

Indigenous and Native Perspectives on Cross-cultural Relationships: Mentoring as Normal

Abstract: This paper argues that in almost all of human history, mentoring was the means of cultural continuity. Then, the next position is that the costs (in non-monetary terms) were outweighed by the benefits. Finally, the discussion turns to the industrialization of students and the educational and work lives. Therefore mentoring should be much more than a reactive remedy.

Introduction and Confession

This paper is inherently wrong because I have no claim to any of the wisdom I will try to present, and I have no roots or rights to any wisdom outside of whatever I have picked up from my own life... For those reading this, I am an old fat white guy. Anyone you know who wants to kill her great-grandchildren? How about preventing that?

I am selfishly here, to learn what I can from your work in how to help people, and how your work advances that desperate need.

First, a preview of a way to think about traditional small groups and their cultural transmission in terms of the 6 standards from the excellent 2015 Mentor 4th Ed. of Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring. There is a remarkable perspective in considering how the elements map onto the traditional.

Standard 1, Recruitment, is effectively a non-issue where elders and knowledge holders are the latest in a very long line of shared common knowledge. The recruitment problem is solved by closely observing children of all ages, growing with observations of each other and observations of adults and elders.

Standard 2, Screening, is also solved by the same means: close observation of each other, and selection for different roles through knowledge of each other.

Standard 3, Training, relates to pre-match learning for mentors and mentees. Again, this is inherent in traditional small groups where “everybody knows your name,” as the popular song says.

Standard 4, Matching and Initiating, is inherently part of the selection of keepers of knowledge and the differentiated roles that people “grow into”.

Standard 5, Monitoring and Support, is also built into the small group continuity process. And Standard 6 is not a problem where closure is part of the life-cycle.

Perhaps most simplifying, the call for core logics and theories of change is met throughout the process, as part of culture which is held in common by the group.

Therefore, the argument will be that the very high transactions costs of starting with mentors whose qualities must be observed and whose behavior is critical, and the complexities which result from unknown mentees whose fate is difficult to observe are just not a cost for the long-term groups.

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Mentoring might be considered as part of human socialization, going back far beyond the roughly 10,000 year old change to patriarchal, class-structured, and physically self-destructive larger “civilizations” which extend to the present. Before that, there is less remaining evidence and too little remaining cultural inheritance. On that, there are some principal references noted. These references teach that the whole is more than the sum of the parts.

These references are partly very academic, including Clint Carroll’s book, *Roots of Our Renewal: Ethnobotany and Cherokee Environmental Governance*. It is a superb synthesis of political ecology and critical Native American studies. Another reference from the academic literature is Malcolm Cairns, Ed., *Shifting Cultivation and Environmental Change: Indigenous People, Agriculture and Forest Conservation*.

And one is deeply understood and heart-felt, but only partly referenced because of the nature of the subject; it is Ken Bear Hawk Cohen’s book, *Honoring the Medicine: The Essential Guide to Native American Healing*. From some treasured time with him, it is clear that the publisher fiddled with the title. Ken would never have said his work was “the” anything, not “essential”; his title would much more likely be “A View of Native American Healing”.

An enormously rewarding middle ground is *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity*, chief editor Darrell Posey. After several years on anthropology about Native Americans, the development of economic anthropology and related areas, the formal appearance of the Common Property movement, was a rapid advancement with their development of the first meetings of the Association for the Study of Common Property, as it began. Every time one looks at *Cultural and Spiritual Values*, one learns something new. (Full disclosure: the author has a very small part of that, among 289 other contributors.)

And, for a deeply rewarding and sadly prescient book, Jerry Mander’s book, *In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology and the Survival of the Indian Nations*, was published in 1991, but nothing has disproven his predictions. (His name is coincidental.) He also wrote *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*. In an interview, he said:

Well, one of the points of the book is that you really can't summarize complex information. And that television is a medium of summary or reductionism – it reduces everything to slogans. And that's one criticism of it, that it requires everything to be packaged and reduced and announced in a slogan-type form.

For a later important book, see Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Have you heard the words “climate change” on mass media?

