

The Sacred Circle: A Process Pedagogy of Healing

ROBERT REGNIER
University of Saskatchewan

ABSTRACT: This paper proposes a process pedagogy based on an aboriginal approach to healing. It is founded on the Sacred Circle teachings of Canadian Plains Indians and on the educational practices undertaken at a school for aboriginal youth, the Joe Duquette High School in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. Healing is viewed here as "transition toward meaning, wholeness, connectedness, and balance" (Katz & St. Denis, 1991, p. 24). As aboriginal pedagogy, this approach to the practice and theory of teaching is self-consciously founded on process symbolized in the Sacred Circle. It is presented here as part of a critical theory of education committed to human emancipation that recognizes that the appropriation of an aboriginal world view as a foundation for teaching is undertaken within the context of modern political and cultural systems and institutions that have excluded, denied, or rejected aboriginal world views. The Sacred Circle is a "traditional symbolic circle" that incorporates the spiritual beliefs of many Indian tribes of North America, including Dakota Nations, Blackfoot Confederacy, Cree, Saulteaux, and Assiniboine nations in Canada. It symbolizes harmony and the belief that life occurs within a series of circular movements that govern their relationship with the environment. Although the Sacred Circle has symbolized aboriginal world views for thousands of years, some schools are beginning only now to use it as a self-conscious foundation for education as healing.

The paper begins with Whitehead's criticism of Western metaphysics and his notion of reality as process. These ideas and some of his views about education and teaching provide an introduction to and framework for developing the notion of healing as a process pedagogy based upon the Sacred Circle concept. The Sacred Circle is examined as the expression of an aboriginal metaphysics in which reality is conceptualized as process, the movement of life through wholeness, connectedness, and balance. Healing and teaching are viewed as the transition to meaning in that movement. Finally, process pedagogy as healing is interpreted as having the three phases of belonging, understanding, and critical reflection through an examination of practices at the Joe Duquette High School.

KEYWORDS: sacred circle, process, pedagogy, healing, Indian education, interdependency, balance, wholeness, aboriginal metaphysics, cyclic patterns

Whitehead's Metaphysics of Process Pedagogy

Eradicate the fatal disconnection of subjects which kills the vitality of our modern curriculum. There is only one subject-matter for education, and that is Life in all its manifestations. (Whitehead, 1929, p. 6)

Process pedagogy is constructed upon the assumption that reality itself is process. Based upon this assumption, human development, learning, and teaching are viewed as process. To make life in all its manifestations the subject matter of curriculum, Whitehead proposes that reality is process, and that human beings as well as teaching are part and manifestations of this process. By recognizing human growth and learning as process, it is possible to construct a pedagogy that reflects the dynamic, interdependent and cyclical character of reality. Whitehead criticizes Western metaphysics, which abstracts, categorizes, and isolates individuals. He proposes the world as a unitary reality characterized by continuous process. He argues that modern education has been unable to extricate itself from the ideas of 17th century physics transformed into metaphysical principles, which became "the description of the whole of reality" (p. 3). Within this view, space functions as an insulator between things and among people. Time is the absolute objective measure of past, present, and future that excludes human experience and movement of events.

Western science as metaphysics, however, sets aside much human experience as "illusory" and "unimportant" for austere abstractions that locate humans in a "world machine" (Brumbaugh, 1982, p. 121). Just as 17th century physics abstracted reality into the uniformity of the atom, the subsequent metaphysics abstracted persons into the genus of man. Individuals are atomistic and insulated from one another in an "irresponsible egoism" (Whitehead, 1929, p. 3). Each human being is an independent entity with no specific aim, existing in a void separate from others where individual egos collide with others in "neutral absolute space" (Woodhouse, 1992).

Within this physics as metaphysics, education has no unitary aim beyond the aimlessness of the random, atomic individual. Curriculum replicates the same excessive rationality that constructed the world as atomic. Its sole aim is to train the intellect to disembodied entities into abstractions, separate the essential from the non-essential, and disregard aesthetic appreciation of particular encounters and events as unimportant. In the absence of an aim or purpose, curriculum reflects the atomic isolation. Teaching is justifiably fragmented and disconnected as ideas reflect the random and disconnected pattern of reality and of human endeavour.

