

## DISCUSSION AND DEBATE

### REDMAN IN THE IVORY TOWER: FIRST NATIONS STUDENTS AND NEGATIVE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS IN THE UNIVERSITY SETTING

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#### **Abstract / Résumé**

First Nations students in university classrooms often face negative, disheartening, and racist environments therein. What kinds of situations exist? Why do they exist? What can be done about them? This paper will examine these questions in the context of what has recently been going on at the University of British Columbia, Canada. It will also be based on the experiences of the author, a First Nations person with over ten years experience as a postsecondary teacher, administrator, and student services provider. This paper was presented at the annual Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS) conference at Memorial University in St. John's, Newfoundland in June 2008.

À l'université, les étudiants des Premières nations se retrouvent souvent dans des milieux négatifs, démoralisants et racistes. Quelles sont les situations existantes? Pourquoi existent-elles? Que peut-on faire pour les dénouer? Le présent article examine ces questions dans le contexte des événements survenus à l'Université de la Colombie-Britannique au Canada. Son contenu est également fondé sur les expériences de l'auteur, une personne des Premières nations qui a plus de dix ans d'expérience à titre d'enseignant, d'administrateur et de fournisseur de services aux étudiants du niveau postsecondaire. L'article est fondé sur une communication présentée au congrès annuel de l'Association des services aux étudiants des universités et collèges du Canada (ASEUCC), qui a eu lieu à l'Université Memorial à Saint-Jean (Terre-Neuve) en juin 2008.

In 2004, I published a paper in *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* entitled “The Key and the Coveted: An Exposé on the Lack of First Nations Representation in First Nations Studies Programs at the College and University Levels.” This article examined the lack of First Nations teachers in college and university First Nations Studies programs and the consequences of this, as experienced by First Nations students. Therein, I pointed out that

First Nations students have been forced to learn their history and contemporary academic knowledge from those who are non-First Nations in ethnicity and background and whose knowledge has been learned in schools instead of lived.<sup>1</sup>

The consequences of such situations included the allowance or cultivation of negative classroom environments. Examples I provided included instructor insensitivity to the disproportionate number of funerals that First Nations students had to attend, exhibition of outright racist attitudes, and use of inappropriate vocabulary in the classroom, including use of the word “squaw.”<sup>2</sup> As a college instructor for ten years, I was repeatedly shocked by the language and attitude of non-Aboriginal academics, teachers, students, and student service providers. As I wrote in the aforementioned paper

This researcher has faced many such uncomfortable situations in his life as [a First Nations] student and academic. Other respected academics with doctoral degrees and with years of experience working with or around First Nations people using such words and phrases [when referring to First Nations individuals or groups] as “drunk all the time,” “idiots,” “you Indians,” and a personal favorite, “you people” [accompanied by a stabbing finger]....<sup>3</sup>

These experiences bothered me so much that I wrote the paper mentioned above as a form of catharsis. I hoped that the publishing of it in one of Canada’s preeminent journals dealing with First Nations issues would draw attention to the matter and cause some kind of change to occur. Now, almost half a decade later, I can look back and gauge how much things have changed (or not) based on recent experiences in the university environment where I now work.

When I started my employment in student services at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in the spring of 2007, I was made aware of two student research projects that had recently been completed in the university’s First Nations Studies Program. These student-driven projects, part research paper and part digital video, were gaining acclaim as works that exposed what First Nations students were experiencing at UBC. What was said therein wasn’t pleasant and would certainly be an eye-

opener for those not usually familiar with such issues.

