place and time where we have an opportunity to draw from that knowledge,” she says. “If people had listened to Inuit people 60 years ago when they started sounding the alarm about climate change, what might be different now?”