In turn, Whitehead draws from the theories of evolution and relativity to construct his metaphysics of process. From the assumptions that evolution can only intensify qualities of lower degrees, and that higher forms of life evolved from lower forms, he argued that lower forms of being should not be regarded as mechanical but rather as alive and having direction in time. For science to recognize reality for what it is, rather than view it as atomistic and without aim or

direction, it must attend to the pattern of these organisms into their cosmic dimensions (Bronstein, 1947, pp. 475–477). Within this evolutionary framework, process is a universal happening where becoming is of greater importance than being. Process consists of units of process that bring together events. These units of process are like “miniatures of human experience” guided by aims. Even atoms and molecules possess inner experience and are guided by aims, thus nature is alive at every point in the widest sense of experience. In contrast, to a Newtonian notion of process, in which cause is viewed in terms of the separateness of space and time as distinct elements, reality is a unitary process that may be viewed in terms of its spaciality and temporality (Woodhouse, 1992, p. 4). Growth in this process is the becoming or actualisation of events that take the form of encounter, adjustment, and resolution.

Process pedagogy, constructed fundamentally upon reality as process, views human experience as part of the whole movement of reality rather than isolated from it and others in it. Within the process paradigm, human beings thrive and grow in the space of living events related to other events by the “kinds of awareness of which they are capable” (Brumbaugh, 1982). In contrast to the self as isolated in continuing, separate, successive moments in time, self is the reiterative cycle of encounter, adjustment, and resolution. Individuals are at one time biological organs linked to the species by their dependence on previous organic growth, by passing through the same maturation process, and by being part of the larger process of nature (Woodhouse, 1992, p. 9). They are also “sensitive, free, creative, human beings, and somehow part of the cosmos where value and purpose have a place” (Brumbaugh, 1982, p. 121). In contrast to abstract individuals, humans are differentiated aesthetically by their own cycle of growth and individuation within encompassing events. They belong to larger communities, societies, civilisations, and cosmic advance (p. 123).

In his *Aims of Education*, Whitehead (1929) himself shows how teaching takes up the process of living. “Students are alive, and the purpose of education is to stimulate and guide their development” (p. v). Process pedagogy takes up as curriculum the life of students connected with the world around them. This pedagogy uses a few important ideas through which the student can understand “that stream of events which pours through his life, which is his life” (p.2). To understand, teachers assist students to relate ideas to “that stream compounded of sense perceptions, feelings, hopes, desires, and of mental activities adjusting thought to thought, which forms our life” (p. 3). Whitehead formulates this pedagogy himself by viewing the teaching of ideas as for use rather than as preparation for use. Teaching recognizes that learning, like other events, “is dynamic, directed, irreversible and taking place in successive phases” (p. 4). Learning actualizes by proceeding through phases of encounter, adjustment, and resolution referred to as romance, precision, and generalisation (Woodhouse, 1992, p. 8; Brumbaugh, 1982, p.4). In contrast to education as undifferentiated by type or pace, this view recognizes that learning is essentially periodic and the “subtler periods of mental growth, with their cyclic recurrences, yet always different as we pass from cycle to cycle” (Whitehead, 1929, p.17). Process pedagogy is

constructed in a metaphysic of reality as process conscious of it as unified, interconnected, and cyclic.

The Sacred Circle and Process Pedagogy

With a view of process pedagogy constructed within a discourse of Western metaphysics and science, it is more possible to ask how process pedagogy might be viewed within an aboriginal world view. More specifically, how might process pedagogy be understood when interpreted through the symbolism of the Sacred Circle? In contrast to Whitehead's concept of process, which arose through the critique of Western metaphysics and science, teachings of the Sacred Circle are not constructed as a criticism of Western science or metaphysics. They are accounts of reality passed from generation to generation through legends, story telling, and participation in rituals and ceremonies. Within the oral traditions, this circle is constituted symbolically in the structure participants assume to pray, to dance, to confer. Enactment of the symbol occurs in sweat lodges, sweetgrass ceremonies, pipe ceremonies, sun dances, feasts, and important meetings. The Sacred Circle represents the cosmic order, "the totality of the universe" (Sanderson, p. 47), and the unity of all things in the universe. It reflects the shapes and patterns of nature, including the round planets, their orbs, and their cyclical movement in space. Everything is in the circle. Within this space all things are related, interdependent, and in harmony. The circle symbolizes time as a form of the continual recurrence of natural patterns such as the seasons, day and night, and life cycles from birth to death and rebirth. The cyclic patterns and recurrences are acknowledged as overwhelming and constant realities that include patterns of cycles within circles, such as the turning of the earth on its axis while the earth revolves around the sun.

