

Review: Decolonizing education: Nourishing the learning spirit

Battiste, M. (2013). *Decolonizing education: Nourishing the learning spirit*. Saskatoon, SK: Purich Publishing Ltd.

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Lately, in the halls of academia, the call to indigenize our educational and related research initiatives can be heard with increasing clarity and frequency. As with many ‘calls to action’, there is a need to be cognizant of individuals’ motives and the *raison d’être* that lies at the heart of why academics might heed this particular call. As a third generation colonizer with direct European roots, I’m sure there are some that might question my motives for attempting to understand the meaning behind this movement, and subsequently, attempting to reshape and reconfigure my corresponding teaching, research, and related professional practices. I question if there might be the perception that this “white dude” is simply jumping on a perceived bandwagon to take advantage of the potential payoffs that might ensue if an open endorsement of this needed change in is demonstrated.

Currently, the majority of our post-secondary institutions are proudly steeped in colonizers’ traditions, policies, and directives with corresponding laws that add perceived legitimacy, if not the litigious muscle to preserve their predominance and corresponding power imbalance. However, to understand fully the unique status of our indigenous peoples of Canada, it is incumbent upon non-indigenous peoples to be fully cognizant of the nuances of treaty. Any institutional barriers that still remain must be recognized as artifacts of our colonial past and Eurocentric ways of thinking or acting.

Fortunately, we have an informed and highly educated indigenous scholar in our midst, who has the insight, as well as the patience, to lead us down a path of understanding. Dr. Marie Battiste is one such scholar, who carefully crafted her book *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit* in a manner that provides the reader with both the context and concepts of change that the title promises. To say it is a “must read” is an understatement. It is more of a “have to read” for a non-indigenous grandson of colonizers like myself. Although my perceptions may be shrouded in some lingering guilt related to how my white privilege came at the cost of disenfranchising generations of indigenous peoples, I remain committed to do what I can to become part of a movement devoted to changing the status quo and helping to right some of these historical wrongs.

Dr. Battiste has “rock star” status in many academic circles, which adds to my trepidation and angst in writing this review. However, knowing that Marie is indeed a patient and wise teacher, I will offer my humble attempt to provide an overview of her book in the hopes that others will also ‘heed the call’ to digest the contents of Dr. Battiste’s writings with an open heart and mind.

I would be remiss if I did not provide the obligatory overview of this book’s contents. Suffice it to say, the twelve chapters go beyond simply providing its readers with a recipe-like list of ‘to do’s’. Instead, Dr. Battiste has carefully crafted her book in a manner that goes from the deeply personal to the undeniably political in a seamless fashion that most writers strive to accomplish, but few succeed. Dr. Battiste is the exception in so many ways. Tying together her past and the influences of family and Mi’kmaq culture, Marie continues the tradition of being a gifted storyteller like her mother. She reveals how her learning spirit has ignited a desire to go beyond a mere understanding of history and leads the reader through a more detailed deconstruction of entrenched epistemologies. Epistemologies that serve to reinforce more stereotypical ways of knowing, and a myriad of institutionalized forms of repression that fall directly under the umbrella of colonization.

Keeping with the personal call for action, Dr. Battiste’s chapter on *Confronting and Eliminating Racism* leaves no stone unturned. If you think you know and understand all the germane issues related to this sensitive topic, undoubtedly, you will be enlightened by Dr. Battiste’s exposé. The following reminder anchors the logical progression of this chapter and serves to reinforce the need to check all our assumptions at the door when we enter our classrooms and lecture theatres:

Race is a social or cultural construct of European consciousness. Race is something that does not reside in the blood or genes of a group of people as characterized in biology. It has no biological source, like the colour of the eye. Race is created in the social attitudes and beliefs of society. (p. 131)

Akin to the anti-slavery movement in the nineteenth century, Dr. Battiste parallels the challenges associated with the anti-racist movement in today’s society. Hate ideologies may persist, but teacher and educators must do what they can to defuse racist attitudes, practices, and positions. Dr. Battiste cites a Mi’kmaq elder’s words of wisdom that readers need to heed, “You can’t be the doctor if you are the disease.” (p. 139)

Similarly, contributing positively to the decolonizing movement starts with a thorough examination of your own assumptions and prejudices. No one said this process would be easy or without the need for self-reflection and making peace with our collective past. Rather than wallowing in the “sins of our fathers”, metaphorically speaking, the onus is on non-indigenous decedents of our European ancestors to go beyond simply acknowledging the pioneers from the past’s eugenic-like need to assume dominance over the land and its indigenous peoples. Fortunately, Dr. Battiste devotes a chapter to

Recommendation for Constitutional Reconciliation of Education to help create a balance between distinctly different worldviews and pave a pathway towards decolonization.

Beyond the political implications of Marie's book, there is sufficient room left for the more personal aspects of change. Readers are called to recognize and affirm the learning spirit within both themselves and their students. As suggested, integrating Aboriginal and Eurocentric sources of knowledge forms one of the main foundational principles for change. Our challenge is to make learning more holistic, experiential, and spiritually oriented including activities that may involve elders, aboriginal languages, cultures, and traditions.

Realistically, these kinds of pedagogical changes do not happen overnight. Careful planning and consultation is required. Battiste's book provides the blueprint for change, but each instructor is the architect that designs their syllabi with care and attention to meet discipline specific needs. However, to divorce those epistemological mainstays from the cultural milieu of our indigenous students, instructors may be inadvertently perpetuating the Eurocentric colonizing pedagogy of the past. Instead, with Battiste's leadership and inspiration, we can become catalysts for change, rather than harbingers of history. The academy remains indebted to scholars like Dr. Battiste, who has the wisdom and political acumen to 'show us the way'.

O'wela'lin/Hay-hay/Merci/Thank you Marie!