One of the projects, *Post Secondary Experience: Perspectives of Aboriginal Students*, was completed by a team of two students, Leila Lattimer and Otis Jasper. In this work, First Nations students spoke of feelings of isolation and loneliness while at university, this while sitting in the midst of classrooms full of people. They also spoke of being unfairly singled out by professors for answers or comments pertaining to things “Aboriginal,” when the reality was that such students had little or no knowledge about the issues under discussion.<sup>4</sup> Regarding the first point raised above, one interviewee noted that

I know for a fact that [Aboriginal] students have left [university] because of the emotional trauma within the classroom...the only way I can describe it is, like complete and utter isolation and displacement....<sup>5</sup>

Regarding the issue of such students being sought out by professors and others as “all-knowing Indian experts”, the same student noted

I have to actually tell people that I don't speak for all Aboriginal people, I am just my own person...being singled out by teachers asking me my known personal opinion on a controversial subject on the basis that I am Aboriginal; you are backed into a corner; it's very emotional. <sup>6</sup>

There are over thirty different First Nations cultural/language groups in British Columbia and over fifty in Canada. Culture, language, and historical experience among these groups all differ. Asking a First Nations student to comment on issues pertaining to groups that the student does not belong to would be like going to Europe and asking a Frenchman to state his opinion or expertise regarding all things Greek or Polish. Professors thus have to incorporate into their knowledge systems that not all First Nations are unified in thought and experience. For example, I grew up in British Columbia and had no idea what was going on at Oka, Quebec as the crisis there exploded on to the national consciousness in 1990. Yet, in my early university days I was asked my thoughts on this matter, as though I had should have some kind of first hand knowledge about it. It was a little embarrassing and intimidating to say that I didn't know what was going on there.

The role that professors play or often don't play in the classroom setting is also a source of trauma for First Nations students. Interviewees in the Lattimer-Jasper project felt that professors never realized “the level of discomfort the [Aboriginal] student was experiencing” in their classrooms.<sup>7</sup> Aboriginals, who are usually in the minority in such settings, are often focused on (“tokenized”) and assumed to be experts in all things “Indian.”<sup>8</sup> The result is embarrassment for the student, an at-

tack on one's self-esteem, as they have to deal with a question they do not know the answer to, while all eyes are upon them.<sup>9</sup> To make matters worse, when the issue is a controversial one that results in polarized opinions, professors will often leave First Nations students twisting in the wind, while heated and discriminatory comments go back and forth in the classroom. Said one such student:

One thing I have noticed with non-Aboriginal professors is that they don't handle confrontation well...most teachers will sit on the fence if there is a confrontation, [or if] they see you struggling with a comment made...you are on your own...[as] they will try to be the neutral person.<sup>10</sup>

I experienced this myself in my second year of university. I had been asked by a professor if I wouldn't mind presenting a paper that I had written on residential schools to the anthropology class in which I was a student. This professor then did nothing as the views expressed in this paper were attacked by another person in the class in a vicious way. I would know how to deal with such now, but in those days I was still an inexperienced young man coming to grips for the first time with such experiences, so I stood there and took the attack without saying much. The much more experienced professor also did nothing as I stood there squirming. A quick and private "I am sorry that happened" remark by the professor after the fact did little to assuage the emotions I was feeling at the time. I have never forgotten that experience.

Another serious issue in the university environment is the western-oriented, colonialist nature of the education. As Lattimer and Jasper point out, "Aboriginal student belief systems are continuously challenged [in university]."<sup>11</sup> Quoting from a recent Centre for Native Policy document, Lattimer and Jasper point out the dichotomy that exists in belief systems therein: "University often represents an impersonal and hostile environment in which [First Nations students] culture, traditions, and values are not recognized."<sup>12</sup> Said one Lattimer-Jasper interview participant:

My training as far as academics were concerned was very colonial in nature.... They took all the values I had growing up...and kind of dismissed them all...they spent a lot of time trying to colonize our views.<sup>13</sup>

These are serious issues for First Nations students to deal with in university environments: feelings of isolation, being singled out as experts in all things "Indian" (tokenization), so-called neutral professors who stand by and won't help as white sharks circle the brown ones in the classroom, and colonialist curricula. What probably hurts the most, however, are the forces of overt racism, discrimination, and ignorance

that First Nations students are forced to deal with on a regular basis. As Lattimer and Jasper point out, "Discrimination is a major barrier for Aboriginal students in daily life, as well as, at post secondary institutions."<sup>14</sup> From misconceptions and comments about "free money" and "free education," to outright racist comments about Aboriginal society, such students often have much to put up with.<sup>15</sup> One First Nations student was asked outright, in a UBC classroom, why it was that Indians were so screwed up.<sup>16</sup> Early in my teaching career, I had a similar experience when I was asked by a non-Aboriginal person in front of a class full of people why reserves were always so dirty. How does one respond to such a comment? Why do First Nations people have to deal with such comments in the first place? What are the consequences of such overt discrimination?