The movement in cyclic patterns constitutes the process of coming to wholeness, interdependence, and balance. In one early creation account, the world was differentiated into the four directions (Access Network, nd.) Wholeness is expressed as the unity of directions equally, although each direction is different. Wherever one stands in the world, there are always four equal directions. Without all the directions, the world is incomplete and cannot be. It is the unity of these directions that makes the wholeness of reality. Each direction relies on the existence of the other directions for its own identity as a direction. Each direction reflects differences in the world (plenitude) and sets out the possibility for interconnectedness. The Sacred Circle, as symbol, is divided into four directions (north, south, east, and west), which represent the four races (white, black, red, and yellow), four aspects of humanness (emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual), four cycles of life (birth/infancy, youth, adulthood, and elder/death), four elements (fire, water, wind, and earth), and the four seasons (spring, summer, fall, and winter). Wholeness in the cycle of the year requires movement through all the seasons, wholeness in life requires movement through the phases of a human life, and wholeness in human growth requires the development of all aspects. The year, life, and human growth can come to completion through this

movement to wholeness. This movement to wholeness is natural and fundamental to all living things.

Nothing exists in isolation of the whole. Although parts are differentiated from one another, they are also interconnected with one another the way seasons are joined through the natural passage of time. Transition through the phases of life interconnects birth with death and infancy with adolescence. All creatures — the winged, the two-legged, the four-legged, and the swimmers — have their place and belong in the scheme of the whole. Through their interconnection, they establish balance in the universe. The four directions are the perfect balance because each stands in perfect proportion to the others. Within the Circle reality is viewed as moving to wholeness, interconnectedness, and balance. Reality as process is reflected in the view of things as animate.

Animism to the Indian means life. However, the definition of life is not established on its converse, death, but rather from extension into further life. Animism transcends death. Animism encompasses the past and the future simultaneously in the present and unites all things into one. All things in the universe are at times animate, but circumstances of the moment can make them more animate or less animate. (King, 1991, p. 184)

Humans stand uniquely as part of the whole through their consciousness of self in the world. They are connected to all beings in the universe just as all things are related to one another. This relationship is reflected in the language, which sees all beings as family or relatives to humankind. Mother Earth, Father Sun, grandmother moon, and brother animals and sister plants reflect the realization that humanity is closely related to all things. Humans, however, are uniquely connected to the rest of the world.

The philosophy of the Indian is built on the perception that in the order of the universe ("the order of things") human beings are last. The Indians know their lives are dependent upon the lives of others in the scheme of things and yet the others' lives are not dependent upon the Indians'. They feel humble when they recognize that all things are interdependent but they are the most dependent. All other things within the universe can exist without them and remain in harmony. They alone cannot exist without the others. (King, 1991, p. 184)

Ceremonies, particularly the pipe ceremony, "reinforce the interrelatedness and interdependence of all life to the creator, and the sacredness of all relationships" (Sanderson, 1991, p. 53). Humans can achieve balance in the world when they realize their connectedness and dependency on nature. This realization comes as human beings live through their own cycles within the cycles of nature. "Life is basically a circle, and in it the past, the present and the future are one. We are the children of the past generations just as we will be the grandparents of the generations to come" (King, 1991, p. 187).

Process pedagogy within the Sacred Circle view is based upon the move-

ment of life to wholeness, connectedness, and balance. This movement recurs in cycles throughout one's life. At the centre of this, education is participation in religious ceremonies, including the pipe ceremony, sweetgrass ceremony, sun dance. These ceremonies bring together the community in a ritual enactment of wholeness and connectedness, and they focus the attention of the community on striving to be at one. To see schools as part of the broader culture and world, faculty arrange events to be inclusive and cognizant of community. In special programs, like the *Earth Ambassadors* program (Lucas, n.d.), students identify as being part of Mother Earth. Within a framework of environmental concern about pollution, students identify their own health and wholeness with that of the earth. Through a learning process that helps them become committed to the health of Mother Earth, they focus their concern about pollution on their own habits. In this process, students see themselves as unique persons connected to nature in a struggle to live through commitment to high ecological principles. Within the general teachings of the four directions, certain learnings dominate each age. Infants learn and grow emotionally, youth grow physically, adults grow intellectually, and elders grow spiritually. Each of these, and other cycles of learning, bring deeper awareness, knowledge, and wisdom.

The Circle can be used as a framework to interpret learning theory and models for teaching. Lee Brown, for example, uses the circle to interpret the Anisa Model, which differentiates experience into contrastable elements, integrates these elements into a pattern, and generalizes the pattern to new situations (Brown, n.d, p. 2) This strategy sets out to develop the ability of learners to guide their own learning, a competence that can be understood in terms of a circular movement that occurs throughout one's life. The Anisa Model of curriculum for self-development uses body-awareness, self-image, self-concept, self-esteem, and self-determination to help students construct a "learning identity." Each of these psychological potentialities, placed within the Sacred Circle quadrants, offers many possibilities for developing learning strategies (pp. 10-12) .

