Blackfoot Way of Knowing: Metaphysical Ceremonialist Learning

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Introduction

I am currently working with a group of scholars including Dr. David Boje and Grace Ann Rosalie at New Mexico State University in examining and analyzing what is being termed “Quantum Storytelling”. In a “Quantum Storytelling Conference” on December 17-19, 2004 a group of scholars gathered to “explore new ideas”. Two of the tracks were concerned with the “complexity of human social systems” as well as other “worldviews”. Inherent within these tracks were implications relative to organizational development in business as well as materiality in learning process.

Within this ambitious context, this paper presents an unpublished discussion of case study results from personal interviews with Blackfoot ceremonialists in a doctoral dissertation entitled Blackfoot Ceremony: A Qualitative Study of Learning (2000). In the study, I used qualitative case study methodology to interview fifteen members of the Blackfoot Confederacy consisting of the Blackfeet (South Piegan or Pikuni) in Montana, North Piikani (North Peigan) and Kainai (Blood) both from southern Alberta Canada. All the interviewees are well-known ceremonialists in the tribes of the Blackfoot Confederacy. As a ceremonial learner and a doctoral student, I wanted to know how the ceremonialists were able to learn the complex rituals and songs associated with ceremony. This particular discussion relates to the first finding in the study named “Learning from Visions and Dreams”.

In my doctoral dissertation the overriding dynamic is that much of the learning is based on the Blackfoot way of knowing that has a philosophical and pragmatic basis in Blackfoot
genesis stories. Although the epistemology is relatively clear through the storytelling, the ontology of learning of though a metaphysical process is onerous.

Excerpts from “Learning in Blackfoot Ceremony” (2000)

This paper explores how some members of a Native American group obtain spiritual guidance and information in the conduct of ceremonial rituals. A sample of edited findings from a doctoral dissertation entitled “Blackfoot Ceremony a Qualitative Study of Learning” (Pepion, 2000) is used to portray the phenomenon of learning through “visions and dreams”. Since the study concludes that “[C]eremony is a reenactment of the tribal origin stories”, the presentation begs the question of ontological and epistemological implications for further research and discussion.

• At a certain age, they may have a dream or vision to pick up a particular bundle. It doesn’t happen to everyone. You don’t just say, “I’m going to get this bundle because I got the money, I can afford it.” That particular bundle has to come to you in a vision or a dream, telling you to come and approach you to become keeper of that bundle. MLW*

[The initials are used identify different individual study participants. The names of the participants are in the dissertation].

• We learn from our dreams. In 1974-75 I was dreaming, I went into a teepee. It was all set up for a pipe ceremony. At the seat of honor was an old man who got up, he was holding a drum. He sang this drum song [He sings]. He said, “Here’s the drum, see those people sitting there [where drummers sit in ceremony], that are your seat.” AP

• Something interesting is when the grandfathers put the songs inside of me. So they’re easier to learn as a natural part of sleeping during that transfer because they were listening to me. I was sleeping by the bundle, I sang all them songs in my sleep but I didn’t know it. VB

• Dreams are your spiritual helpers. They are pushing you to this way of life. You can have a direct vision. Usually people don’t listen to the first dream. They’ll wait for several more dreams for clarifications of the dream. One of the holy women up in Canada, she dreamt for her dream four times before she made a move on it and then she became a holy woman. BHW
• I think there’s somebody gave them to help me. Somebody send their spirit or somebody belong to that pipe. You never see them. You never hear them speak to you, but they around there with the pipe. GKW

• My uncle owned the Police Pipe before I did, he did not know the songs but in his dream, the forked stick taught him all the songs because nobody was there to sting them. So the next day they were wondering how they were going to; during the opening, they were worried how they were going to sing them. But they were taught to him in his dream that night. So the next day he didn’t think about them he just started to sing them. VB

• That’s what they say, that they’re planted inside of you [songs]. It comes out when needed. When I’m learning these songs I use a little bit of that because if I think about it I can’t remember it, but if I just start singing it then I sing it right. That’s the part of the grandfathers helping me; they won’t let me go wrong. So when I really have trouble with a song, that’s what I do. Then after I start it, it comes right back to me, then I can start to sing. VB

• A lot of these old people the way they get dreams. They go up there alone. Like this old Charlie Iron Breast, I take him way up to Cooper Lake in a wagon. … “You’re supposed to act pitiful towards the Creator.” [stated Iron Breast] Some shadow, [spirit] they call them the old people, shadow, people that they pray to. They’re the ones making all that stuff; they’re miracle people. If you listen you’re going to learn all these songs. GKW

