

Dialogue to Transform the Academy: Report of the Indigenous Knowledges Study Day

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The challenges and opportunities that surfaced during the two-day International Conference on Indigenous Knowledges: “Transforming the Academy,” were addressed on Saturday, May 29, 2004, when a group of invited participants met to discuss future directions and explore ways to develop and introduce IK courses to universities worldwide. The Study Day participants acknowledged the visionary efforts undertaken by institutions, such as the Alaskan Native Science Commission, The Institute for Circumpolar Health Studies at the University of Alaska, Anchorage, The Centre for Indigenous People’s Nutrition and Environment at McGill University, Montreal, Canada, and The Woodlands Wisdom Nutrition Project that involves six American Indian Tribal Colleges in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and North Dakota in cooperation with the University of Minnesota. The tribal colleges that are part of the Woodlands Wisdom Confederation are College of Menominee Nation, Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College, Turtle Mountain Community College, White Earth Tribal and Community College, Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibway Community College, and Leech Lake Tribal College.

The many stories and experiences shared during the Study Day helped to make this event a success. One of the challenges faced jointly by the participants and Dr. Fred Loomis, the Study Day Facilitator, was to transform the content of earlier and very animated small group discussions into a set of recommendations that would serve as an actionable plan for long term collaboration among very diverse institutions and organizations with very different agendas for transforming the academy. Study Day participants discussed, among other issues, the appropriateness of Internet technology for the design and delivery of a truly global, multi-institutional, graduate level certificate program in indigenous knowledges.

As part of the deliberations and reflections, participants drew heavily upon their own experiences but some also considered Joseph Couture’s (2000) article, “Native Studies and the Academy,”¹ that had been electronically mailed to them in advance. By design, the Study Day did not attempt to provide specific examples of curricula, relying instead upon the Appreciative Inquiry approach of the Madii Institute to build a level of consensus among this international community of scholars. The aim of the deliberative process was to identify those principles that underlie a curriculum that is sensitive to both cultural knowledge and knowledge of the natural environment, based on culturally diverse life experiences and reflecting the histories of different populations.

Objectives and Rationales

The major objectives of the Study Day, in which more than twenty-five attendees participated, included:

- Sharing various organizational, teaching and learning approaches used to advance the study of indigenous knowledges.
- Exploring key conceptual frameworks for a curriculum in indigenous knowledges.
- Developing a foundation for a multi-institutional global community for the study of indigenous knowledges.

The study day was replete with examples of the many innovative strategies people have developed to cope with change in their social and physical environments. Asset mapping was discussed as a useful technique for documenting aspects of the traditional knowledge that is acquired over time by communities. “Asset mapping” is a term coined by McKnight and Kretzmann² to describe a method for conducting an inventory of the “giftedness” and skills of the individuals, associations and institutions that exist in any community and contribute to its social, economic, intellectual, physical, and environmental capital.

The techniques used in this approach were drawn from the indigenous knowledge mapping approach used among circumpolar peoples by the Arctic Institute of North America and Fikret Birkes at the University of Manitoba’s Natural Resources Institute. This method includes mapping of physical resources and practices, as well as the stories and knowledge that people have developed to sustain themselves as they innovate and adapt to changes in their environment. The key assumption of this approach is that the community capitalizes on its own internal strengths and resources before leveraging external resources to supplement, not replace, internal capacities.

Because the participants in the Study Day came from diverse communities, the asset mapping approach seemed to be a useful tool. It reminded participants of the need to value cultural knowledge as an asset—the assumption being that valuing this knowledge honors people and capabilities often overlooked in a community, and ultimately, changes our actions and the future we build.

Another approach for transforming the academy is the initiative taken by Penn State’s Interinstitutional Consortium for Indigenous Knowledge (ICIK) to involve faculty in the study of indigenous knowledges. Some of the goals set by ICIK include:

(1) *To produce and document indigenous knowledges so that they can be made available to peoples around the world.*

(2) *To encourage curriculum studies/curriculum development in the domain of indigenous knowledge.* In this context, curriculum studies/development is concerned with the production of knowledge. Such a viewpoint moves beyond traditional notions of curriculum as simply the course of study; a compilation of information to be learned. As defined here, curriculum studies of indigenous knowledge involve epistemological questions relating to the production and consumption of knowledge, the learning, the contestation of all forms of knowledge production and the purposes of education itself.

(3) *To validate indigenous knowledge.* Since knowledge production is contested, values, cultural assumptions, and belief structures are always implicit in the process. Traditionally, indigenous knowledge has not been validated vis-à-vis Western scientific practices. Understanding that power relations cannot be separated from knowledge production, ICIK seeks to legitimate, to take seriously, indigenous forms of knowledge.

(4) *To produce new research methods for studying indigenous knowledge.* Inquiry methods need to be developed that are capable of capturing the cultural embeddedness of indigenous

ways of knowing. By cultural embeddedness we are referring to the tendency of such knowledge to meld with the experiences, customs, theologies, self-concepts, community, and the individual relationships of indigenous peoples.

(5) *To initiate global conversation between north/south, “developed”/“underdeveloped” societies.* ICIK hopes to deepen and extend the conversation that, many contend, is prerequisite for global consciousness and inter-cultural solidarity.

(6) *To motivate scholarly work concerning the contribution of indigenous knowledge to the goal of sustainable development.* Initiatives have been taken to integrate indigenous knowledge into new approaches to health, nutrition, agriculture, and the conservation of the environment. The generally accepted philosophy behind these initiatives is that new approaches should not replace indigenous knowledge, but rather should make use of this knowledge which has been produced by generations of practice by families, traditional healers, shamans, and farmers.

Although these goals have not been completely implemented, they represent the complexity of the task of transforming the academy.

Outcomes

The major outcomes of the study day included:

(1) *The need for new institutional approaches to the study of indigenous knowledges:*

- Focus should be on “knowledge without borders.”
- The indigenous community (e.g., native peoples, elders) should be brought into higher education structure and curriculum in a meaningful way.
- All indigenous people are not alike and do not think alike.
- Vision would be to address issues of life experience and community sustainability.

(2) *Find new ways of sharing teaching and learning strategies:*

- Need to challenge assumptions about formal ways of knowing.
- Faculty and student engagement with the community is key.
- Need to form inter-university learning collaboration that links traditional disciplines to the problems of communities.

(3) *From the global IK community of scholars, new curricular approaches will emerge:*

- Shared values should be articulated for the field of study.
- Understanding and valuing of the cultural context.
- Model should consider fieldwork, capstone experience and student/community-centered approaches.

(4) *The relationship between IK and sustainable economic development offers much to international outreach goals:*

- IK and local ways of knowing can bring about advances in development (e.g., local pathways to global development—health, food, shelter, etc.).
- The role of the academy in stimulating research and debate among key members of the IK community.
- Funding agencies (World Bank, USDA, National Science Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation) would like to see this field advance.

Suggested Next Steps

- Share information with study day participants.
- Facilitate online dialogue.
- Publish conference proceedings on website.
- Develop Penn State and international communities of IK scholars.
- Cultivate funding agencies to further develop ICIK's research agenda at Penn State.
- Continue curriculum development process with International Working Group convened initially during the Study Day

Endnotes

1. COUTURE, Joseph, 2000. "Native Studies and the Academy," in G. Dei, B. Hall, and D. Rosenberg (eds.), *Indigenous Knowledges in Global Contexts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press).
2. KRETZMANN, John P., John L. McKnight, 1993. *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Evanston, IL: Institute for Policy Research).

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