Healing as Metaphysics

Our Indian people are in their midnight, and will come into the daylight when the eagle has landed on the moon. (Hopi Prophecy, 1850)

Many Indian people interpret this prophecy to mean that the statement by the first astronauts on the moon, "The Eagle has landed," is the sign that a healing cycle for aboriginal people has begun (Lucas, 1989; Brown, n.d.). The present time, in the history of North American aboriginal people, stands in contrast to contact with Europeans who brought disease, destruction, and domination to aboriginal people of the Americas. The story of Alkali Lake, British Columbia, where the community recovered from 100% alcoholism to 95% sobriety stands as one of the most impressive examples in this area (Alkali Lake Indian Band, 1985; York, 1989, pp. 175-201). The return to traditional Indian spirituality has been at the centre of recovery for some communities.

The Sacred Circle, alternately called the Medicine Wheel in Plains Indian cultures, serves as the symbol system for interpreting healing and illness. Health is part of the same metaphysics as the process of reality itself. Within this wheel, health means to live a meaningful vision of one's wholeness, connectedness, and balance in the world. The shared visions of well-being are celebrated and renewed through ceremonies and rituals. Healing is the transition that restores the person, community, and nation to wholeness, connectedness, and balance. Within the framework of this meaning, one has purpose and direction in a life that one lives vigorously. Illness is a loss of meaning that results in weakness, fragmentation and isolation, lack of purpose and direction.

When Western governments attacked aboriginal cultures through schooling and other policies, they targeted aboriginal world views whose metaphysic sustained the health of the people. Education sought to deconstruct people from their aboriginal identity and place them outside the influence of the Sacred Circle. They reconstructed an identity that was isolated from the aboriginal world view and individualized and isolated within Western metaphysics and religion. Residential schools restructured the political and social organisation of aboriginal youth by removing them from family and their communal settings. In school, world view itself was reconstructed away from participation in the cyclic process of nature through rituals, ceremonies, and gatherings into categories and representations. Schools struck at the metaphysical foundation of aboriginal being-in-the-world.

Denial and purging of aboriginal metaphysics is at the foundation of social and cultural disorganisation and personally destructive lifestyles that have risen to epidemic proportions in Canada. Aboriginal people suffer the most severe social, economic, and educational conditions in Canada. Recent studies indicate that as many as 74–94% of members of aboriginal communities may have been sexually abused in their childhood (York, 1989, p.30; Lucas, 1989). This sexual abuse has been traced to the sexual abuse of students in Indian residential schools. "Like an infectious disease, the abuse is transmitted from generation to generation. The victims become the abusers" (York, 1989, p. 30). Aboriginal people became the victims of legal injustice. By 1976, a 16-year-old boy in Saskatchewan had a 70% chance of being incarcerated by the age of 25 (York, 1989, p. 146). In Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, 50% of the federal penitentiary population is aboriginal, although aboriginals comprise less than 5% of the national population. Whereas the Saskatchewan population is about 15% aboriginal, 75% of the provincial correctional centre population is aboriginal, and 85% of the women's correctional centre is aboriginal. "Prison has become for young native people the contemporary equivalent of what the Indian residential school represented for their parents" (York, 1989, p. 147). The suicide of about 5000 Canadian Indians under the age of 25 each year is at a rate six times higher than for non-Indians. Some researchers believe the true rate is 12 times higher than the Canadian average, and a University of Lethbridge sociologist who specializes in suicide says he has not found another racial group with a suicide rate nearly as high as the rate among Canadian Indians, not even in the worst

U.S. ghettos.¹ Within this scenario, children and young people become victims who lose self-esteem and cannot control their own affairs. They are alienated from community as community itself disintegrates, and they find themselves in a world of random occurrences without order and meaning.

In reaction to the long history of the denial and purging of metaphysics, aboriginal cultures have been revitalized and invigorated in the past two decades. They have won participation in constitutional negotiations, recognition of land claims, increased governance on what were once called reserves, administration of justice systems, and operation of their cultural and social institutions. These changes have been accompanied by cultural rebirth and rejuvenation. The Indian Control of Indian Education movement advanced band control of schools on Indian reservations, Native Survival Schools grew primarily in urban areas, and Native Way schools advanced culturally grounded education.² These educational developments were changes from government education strategies of civilization, detribalisation/aggressive civilization, and assimilation that rejected and purged aboriginal world views. These developments moved beyond aboriginal strategies of resistance, opposition, and confrontation that characterized the way many people addressed a colonial schooling system. In a broad sense, schools were centres of healing and teachers were healers.