• That time I took Charlie Iron Breast, I took him up to Cooper Lake in a wagon. … I tie them horses…. He got off and I got off. He took his blanket and he took his pillow. A lot of matches and tobacco and his pipe. … He laid his blanket and pillow and he’ll just sit in there. “What else?” I said. He said, “I’ll smoke with you, before you go down.” … When we were smoking, I was thinking. “This old man, gee, he’s brave. He’s got no protection. Everybody else, he can’t do that.” It’s supposed to act pity [pitifful]. GKW

• That’s the only way you’ll get your dream. … I was thinking kinda didn’t believe him, but started to get dusk and dark. … “Well I’m going to leave.” I got up and start and walk down. I stopped, look back at him. He is still on his pipe, smoking. I got to the wagon, I could barely see. I took my time; give him time, he might change his mind. I was thinking to myself. He didn’t have no protection. He really believe he’s get a dream, vison. He really believe it. I think that’s the one he depend on.” GKW

• … [I] got up there early [the next morning]. … I hitch them [horses] and started out. I got up there … I tie them horses … and I walked up. I told him “you got up; you must have got up pretty early.” “Ya” he said, “birds just start singing, way down there, all over.”
… “Something up here but he can’t see very good.” He could hear this like wind like it goes through. “Must have been an owl or must be eagle or something” he said. “Could hear wings like that.” GKW

- He never did tell me anybody gave him his power; this person, bird or whatever it is. That vision, he sleep, they gave it to him. I was thinking, might be eagle or owl or hawk or something. He said, “I could hear their wing when they come through. They big birds.” He never did tell me. GKW

- He never did tell me, old Charlie, if there’s anybody come. He hear some people down there pounding and everything like that. That’s the only thing and those things flying overhead. Those might be the things that gave him his power. GKW

Discussion on Learning from Visions and Dreams

Learning from visions and dreams is important to the Blackfoot ceremonialists. For the contemporary western learning theorists, this way of learning is probably the most difficult to acknowledge. Educators have not delved into this kind of learning, as it is an elusive proposition that does not seem to fit with most known concepts of learning. Other disciplines such as Anthropology, Psychology and related behavioral branches of study have peripherally examined other cultures’ way of learning related to spirituality. The scientific method of quantitative inquiry has separated itself from this kind of knowledge for a variety of reasons including the fact that the variables in these kinds of studies are not conducive to quantification. Qualitative research at least recognizes that something is going on related to learning.

In this study, the participants impart a reality for them, which recognizes they are able to do things such as sing ritual songs that have somehow been internalized into their psychic. Most of the revelations through dreams occur by the participant envisioning a person "giving" them a song. The song may or may not be consciously recalled except in ceremony. The idea is that something like a song is subconsciously or metaphysically placed into the mind of the person having the dream. The empirical phenomenon is that some of the participants in the study are
able to sing the correct song in the precise part of the ritual, which is noteworthy since most ceremonies involve a complex set of rituals that may take several hours to complete. Indeed, others who receive songs in a dream are able to consciously recall and use the chant, as it may be appropriate, to a ritual or set of liturgies. Other disciplines in the behavioral realm have certainly studied infusing the mind with subliminal messages, which are believed to produce overt behavior. However, identifying the process of learning in this study was more important than attempting to explain these kinds of learning phenomenon. Therefore, the concession is made, in this research, that the case studies reveal the phenomenon of learning through dreams and visions.

A significant issue related to learning process through dreams and visions is that the individual would consult an elder to assist in "interpreting" the dream. In almost every case, the participant would confer with a trusted elder with whom they had developed a relationship. The trusted elder was usually an older, experienced ceremonialist or person who was generally known as having the "gift" or "power" of interpretation. Inherent in this finding is that a master/pupil relationship exists between learners and experienced elders. It is consequential to note that a process of dialogue and interaction between the ceremonial learner and an experienced teacher occurred.

Some of the participants disclosed that they contemplated the meaning or significance of their dream or vision. It appears that the learning process here utilized critical thinking skills to examine phenomenon to find meaning. Contemplation implied that meditation or "time to think" was a part of the learning process related to these spiritual experiences.

Dreams and supernatural experiences are also ways in which some of the case studies obtain "power" or the "right" to render certain rituals. In one case, the individual was "visited" in
a "dream" by a "spirit" who gifted him with a specific ritual for healing illness. In two other instances, the individuals received spiritual entitlement to drumming and singing in particular ceremonies. In these cases, the spirit in the dream was viewed as a teacher who provided the learner with specified ceremonial practices.

Several of the participants in the study voiced the opinion that they obtained positive reinforcement or "inspiration" to continue the ceremonial lifestyle through dreams. This type of learning experience enhanced self-esteem and bolstered motivation to continue a perceived challenging lifestyle connected to ceremonial learning. Part of this sense of accomplishment is related to the belief that they were taking responsibility for regaining and preserving a body of traditional knowledge. These characteristics are conducive to the elements of self-directed learning and intrinsic motivation identified by educators in the pedagogical processes (Kidd, 1973)

Recalling the dream experience is a way of "remembering" and providing "meaning" to some of the ceremonialists. An understanding was gained that seemed to enhance the body of knowledge related to Blackfoot ceremony. The dream can provide a frame of reference by which the ceremonialist can recall the process and procedure related to the conduct of ritual.