These kinds of incidents are not isolated. In my recent role as an Aboriginal student services provider at the University of British Columbia, I have continued to hear of similar experiences. In February 2008, I had an upset First Nations student visit my office wanting someone to talk to. He had been highly offended by the use of a certain film in a political science class, in which the word "savage" and other such terms were repeatedly used to describe First Nations people. Granted, this was a film examining early twentieth century Canada and attitudes from that time but according to the student, no effort had been made to prepare the class for what was going to be said, no disclaimer of any kind was provided, nor was there any specific discussion afterwards regarding the offending language. The content of the film was merely discussed as a historic document and the issue of terminology was downplayed by the professor when the student approached him afterwards about this.<sup>17</sup>

A short time later, I received a visit from another student suffering a similar problem in a different context. This person had been planning to help out as a facilitator in a UBC program being offered to residents of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. According to this student, the following was said in a program orientation meeting for such facilitators:

People will be coming to the program who have not washed for days...they will sometimes smell...if such ones shake your hand, do not be too quick to wipe it off, as people will get offended and walk out....<sup>18</sup>

The student facilitator listening to this was not only Aboriginal but lived in the Downtown Eastside area. Maybe the comments were designed as helpful instructions to show respect to the intended clientele but when the facilitator met with me, he was quite depressed over the whole thing. He certainly did not interpret the instructions and the tone of such in

those terms. When this person talked of the anger and shame he felt, I could relate and it took an extended conversation to get us both feeling right again. Hence, whether people realize it or not, there are painful consequences to callous words, whether well intended or not.

Reactions like those noted above are short term corollaries of a much bigger problem which has far-reaching consequences. In 2004, R.A. Malatest & Associates released a report entitled *Aboriginal Peoples and Post Secondary Education: What Educators Have Learned*. Therein, they acknowledged that “Aboriginal student enrolment rates are growing substantially faster than those of other demographic groups.”<sup>19</sup>

Yet, a 2006 report by Michael Mendelson revealed that the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal postsecondary graduates had actually changed little over the previous decade, with Aboriginal graduation rates lagging far behind.<sup>20</sup> Hence, the good news is that more Aboriginal people than ever are entering the doors of the Ivory Tower. The bad news is that there is no commensurate statistical increase regarding those who walk out the other side with degree in hand.

What is thus happening, as First Nations students journey through the hallowed halls of the academy? There are many influencing factors pertaining to the above statistic, yet this paper and the projects it quotes from point a distinct finger at the university classroom climate as a contributing factor in Aboriginal postsecondary drop out rates. Universities and colleges have thus failed First Nations students in this regard.

What can thus be done about this conundrum, and at the very university that I take pride in working for? Based on their research, Lattimer and Jasper offer up some practical suggestions, including the recommendation that *all* students in any Faculty of Arts program in British Columbia be required to take at least one mandatory First Nations Studies course.<sup>21</sup> This would certainly go a long way towards educating non-Aboriginal students about issues of relevance in the First Nations community and would maybe head off some of the hurtful comments made in ignorance in campus classrooms. I say *maybe* because in my past life as a college teacher in the field of First Nations Studies, I often had non-Aboriginal students in my classes whose minds and discriminatory comments were not changed by a process of official education. Still, I am glad that I tried and I know, based on many comments, that the First Nations students I had in my classes were also happy that I tried. To misquote Abraham Lincoln, it is not possible to win over all the people all of the time. But you can win over some of the people all the time or even all the people some of the time. So it goes when teaching non-Aboriginal people about Aboriginal issues.