It is the practice of teaching as healing that offers many possibilities for aboriginal students. In "Teacher As Healer," Katz and St. Denis (1991) draw upon studies of traditional teaching by elders and medicine people to construct a model of "teacher as healer" and "teaching as healing" in Cree and Fijian culture. Within a notion of healing as transitioning toward meaning, balance, interconnectedness and wholeness, they identify how teaching and learning can be healing.

The "teacher as healer" is one who, infused with spiritual understanding, seeks to make things whole ... seeks to respect and foster interconnections — between herself, her students, and the subject matter; between the school, the community and the universe at large — while respecting each part of these interconnected webs. (Katz & St. Denis, 1991, p. 24)

In their model, they identify that to be a healer, teachers enhance their consciousness into the spiritual realm where they move beyond personal needs to become servants of the community. They must display qualities of the heart "courage, commitment, belief and intuitive understanding that opens such teachers to be learners to become educators.... But heart ... is not limited to ... the feelings or emotions; heart involves the total person as he or she operates in her deepest essence" (Katz & St. Denis, 1991, p. 28).

Although the Sacred Circle has symbolized aboriginal world views for thousands of years, some schools are beginning only now to use it as a self-conscious foundation for education as healing. In its mission statement, the Joe Duquette parents' council and faculty identify their high school as "a healing place." They use the Sacred Circle as a conceptual foundation to understand and explain their approach to education, which includes an upgrading and academic

program for aboriginal youth from 14 to 20 years. The (Natawim) Healing Circle project there integrates the academic program into an aboriginal spiritual foundation to address students who are hurting from "chemical dependency, alienation, racism, denial, self-mutilation and other forms of violation and abuse." The failure of schools to address these students is evident in extremely high drop-out rates³ and their experience of school as alienating. Parents and faculty decided to use this foundation to address the psychological disturbance, social isolation and dysfunction, and existential malaise aboriginal youth suffer. They considered that academics alone did not constitute an education and their students could not be educated without addressing their emotional and spiritual being.

Healing as Process Pedagogy at Joe Duquette

To address the spiritual needs of its students, the Joe Duquette School faculty departed from the traditional view of education. The faculty adopted a healing approach in their teaching and drew upon the Sacred Circle teachings to direct its work. Although the school had already adopted a Native perspective in curriculum areas and had courses to assist students deal with personal and social difficulties, it had not substantially formulated a framework for addressing the considerable psychological, cultural, and social difficulties many students experienced. However, the school faculty recently committed itself to offering an academic and upgrading program within the Sacred Circle concept. It provided a framework for viewing students holistically, and worked practically to have students become more self-accepting, to build community, and to envision a meaningful place for themselves in the world.

The school faculty has worked dialectically through its practices of teaching, counselling, and theorizing about what is possible and what needs to be done. Western approaches to teaching have their limits and much school counselling was inadequate to the needs of many students. Peer self-help groups, time in drug and alcohol treatment centres, various workshops, events (e.g., Drug and Alcohol Awareness Week), school curriculum in the form of survival skills, and work-contact groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous were successful but inadequate. The change at the school came when students and staff encountered and studied how aboriginal drug and alcohol treatment centres and aboriginal communities addressed their alcoholism and sexual abuse issues through the Sacred Circle approaches (Lucas, 1989). The school began interpreting and reshaping some of its practices from within a Sacred Circle healing paradigm.

Process pedagogy proceeds in phases of belonging, understanding, and critical reflection. These three phases recur in cycles that make up the whole. The following description and analysis of a process pedagogy of healing is constructed on the basis of my participation/observation at the school, beginning more than 10 years ago when I served one year as the principal, through recent participation in workshops, and through an interview with a faculty.

The Sacred Circle as Belonging

Once a week students and staff begin the day at the Joe Duquette High School in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, with a sweetgrass ceremony. The participants, who are sitting in a circle on the gymnasium floor, ritually smudge themselves with sweetgrass smoke. This smudging consists of waving the smoke to one's body and head from a sweetgrass braid that one participant carries to each person in the circle. The smoke, which fills the air with incense, symbolically reflects the harmony of participants with one another, the creator, the grandfathers, and creation. The principal or a teacher offers an invocation or prayer of thankfulness, respect, and good intentions for the day. Brief announcements are made, guests are introduced. This ritual affirms that everyone belongs and is welcomed by the others into the circle of life. As participants file out past one another when the occasion ends, they shake hands. In this gesture, individuals are not one in a genus, but unique enough to actively acknowledge every individual and to be acknowledged by every other individual in the circle.