Although it was not quite clear how the phenomenon of a "spiritual helper" assisted the ceremonial learner, several of the participants indicated that they had this type of guidance. This type of spiritual patron provided confidence and a sense of distinction for the learner. However, all the study participants communicated a feeling of humility that the supernatural forces were not inherent in them, but worked through or with them in their ceremonial endeavors. Thus, learning through dreams and visions provides the learner self-esteem and self-worth.
Although no attempt is made to categorize the ceremonial learner by age, experience or level of education, all of them exhibited faith in their beliefs. No doubt was voiced regarding the seemingly metaphysical forces that are integral to this way of learning.

**Conclusion**

Utilizing “Quantum Storytelling” in organizational development with diverse groups, such as Native Americans, consideration must be given to the fact that scientific method, in many cases, may not be conducive to Indigenous ways of knowing. A culture that learns from visions and dreams is a phenomenon that confounds logic and reasoning in Western knowledge systems. Scholars like Joe Kincheloe (2006) advocates using other processes to examine differences to achieve what he terms “new concepts of human being”. He espouses using a multi-logical orientation to understand cultures outside of the western perspective. As indicated by Kincheloe, Western knowledge’s adherence to hegemonic ideas of “cultural supremacy and exclusionary practices” excludes other possibilities. However, he acknowledges the emergence of a “new respect for the genius of indigenous epistemologies and ontologies” and further advocates recognizing the “value of non-Western knowledge”.

The concept of power in relationship to development and learning in Western knowledge is a far cry from the metaphysical indigenous concept, as with the Blackfoot ceremonial learning. Henry Giroux (1997) promotes the position of “challenging the narratives of national identity, culture and ethnicity” and the need to “examine, acknowledge and unlearn” the “privilege” of Western society. Unfortunately, when considering concepts of a metaphysical power “nihilism” prevails within Western knowledge systems. Thus Giroux advocates the necessity to “rethink the politics of multiculturalism”.

The idea of information being “internalized into their psychic” so that “recall” is possible may not too far from “cognitive” process of synthesizing knowledge. Vine Deloria Jr. (2009) was intrigued with the possibility of Jung’s archetype theory and concepts as a possibility for elucidating Native American metaphysical knowledge. In the end, Jung’s inability to shift beyond the static Eurocentric discipline that considered indigenous knowledge as “primitivism” and the rigidity of evolution dismissed new
ontological possibilities for Western knowledge. As Smith (2012) relates the disciplined must be undisciplined in the decolonization process.

The study clearly recognizes a mentorship process in ceremonial learning when the learner interacts with an elder person of experience and knowledge. The mentor nevertheless is also acknowledged as a person who has a “gift” or “power” of being able to analyze and translate “dream” information. Thus we are again confronted with an ontological meaning making process. This certainly has possibilities to explore in utilizing the mentorship process in organizational development.

The idea of contemplation and critical thinking in Indigenous ways of knowing to create meaning fits with the concepts of mindfulness. It coincides with Yellow Bird’s (2005) processes of using mindfulness to decolonize the mind through the use of meditative techniques. Altering one’s state of being as a way to become conscious or aware of a more global synthesis in making meaning of convention has possibilities. This kind of affective learning process is not unfamiliar to organizational planning and development.

The notion of a “spiritual helper” is an anomalous abstraction to Western knowledge. Ethnography and qualitative research utilize empirical procedures to document the “lived experience” of people and cultures. However, interpreting this kind of data and information utilizes Western abstract concepts and principles (methodology) to create meaning. This kind of circumlocution only validates Eurocentric knowledge. Thus Kincheloe and McLaren (2008) advocate a “bricolage” or a “critical hermeneutics” approach in bringing storytelling (or lived experience) in to consideration as a non-judgmental, participatory information and data to transform a situation. Thus organizational developmental processes would be akin to Freire’s (2009) approach of utilizing “generative themes” from the organization participant’s “thematic universe”. Freire has a very carefully constricted process of using technological and western learned “experts” to facilitate what is now called participatory action planning and development (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2008).
The use of Quantum Storytelling to instigate organizational development though participant learning processes that utilizes materiality and information that ebbs and flows with the dynamic processes of peoples lived experiences through time and space has some profound implications. Indigenous ways of knowing brings the much abused term “diversity” into a universe of connectedness of all things that are constantly and dynamically repositioning.

**Works Cited**


Yellow Bird, M. (January 24, 2014) *Decolonizing the Mind* [video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTADOckJTww