

A Journey Towards Truth and Reconciliation

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Trustee Professional Learning Module

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Core Modules

Module Resource #6

Phillip White-Cree

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with Phillip White-Cree, Researcher, Mohawk Council of Akwesasne*

History

I think for the First Nations context it is important to understand where indigenous First Nations peoples really lie within Canada and North America whole. It's really different groups, different languages, and different peoples that are basically regionally based. A lot of them are based on watershed areas. If you understand where a watershed is, you understand interconnections between those communities and those peoples within that region. Since Ontario has so many different watersheds in different regions, it has a diverse number of First Nations peoples, cultures, traditions and Nations that are all both local as well as interconnected through traditional connections. As well as post-contact connections where some actually grouped together and started working with their neighbors to work with what would eventually become Canada.

Two Row Wampum and Treaties

A lot of early ideas of how to work with peoples comes in with the Two Row Wampum. This is a Haudenosaunee idea when they first contacted the Dutch, that they were two peoples working together down the river of life. One embodied in a ship and the other one in a canoe. These two people would work in harmony and working together through the river. Eventually, there would be trade and commerce between the two friendly nations. It would also have the implication that one may visit, but one does not control the other's vessel. One does not impose the other's idea, or rules, or concepts. This is where the early idea of a Two Row, this equal, but separate peoples' philosophy comes in really for indigenous people and especially for the First Nations of North America.

Everything is living. Everything is growing. When we talk about Wampums and treaties they are living documents. They are meant to be discussed. They are meant to grow. They are meant to evolve.

The resources are intended as starting points for trustees wishing to learn more about Indigenous historical, political, cultural, and social topics. These links are offered for the sake of further interest and context, and are not intended to be authoritative or relied upon for complete accuracy, nor are they under the editorial control of the OESC or any member of its FNMI Steering Committee. If viewers have suggestions for additional resources, or find errors and broken links, please complete the feedback form that accompanies the module.

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Transformation to Canada

That got relayed to British and French crowns and eventually, with Confederation, the British Empire said all crown duties and obligations would be given to Canadian Parliament, including the obligations that the British crown had made originally with First Nations and Indigenous peoples. The Canadian Parliament would then do as they wish with those obligations.

This is where John A. McDonald comes in as the Superintendent of Indian Affairs. He really took different Indian legislation and wrapped it together to forge what became known as the Indian Act shortly after Confederation. Parliament is assumed full control over "Indians and Indian lands."

Now the original premise of this was to actually make First Nations indigenous people part of mainstream Canada. This is contrary to ideas such as the Two Row where it would be two separate peoples. Now it's being viewed as it should be one peoples going together. This is where conflict arises with First Nations because government officials start assuming parent roles and responsibilities, and fiduciary responsibilities to these First Nations peoples and start laying the stage that it is government that is in control of First Nations people. This goes all the way from the very foundations of the idea of education, and lands, and health of "Indians" or Status Indians as the Act states.

These responsibilities now lie within the hands of the government and then shortly thereafter, the idea of schools, residential schools and Indian day schools become the norm, where the government mandated that First Nations children should be removed from the reserve and be relocated to residential schools, or if there is enough resources to have an Indian day school placed on or adjacent to the reserve or community.

This becomes a source of a lot of traumatic experiences for the children... as a tool that was used by the government at the time that had consequences in which they felt they were doing for the greater good, but actually caused harm by having physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual abuses. These are the traumas that have continued through residential schools all the way up until 1996 when the last one in Canada was closed.

Over 150 plus years, government-sponsored residential schooling becomes a source of a lot of pain and hurt within First Nations people. The idea was that the schools were to erase First Nation identity and make it Canadian. I think that's where you get a lot of pushback from First Nations.

Eventually the social structures within those communities start feeling the ripple effects of what happens when these children go through these processes, being disconnected and not being able to connect to the land in which their ancestors were. Canada didn't really understand the repercussions until much, much later in the 1900s, eventually into the millennium of 2000. There is this shock and awe that happens within education where the mainstream is finally catching up to these injuries that has happened to a whole segment of the Canadian population, Canadian peoples and First Nations people that the Canadian people were not aware of the full ramifications of this effect. Then First Nations people did not understand the true rationale and the understanding of how these pains can go between generations and be continued on as inter-generational trauma.

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Transformation to Canada (continued)

Eventually with the 60s scoop, where children were still taken by government and moved to foster families, those foster families were still left in the predicament of not understanding how to have some kind of cultural sensitivity to these foster children. These foster children then get lost in the system and eventually become a Canadian, but without real any identity outside of that concept of Canadian. I think this is why both Canada's general public, as well as First Nations people and indigenous nations want to really reconnect to how they can reclaim something that was left out. That was forcefully left out.

Truth, Reconciliation, and Education

Education shouldn't be viewed as a negative tool, but is just that, a tool. I think this is where in the future and going forward, there is a real drive to have people moving towards reconciliation, as well as understanding. Moving all the way to the idea of separate but equal understandings and progress towards a common goal. The first step of reconciliation is understanding where these problems happen, where these things stem from. Now that you understand the issues, eventually we can start forward in how to heal and drain the toxic issues that underline these concepts. Originally a lot of the concepts were racism. Straight and simple. As well as this idea of superiority. Once you get to seeing people as human beings, understanding and respecting everybody's individual backgrounds, ideas, histories and understandings, you can start to move forward. Each individual is a small fragment, but when put together and put ideally each one having a specific role of a greater whole, you'll see that Canada is a much larger mosaic of individuality as opposed to trying to lump together into a single collective.