This sweetgrass ceremony is the visible manifestation of a school committed to education as a process of healing through the Sacred Circle. The healing process begins by affirming that each person belongs to and has a place in the world. This place is beside everyone else in the community who constitutes the circle. Living in harmony with the whole consists not only of unity with others but also reconciliation. Reconciliation anticipates a brokenness that needs to take place for the harmony to be realized. It is characterized in the practice of Indian hunters who offered up a prayer of reconciliation before killing animals. This prayer was a recognition that the animal gives up its life so the hunter and his community may live. The brokenness of the death is reconciled with the hunters continuing life. Students and teachers participate in the sweetgrass ceremony even though they know they will break this unity with others by becoming reclusive, authoritarian, angry, and wayward. The ceremony is an anticipatory reconciliation undertaken in an awareness that recognizes individual limitations.

The ceremony ritually overcomes the separateness of history and geography of students from the 70 bands in Saskatchewan, from northern and rural communities, and from other parts of Canada. It reaches across tribal customs and culture. It brings the janitor, teachers, students, principal and vice-principal, cook, secretary, and social worker together as community. The circle unites male and female, Native and non-Native. Participation of the whole school at the weekly ceremony emphasizes that everyone is to be included.

For many students, the circle is a first step to overcoming isolation, self-denial, exclusion, being disenfranchised, alienation, and loss of identity. Acceptance in the circle is a recognition that one belongs here. Participation in the circle allows individuals to believe that hurts will be recognized as hurts. One can come to trust that, if these hurts are made manifest during the day, one will not be ostracized, embarrassed, or shamed into isolation or rejection. By necessity of the belief in the circle and its inclusiveness, school participants must continue to deal with you.

Although one is more vulnerable in the circle, one can reside in a relationship with trust that can transform guilt and self-blame into understanding and consciousness, into forgiveness and harmony.

Sacred Circle as Understanding

The purpose of talking circles is to create a safe environment for people to share their point of view with others. This process helps people gain a sense of trust in each other. They come to believe that what they say will be listened to and accepted without criticism. (Four Worlds Project, 1990)

The Healing Circles conducted in each class at Joe Duquette High School every morning help students understand and make meaning of their experiences and feelings. In this process, they come to see and build their interdependence with others in the class. Interdependence is viewed as the basis of a community of healing. This community is built on the notion that through speaking the students can share their hurting with others who will empathize with them. In this empathy, students receive the affirmation of others, which builds self-image and confidence. As students continue to speak about their feelings and experiences, they can interpret what they mean. As students understand one another, they are able to interact supportively.

This process assumes that during adolescence peers have a significant influence upon one another by virtue of the peer culture they share. They influence one another's habits and values, and they share ways of seeing and activities. Because the students can be one another's best teachers, the pedagogical task is to have students develop competencies to identify their feelings and express them in a language that can be shared with others. Another task is to prepare students to empathize and help others reflect on their situation. The teacher has to create conditions within which students feel secure enough to explore and speak, and be supported in addressing whatever issues are presented.

The Healing Circles begin with the ritual of smudging and a prayer that focusses the students in a relationship with the creator, the cosmos, and one another. To open the session, the teacher speaks to the value of dialogue and to the potential of the class as a healing community. A talking stone may be passed from person to person to designate who has the floor. As the stone is passed around the circle, each student speaks about how he or she feels or about some experience, and the others listen. They speak of incidents, fears, desires, anger, frustrations, confusion, depression, aspirations, and events. Some pass and don't speak at all. When one speaks, the listeners try to help the speaker express him/herself, empathize with the speaker's predicament, reflect upon the circumstance, suggest how the situation might be improved, and offer assistance. The community takes up the personal reality of the student as curriculum. Teachers help students learn to be compassionate, to be accepting, and to share. Students move from the culture of silence into dialogue (Freire, 1970). Within the Healing Circle format, the movement to connectedness and interdependence comes through understanding. To make the Healing Circle process work, teachers

encourage students to listen to one another without judgement, condemnation, or criticism. They help build confidence so students are willing to discuss their feelings, and speak what they believe to be the truth. The group becomes increasingly skilled at allowing listening and speaking.

Sacred Circle as Critical Learning

The morning sweetgrass ceremony reinforces students' sense of belonging. The Healing Circles encourage students to recognize their interdependence with others, and to dialogue about their experiences, feelings, and aspirations. The next part of process pedagogy is to have students visualize and make judgements about themselves so they can become self-determining. To move to critical reflection and action, faculty at the school have constructed two processes derived from the Sacred Circle as Medicine Wheel.