There are some important and potentially groundbreaking initiatives

currently taking place at the University of British Columbia that will be designed towards educating the university community at large about the issue under discussion. For starters, an expansion of the original First Nations Studies Program student research projects is taking place, with a new series of interviews being done with UBC Aboriginal students not involved in the first set. This new round is being done as part of an official FNSP research project, headed by the Director of the First Nations Studies Program, and with the continued involvement of some of the students (since graduated) who were involved the first time around.<sup>22</sup>

This new project is designed to include reflections and remarks about this issue from university faculty and staff. For example, what have they observed in their own classrooms and in the overall university environment? What experiences have Aboriginal students shared with them? What do they personally need to learn about this issue? One of this expanded project's goals is to publish these reflections, and as the Principal Investigator says:

We think that the experiences and reflections of instructors and administrators can contribute to more complete understandings of the issues involved in discussing sensitive subject matter, and will make an important contribution to the resources that are developed to assist with professional development.<sup>23</sup>

In concert with this, there is discussion at UBC about offering professional development workshops for faculty and staff that will specifically address the issue of classroom climate at UBC as it has affected Aboriginal students. The university's First Nations House of Learning, Equity Office, and the Centre for Teaching and Academic Growth are working together on this project.<sup>24</sup> This is in accord with the University of British Columbia's current implementation of a comprehensive Aboriginal Strategic Plan. Section 6 of this plan deals with study and work climate issues at UBC and acknowledges that

Student experiences of isolation, racism, and alienating discussions in classrooms are well documented and have been identified as concerns.... Similar circumstances can poison the atmosphere for faculty and staff as well...and many are ill prepared to address difficult Aboriginal issues in classrooms or workplace environments....<sup>25</sup>

Although in the formative stage here at UBC, the proactive plan to initiate programs for cross-cultural training has the potential to tackle the issue being promulgated in this paper, head on.

Hence, there are some positive steps being taken by people at UBC

to change the classroom climate, as best they can, for Aboriginal students. I write “as best they can” because it is the fear of some that any training workshops resulting from the above work will only be voluntary in nature and not compulsory for faculty and staff. The result being that those who need such education the most will probably pass it over.

Yet, this project has grown from the seeds of a couple of small First Nations student projects into what is described above. It is the feeling of many at UBC that at least *something* is finally happening with regards to this issue. First Nations students have enough going against them without having to worry about racism and ignorance on display in the classroom. Many are still psychologically hostage to the multi-generational effects of residential schools or have been scarred by a series of poor educational experiences. Many are shy as they make their way in a foreign neo-colonialist world. They don’t need the extra hassle of negative classroom environments on top of everything else.

Native American scholar Bryan Brayboy has written of the problems faced by Native American students in academic settings. He notes that such ones like to maintain low visibility in such places, essentially remaining “hiding in the ivy” (“ivy” referring to the big American Ivy League-type schools), this because of the assortment of problems and climates they face therein.<sup>26</sup> According to Brayboy, these students end up exercising strategies to cope that, I believe, may be detrimental to their mental health and self-esteem. This includes such students taking long, circuitous routes to class to avoid people and remaining isolated in dorm rooms for extended periods, all in order to remain “invisible” in the university setting. Brayboy provides his own reasons as to why Native American students do this, including the shameful and widespread use of Native American mascots and names for college and university sports teams.<sup>27</sup> As I write this, I think of my own university and its use of the sacred First Nations “Thunderbird” as the name and mascot of its own sports teams. Yes, permission was given to the university by a local First Nations group to use this image, but to some Aboriginal people it still doesn’t feel right. Especially if one considers that *many* Native American groups have a belief in the sacred Thunderbird, that there has been a history of abuse of such images, and that negative consequences have resulted from the use of such, as Brayboy points out.

Mohawk author Patricia Monture-Angus writes in *Thunder in My Soul: A Mohawk Woman Speaks* (2002) of the alienation and prejudice she also experienced while attending law school. Monture-Angus notes that she and other Aboriginal law students always felt like “outsiders” in the hallowed halls.<sup>28</sup> She clearly remembers the curriculum which was grounded in White, patriarchal, middle-class values; the insults from those

who felt that First Nations students only gained access to law school because of special access programs; and the Aboriginal worldview, rooted in the values of harmony and holism, that is completely missing from the theory and practice of law.<sup>29</sup>

Hence, for the many reasons and experiences noted above, the Redman has never been particularly comfortable in the Ivory Tower. What is encouraging, however, is that such ones are now taking responsibility for changing the situation as it exists as they research, write, disseminate information, and work in many ways to educate those in the university about these issues. There is still a long way to go, but the fact that the issue of classroom climate for Aboriginal students at the University of British Columbia is now being talked about and acted upon in some very proactive ways is an encouraging step in the right direction and perhaps can be a model for others.