Changes are occurring. Although it did take some First Nations having to assert themselves from the civil rights movements, Indian brotherhood, and eventually to the Oka crisis, this idea of "don't forget me, I'm still here", had to occur. That led to the Royal Commission of Indigenous Peoples. That Commission then drafted the first report in '96 as to how do you reconcile issues that the Canadian government did as a whole? How can the society of Canadians work towards having a future with indigenous people as having an actual part?

That eventually rolled into having the Truth and Reconciliation Commission where they report on the actual abuses that happened in residential schools, the length and issues and intergenerational trauma. As it was said in the report, cultural genocide, that was perpetrated through the residential school system. People need to understand that first. Then say okay, rather than me telling you what to do and learn, what can you share? I will share as well. This mutual sharing of back-and-forth and building bridges as opposed to simply saying no you're only going to follow my structure and my structure only. Their Calls for Action are the starting points for reconciliation.

This then led to the Harper government doing the apology for residential schools. It's a first step, but there are many steps that need to be continued, for the federal and provincial and local governments to start enacting legislation to try to help things move along. The idea of recognizing that indigenous people have something higher than just minority rights. They actually have indigenous rights, which in part from the United Nations, does say self-determination and control of local lands, and local ideas. This is something that Canada is now having to understand and reconcile. How do First Nations people, indigenous nations, have a real role within the future of Canada?

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Land Stewardship

Land stewardship really stands with the value systems and understanding the two different sets of value systems. Multiple sets of value systems because for a long time, Eurocentric thinking was the land is here to give whatever I need. I think from a lot of indigenous peoples, they understand that their land and environment is very much a living entity, whether or not it's captured in the idea of Mother Earth, or Gaia concepts, or other ideas of this living and breathing entity, but being something that is much bigger and larger to understand than just simply a piece of rock with a few living things on it.

I think it really starts showing the interconnectedness between the different environment and ecosystems. Having a value and respect for these ecosystems and having an understanding that any small change can have repercussions much greater than originally intended, and where you can actually learn from what is present in the environment to actually have the most benefit and the most gains. Not to disturb the networks, the ecological networks, that could cause eventual detriment, but to actually try to enhance those environmental networks. I think that's where having indigenous peoples and indigenous values comes into play of knowledge of the land. Knowledge of that local area that can then be the guide to if there's any future development for any future infrastructure.

Language

From the TRC recommendations there were a lot of ideas around languages, and indigenous First Nations languages in particular, of how to promote these. I think that is stemming from the residential school era and the Indian Act idea of make them learn French or English and that tool was used in such a negative way to harm the populations that now to reconcile that, you must make the same tool of education be a promoter of those languages. Not just preserving the language but advancing the languages. I think that's the greater attempt with First Nations people is that you don't want to just record your current speakers, but you also want to encourage more speakers in an advancement of the language.

What are new words that language can then develop and make sure that the languages for indigenous First Nations people are actually relevant today? I think that's what is a very strong key for education because there's a lot of time, energy and effort put into bilingualism between French and English. If that same energy even diverted slightly to a First Nation community and local community that can be a huge benefit to languages and encouraging the advancement of languages.

I personally am open to non-indigenous people learning indigenous languages because if there's more speakers, there's more use for that language. I think that something both Canada and North America can really benefit from because there's so many indigenous languages. There's so many different philosophies and cultural values that are locked in language that you really get a greater understanding.

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Language (continued)

Even now in the English language, we're struggling to deal with people who identify as other than male or female, but yet in a lot of indigenous languages there's already a third, fourth, or even fifth, pronoun for people who do not identify as strictly male or female binary. I think that understanding of an indigenous language helps really bring to the forefront this idea of other values and different ways of expressing oneself that doesn't necessarily be captured either in French or English.

I think this is where you can really promote indigenous languages within schools; this idea of working together and having that dialogue and allowing indigenous languages to have that same level of respect as one would learn in English or French language in Canada. That is one of the recommendations and I think that's something that should be moved forward to really trying to understand that process, but also to help speakers and teachers.

Youth and Language

I think that's where the hope is to not just rely on the elders to be the experts, but to also rely on the younger population because within a lot of First Nation communities, the younger ones are the actual ones who speak and have a lot of understanding of indigenous knowledge, but they don't necessarily have the forums in which to express themselves to their peers or even people who are older than them. I think this is where with education and this idea of sharing, this dialogue, that willingness isn't just from the older generations. It's also from the younger generations and also the parent generations. I think this is where you really have to see this as a multi-generational engagement that has to occur.

Clans

For the Haudenosaunee, we have nine clans. They're all animal-based and for the Mohawk, Kahniakehaka in particular, we have the bear, wolf, turtle. Three primary clans and then from there each clan has three distinct families. Then understanding which one of those three families one comes from, you then have a speaker for one of those three families. In total, Kahniakehaka have nine traditional speakers. My mother is one of the Turtle Clan members so therefore I get her clan by default. Then I was named in the longhouse and under the one title of the Turtle Clan so I know who my speaker should be and how the process adapts to make sure that my voice gets heard to the greater whole.

Clans is another thing that is so individual community or nation based. Out west, you'll find a whole different system of clans and lineages. For us out east, you're going to have a whole different concept of that as well. I think that's where anthropologists really did a lot of research at first and did say that the Iroquoian model of clanship, kinship was something that needed to be really understood because it's a matrilineal line and that was something very new to anthropologists at the time. Whereas other communities, it's patrilineal or a combination of both. For the Navajo, each one identifies their four grandparents' clans whenever they go forward in the world. There's that respect for every aspect of the family.