In the first process, students are taught to think critically about their own healing within a conceptual framework taken from the Sacred Circle. The Sacred Circle is used in the Native treatment centres to have patients direct their own healing. It offers a relevant, practical way for students to visualize their health by providing a framework for critical self-reflection. The Sacred Circle drawn into four quadrants differentiates physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual dimensions of personal development. Through this model, the students are encouraged to view themselves as whole persons who can become self-determining. This self-determination requires envisioning ideals in each area and examining the connections within each area. A discussion of high physical ideals provides a framework for addressing physical abuses such as smoking, alcoholism, and drug abuse. Analysis of physical abuses are directly connected to emotional, spiritual, and intellectual matters. The wheel facilitates practical reflection that relates to the immediate life circumstances of students and offers a framework for students to visualize possibilities for themselves. Through the circle, students can visualize themselves as whole persons, see connections between different aspects of their lives, and determine how to balance their development.

The concept of the Sacred Circle is taught in the modern survival skills course. For many students, the circle serves as a practical guide to self-reflection and self-criticism. As Andre Poilieve, a long-time faculty at the school, reports,

The kids are now quite articulate in being able to project themselves, their interior, in relation to the wheel. So you'll ask them, what does the wheel mean to you?, and they will just shoot off the four directions, the four ages of humanity, proper positions of the wheel, and how things are connected, interrelated and balanced. They can identify the wheel as a vision of wholeness, balance, and connectedness. They can also identify their own lives, their brokenness, imbalance, and disconnectedness. They can say, I have a problem here. I am still doing drugs, and I'm still drinking. The wheel gives them some perspective on their brokenness.⁴

One teacher at the school has pioneered a pedagogy for aboriginal youth, using story circles and improvisational theatre techniques (Regnier, 1987). This circle hearkens back to the oratorical practices of the Plains Cree who, particularly in the long winter months, told stories and prepared the young for ceremonies. In this pedagogy, experimented with at the school for a decade, students construct stories together and act out improvisations based on and in relation to these stories. This procedure, which draws heavily upon liberation and empowerment foundations in the work of Paolo Freire, critical theory, and feminist pedagogy, helps students reflect and act critically upon their experiences, feelings, and aspirations. Within the circle, made sacred in its ancestral mythos through the guidance of the teacher and growing sensibility of the students, students are secure and ready to reflect upon and tell stories about their own lives. Through these stories, their lives become curriculum. Student improvisations interpret these stories and construct imaginative responses to the conditions and situations depicted by them. Through intensive sessions, issues raised in the stories are restated and reconsidered, re-enacted and replayed to identify and express their essential meanings. In this way, students work through an analysis of their real life worlds, and construct ways to live creatively (Regnier, 1988).

In the circle, students belong to the stories and become the community that created them. They have their own individuality or personality because they have a community within which they can have personal relationships. Through listening and speaking, they improve language proficiencies and become increasingly articulate and discriminating in telling their own stories. The process moves students from silence to speaking, monologue to dialogue, isolation to participation. This process pedagogy has been credited with improving literacy of some students dramatically. It advances cooperative, supportive and imaginative social relations among students, and significantly improves communicative competence and interaction. Conducted within the perimeter of the Sacred Circle, it becomes a re-creating of aboriginal spiritual culture in the urban context. Through this pedagogy, student healing comes through reflecting upon and interpreting their lives in a way that connects them with community, culture, and the world around them.

Through the story circles and collective improvisation, experience becomes art, and real lives become aesthetic. Since 1983, students have produced several plays through the story circle and collective improvisational process. These plays voice urban native youths' quests for identity, meaning, and purpose from reflections of their experiences. *Indians 'R' US* (1988) explored the vulnerabilities of childhood and being a "man." In *Troubled Spirits* (1987) students, through the character of a mythological trickster, demand an Indian-controlled school. In *Family Violators Will Be Towed Away* four sisters confront the difficulties of living with their own parents and in state institutions. In plays, students address issues of prostitution and gang warfare, the difficulty of living in urban situations, and alcoholism and poverty. Each of these non-scripted plays clarifies the quests of these students in their own voice, and transforms the quest

and experience into artistic and cultural expression.

Culture is activity of thought, a receptiveness to beauty and humane feeling. Scraps of information have nothing to do with it. A merely well informed man is the most useless bore on God's earth. What we should aim at is producing men who possess both culture and expert knowledge in some special direction. Their expert knowledge will give them the ground to start from, and their culture will lead them as deep as philosophy and as high as art. (Whitehead, p. 1)

Healing Education in Canada

In the literature, several initiatives speak to the efforts of Canadian First Nations to view healing as central to community development and schooling. Throughout the country, healing workshops for men, healing circles for abuse victims in residential schools, community sentencing circles and some rehabilitation programs for offenders, alcohol and drug treatment centres and schools are drawing upon notions of aboriginal spirituality as a framework for their initiatives. Mokakit, the organisation of indigenous educators in Canada, has commissioned and completed *First Nations Freedom: Curriculum of Choice. Alcohol, Drug, and Substance Abuse Prevention — Kindergarten to Grade 8*. This culturally relevant First Nations curriculum has been developed, piloted, and implemented in Canadian First Nations schools. Since 1982 and 1987, when members of the Four Worlds Project in Lethbridge, Alberta, consulted with elders and cultural leaders representing 40 tribes in North America, they have been producing educational materials grounded in First Nations spirituality and culture. The project has been productive and provides several resources. Many First Nations communities in Canada have initiated projects that are constructed upon or incorporate healing approaches to education within aboriginal world views.

