

## **REFLECTIONS ON THE DIRECTION OF NATIVE STUDIES DEPARTMENTS IN CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES**

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Native people have been studied for a considerable time now -as a race and culture that was disappearing and therefore knowledge of them had to be preserved as a group who continually presented a "problem" to the dominant society and their ways and therefore an awareness of the difficulties and conflicts had to be discerned and assessed; as a "primitive" people who held peculiar customs, rituals and beliefs that must be collected, categorized and catalogued. Although, having little direct benefit as far as the majority of Native people are concerned, these studies have involved many disciplines: history, anthropology, sociology, social work, psychology, religious studies, philosophy, education and linguistics.

However, Native people have not disappeared. And, today, it is being very seriously questioned as to where the "problem" really lies - with the Native people or with the people who have deprived them of their humanity and identity and forced them to conform to a foreign life-style and culture. As well, Native spiritual ways are fast becoming recognized as a belief system of eminent quality, deep insight and quite possibly the answer modern society needs to a culture and belief system that seems more destructive than benign, that is drowning in its materialism, and that is crying out for spiritual meaning and human understanding.

It is out of this background and into this present situation that Native Studies has emerged as a discipline in and of itself.

Now that a number of Native Studies programs and departments have begun in different universities across Canada, and now that they

are being staffed more and more by Native people and being influenced more and more by the Native peoples' own needs, beliefs and cultural ways and methods, some very significant questions are arising as the direction the discipline of Native Studies will go from here. As Native Studies as a discipline is being born and emerging into the institutions of "higher learning" we must begin as soon as possible to address ourselves to these questions.

First of all, Native Studies is not simply a study of Native people and their ways. Otherwise, we could leave it to anthropology, sociology and so on down the list of interested disciplines. Native Studies involves, moreover, a language, a psychology, a philosophy and world view that is entirely unique and cannot be adequately taught within the present departments of the University. It must necessarily be taught, then, by Native people, and, further than that even, by Native people who believe in and follow the Native way of life. If it is truly a Native Studies Department, it will also by its very presence and teaching methods and activities necessitate changes within the institution in which it is situated. This is not such a preposterous claim, since virtually all disciplines have necessitated changes in the institution as they endeavoured to develop their unique place within the structures of higher learning. Higher learning is no simple process that goes on between the professor and his lecture and the student and his examinations. It has become, as the various disciplines have emerged, a multi-faceted learning environment in which various activities, teaching techniques and evaluative processes take place: laboratories, field trips, seminars, workshops, experimentation, field work, role playing situations, interviewing, language labs, practice teaching, and a host of other necessary methods to facilitate effective learning in particular fields.

What is particularly unique in Native Studies developing as a discipline is that it presents an almost entirely different world view and approach to education. It will, therefore, involve a different approach to other disciplines that come within the purview of Native Studies. That is to say, Native Studies will present a unique Native philosophy, Native psychology, Native history, and "turn out" Native social-workers, Native educators, Native counsellors and so on. Or at least sufficiently influence these disciplines as they must come to properly relate to Native people and their situation, to cause them to deal effectively and appropriately with these areas.

Even the sciences come within its influence as the concepts of the organic wholeness of the world and universe and man's intimate relationship and kinship with the environment become acceptable and worthy concerns. As Native Studies finds its place within the institutions of higher learning, in the truest sense of Native Studies as a discipline, it must necessarily make its impact on the institution and the disciplines within it.

As I see it, from this point in our development, these seem to be some of the changes that need to be considered:

1. Because Native Studies implies an uniquely different philosophy and world view, it will become important to involve those Native people who best express this approach -- namely the Native elders and spiritual leaders. This means that these people will have to become accepted, without reservations, as a necessary aspect of the teaching of Native Studies. The professor, then, may become one who assures that these people are available in the teaching situation, rather than simply the one who is charged with the total responsibility of teaching the course him/herself. It may also require that these elders and spiritual leaders be recognized as having equivalence in terms of degree qualifications necessary to teach in the University.

2. Because there is the commitment to a belief in organic wholeness in the world view and the recognition of a basic relationship (kinship) within creation, certain implications arise from these:

- relationship to the land and environment becomes one of the foundations of Native Studies,
  - methods and approaches of study and teaching must necessarily break through the "walls" of the university institution, to become a total relationship with the land the environment, i.e., not only learning about the land and environment, but participation in it;
  - awareness and appreciation of this world view and an understanding of this "relatedness" must reach out to the North American community as a whole. This is especially important in view of the present dilemma of modern society and the deterioration of the environment. Native Studies has a special responsibility in this regard.
3. Because the Native philosophy of education focuses on the total person as a living, dynamic being in relationship to the whole

of his environment,

- educating in the discipline of Native Studies will have to be both holistic and person-centred, i.e., the student and "teacher" cannot be separated from the whole environment in order to learn, and, a balance must be established between the "subjective" and "objective" approaches to learning in order that they complement one another,
- this will require a very different evaluative process so that personalism and the subjective aspect will be recognized as a valid and meaningful part of the learning process;
- the Native community and non-Native community will have to become directly involved in or directly related to the university education process.

4. Because the Native way of life is a spiritual way of life the university Native Studies Department or Program or College would have to be a "spiritually-based" discipline and the spiritual ways would become an essential foundation of courses, programs and research within it. This does not mean that Native Studies would be another "religious studies" department, but that the spiritual understandings would direct the development of a meaningful and truly Native Studies discipline.

Now this may seem like a rather high sounding claim for a discipline that is only in its stages of infancy, but then again, the campuses may be well overdue for such changes in the realms of higher learning. Certainly on the Native peoples' part there is a movement toward self-determination, as well as rediscovery and reintegration into their own traditional, cultural and spiritual ways. It would be appropriate for "their" discipline to be based on the same orientation and moving in the same direction. Paralleling this is modern societies disenchantment with its own values and orientation, with what it is doing to the environment, with the lack of a meaningful identity, losing of the quality of life and the sensing of the spiritual vacuum in this empirical and technological age bent on fulfilling the unharnessed ideals of "progress" and "development". Perhaps a discipline of Native Studies based on concepts such as holism, education of the total person, "relatedness", harmony and responsibility to the land, community involvement and participation, which is spiritually oriented and spiritually fortified will be precisely

what is needed at this critical time for both Native and non-Native alike.

Eventually, to meet these ideals "Native Studies" will have to take place in an environment that involves all levels of learning as well as all stages of life, where the very young will be able to learn from the very old and the different ages will not have to be segregated from one another. Perhaps a learning situation or environment will have to be created where all who are involved in learning and living will be in direct and constant involvement with the whole of life for the whole of life. This may be the only way in which these ideals can be meaningfully accomplished. However, in the meantime, Native Studies finds itself in the delivery-room of the university campus. It must struggle to gather growth and work toward its goals. And it will, necessarily, make its presence felt in the institutes of higher learning.