### Notes

1. William G. Lindsay, "The Key and the Coveted: An Exposé on the Lack of First Nations Representation in First Nations Studies Programs at the College and University Levels," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, Vol. 23, No.1: 185.
2. Lindsay, *Ibid.* 191.
3. Lindsay, *Ibid.* 192.
4. Leila Lattimer and Otis Jasper, "Post Secondary Experience: Perspectives of Aboriginal Students," *Research Paper* (First Nations Studies Program, Student Research Project, University of British Columbia, April 2007) 9.
5. Lattimer and Jasper, *Ibid.* 10.
6. Lattimer and Jasper, *Ibid.* 10.
7. Lattimer and Jasper, *Ibid.* 10.
8. Lattimer and Jasper, *Ibid.* 10.
9. Lattimer and Jasper, *Ibid.*, 10.
10. Lattimer and Jasper, *Ibid.* 10.
11. Lattimer and Jasper, *Ibid.* 11.
12. Lattimer and Jasper, *Ibid.*, 14.
13. Lattimer and Jasper, *Ibid.* 11.
14. Lattimer and Jasper, *Ibid.* 14.
15. Lattimer and Jasper, *Ibid.* 15.
16. Leila Lattimer and Otis Jasper, "Post Secondary Experience: Perspectives of Aboriginal Students," *Digital Video* (First Nations Studies Program, Student Research Project, University of British Colum-

- bia, April 2007) Digital video segment.
17. Conversation between William G. Lindsay (Coordinator for Aboriginal Student Services, First Nations House of Learning, University of British Columbia) and a UBC political science student, February 6, 2008. *Coordinator's Student Meeting Records*. Note: In the interests of privacy, this student shall go unnamed.
  18. Conversation between William G. Lindsay (Coordinator for Aboriginal Student Services, First Nations House of Learning, University of British Columbia) and a UBC student and program facilitator, April 30, 2008. *Coordinator's Student Meeting Records*. Note: In the interests of privacy, this student shall go unnamed.
  19. Lattimer and Jasper, 2.
  20. Lattimer and Jasper, *Ibid.* 2.
  21. Lattimer and Jasper, *Ibid.* 18.
  22. Linc Kesler, Karrmen Crey, and Amy Perreault, "What I Learned In Class Today: Aboriginal Issues In the Classroom," *Project Information Sheet* (First Nations Studies Program Research Project, University of British Columbia, January 11, 2008) 1.
  23. Linc Kesler, Karrmen Crey, and Amy Perreault, "What I Learned In Class Today: Aboriginal Issues In The Classroom," *Project Interview Consent Form* (First Nations Studies Program Research Project, University of British Columbia, February 11, 2008) 1-2.
  24. Conversation between William G. Lindsay (Coordinator for Aboriginal Student Services, First Nations House of Learning, University of British Columbia) and Dr. Richard Vedan (Director, First Nations House of Learning, University of British Columbia), February 13, 2008. *E-mail Correspondence*.
  25. Website: *The University of British Columbia*, "UBC Aboriginal Strategic Plan," <<http://aboriginal.ubc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2009/01/asp-final-textonly.pdf>> 14.
  26. Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, "Hiding in the Ivy: American Indian Students and Visibility in Elite Educational Settings," *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (Summer 2004): 125-128.
  27. Brayboy, *Ibid.* 125-138.
  28. Patricia Monture-Angus, "Now that the Door is Open: Aboriginal Peoples and the Law School Experience," *Thunder in my Soul: A Mohawk Woman Speaks*, Fourth Edition (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2002), 97.
  29. Monture-Angus, *Ibid.* 98-101.

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