NOTES

1. This information reported in *The Dispossessed* by G. York comes in part from the Department of Health and Welfare, *Suicide in Canada* (Report of the Task Force on Suicide in Canada, 1987).
2. For a review of survival schools, see Regnier (1987) and McCaskill (1988, pp. 153-179).
3. In Saskatchewan, the high school drop-out rates for aboriginal students in urban inner city schools was 93% in 1981. Another study placed the drop-out rates at 74% and 84%.
4. Interview with Andre Poillieve (1992).

REFERENCES

- Access Network. (nd). *The sacred circle* [Video]. Edmonton: University of Alberta.
 Alkali Lake Indian Band. (1985). *In honour of all* [Video]. Alkali Lake, BC:
 Bronstein, D. J., Krikorian, Y. H., & Wiener, P. P. (Eds.). (1947). *Basic problems of phi-*

- losophy. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Brown, L. (nd). *Learning: A study of the values, identity, culture and learning in the classroom*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Brumbaugh, R. S. (1982). *Whitehead: Process philosophy and education*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Caduto, M. J., & Bruchac, J. (1988). *Keepers of the earth*. Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers.
- Four Worlds Development Project. (1984). *Connection between health and education*. Lethbridge, AB: Author.
- Four Worlds Development Project. (1984). *Helping your community*. Lethbridge, AB: Author.
- Four Worlds Development Project, (1984). *Understanding and preventing the problem of drug abuse*. Lethbridge, AB: Author.
- Four Worlds Development Project, (1984). *Wholistic educational evaluation for community transformation: A preventative approach*. Lethbridge, AB: Author.
- Four Worlds Development Project, (1988). *Unity in diversity: Student readings*. Lethbridge, AB: Author.
- Four Worlds Development Project, (1989). *Recreating native education: A case study in program evaluation and design*. Lethbridge, AB: Author.
- Four Worlds Development Project. (1992). *Moving toward wholeness: A substance abuse prevention training manual for educators working with Native students*. Lethbridge, AB: Author.
- Four Worlds Project. (1990, March) Guidelines for talking circles. *The Four Worlds Exchange*, 1(4), 11–12.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Hunt, N. B. (1981). *Indians of the Great Plains*. Bedfordbury, UK: Orbis Publishing.
- Katz, R. (1982). *Boiling energy: Community healing among the Kalahari Kung*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Katz, R., & St. Denis V. (1991). Teacher as healer. *Journal of Indigenous Studies*, 2(2) 24–36.
- King, C. (1991). Indian world view and time. In E. J. McCullough & R. L. Calder (Eds.), *Time as human resource* (pp 182–187). Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press.
- Lucas, P. (Producer). (nd). *Earth ambassadors* [Video]. Issaquah, WA: Phil Lucas Productions, Inc.
- Lucas, P. (Producer). (1989). *Man alive: A circle of healing*. Pt. 1 and 2 [Video]. Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.
- McCaskill, D. (1988) The revitalisation of Indian culture: Indian cultural survival schools. In J. Barman, Y. Helbert, & D. McCaskill (Eds.), *Indian education in Canada, Vol. 2: The challenge* (pp. 153–179). Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Regnier, R. H. (1987). Survival schools as emancipatory education. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 14(2), 42–54.
- Regnier, R. H. (1988). Acting and taking care of one another. *Our Schools, Our Selves*, 1(1)
- Sanderson, J. L. (1991). *Aboriginal pedagogy: An adult education paradigm*. Unpublished thesis, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon.
- Tobias, J. (1974). *Report to the commissioner of land claims*. Saskatoon: Federation of Saskatchewan Indians.
- Whitehead, A. N. (1929). *The aims of education*. New York: The Free Press.
- Woodhouse, H. (1992). *Process philosophy and global education*. Paper presented at the Sixth Annual Meeting of the Process Philosophy of Education, American Philosophical Association, Louisville, KY, April 24–26.
- York, G. (1989). *The dispossessed: Life and death in native Canada*. Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys.

Author's address:

Department of Educational Foundations
and Indian & Northern Education Program
College of Education
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, SK, Canada S7N 0W0