This paper is not going to try to summarize complex information; the best is to point to it, and hope that it stimulates reader ideas and memories. The source of science progress is its success in creating knowledge that can be cumulated by applying methodological comparability; hence the value of your work.

Listening, Observing and Learning

“In Native American culture the spiritual person is, most importantly, a good listener. But the word listening implies more than hearing sounds or comprehending language. It includes the intuitive impressions received by a silent mind. It allows room for input uncolored by preconception and prejudice. *** Listening puts us in touch with the energy, vibration, and spiritual forces that lie at the heart of creation. *** In all indigenous cultures, silence is a token of respect, self-control, patience, and humility.” (Cohen, 2003: 39-40, 42.)

That seems critical to mentoring of any kind. The role of mentoring may be much greater than it would seem from treating it as a specialized part of human relations. The great majority of human history, in time rather than in numbers of people, has been informed by transmission of culture – crudely described as “learned behavior” – that starts with listening. “Traditional knowledge” is not antique facts but “the social process of learning and sharing knowledge, which is unique to each indigenous culture, lies at the very heart of its ‘traditionality.’” (Posey, Ed., 1999: 4; hereafter, “Posey”). Traditional knowledge is transmitted largely through practice and what we would call apprenticeships with specialists. (Posey: 9 and *passim*.) Languages are shapers and shaped by experience cumulated as culture. Our problem now is that we have less and less experience and less cultural reflection, as “media” overwhelm lived and felt experience and culture (Postman, 1985; Mander, 1991). An indigenous person is quoted in Posey (p.71): “You don’t ask questions when you grow up. You watch and listen and wait, and the answer will come to you. It’s yours then, not like learning in school.”

Observing carefully is also ubiquitous among the indigenous. Posey includes a contribution about the modern speed of categorization on observation, which is to put a thing or person into a generic category. “It’s easy. But do we observe what is actually there?” (Posey: 439.) One valuable characterization is that we have two emerging kinds of homelessness (as well as the one in our cities): the homelessness of uprooted cultures and the uprootedness of those who own a great deal but have very little connection to where (or how) they live (Posey: 452).

Evidence of Success of Indigenous and Ancient Cultures

Solely addressing the Americas, Weatherford’s very pleasant book, *Indian Givers*, describes the enormous range of resources successfully managed before the European invasions. But behind conditions in 1492 there were thousands of years that left the Americas astoundingly rich in wildlife and plant diversity and populations (see also Mann, 2005). The implicit racism in the idea that such an environment existed only because pre-invasion populations lack the capacity to do the kind of damage, drainage, and destruction that we have inherited and inhabit has been thoroughly debunked (Posey, *passim*.) For example, “They tell us, ‘We are going to teach you how to catch your own fish in a sustainable way.’ But what they don’t seem to recognize is that we have been doing this for thousands of years... We know it is sustainable because we survive.” (Posey: 157; and see the contribution beginning on page 291.)

We have just begun to take seriously the idea that things which cannot be sold, other than life, have value that can be thought of as something other than sentimentality or a court verdict for damages. That is, life as opposed to death, and there is no strong consensus on valuation of

health or quality of life, or even on valuation of natural capital or ecosystem services, other than what economists call “hedonic valuation”, measuring buyer’s willingness to pay for conditions such as better air quality, or proximity to open space; see a book on resource or environmental economics – e.g. Bromley, Ed., 1995 and presently see Earth Economics; eartheconomics.org, a non-profit created to provide defensible valuations of ecosystem services and natural capital.

There were sky-covering flocks and great herds and numbers of animals, not only buffalo. They were maintained, helped, and in some cases cultivated by Natives who had means of exchange within home groups and between groups. But, there was very little motivation for the kind of destructive abuses that we now pretend are “human nature” (Wiener 1995), as if humans did not exist before the mass media and the printing press. This is a long story, but its message is clear enough despite the tortured sense of humanity that included a world full of “us” and “savages” (Cohen, 2003: Introduction).

There are millions of people living now with techniques and with a sense of responsibility to the world that have far deeper roots than industrial and fossil-fuel... Culture? That may be the wrong word. Just say, ‘commercialism?’ For a recent volume that begins with those roots and their development into the present, see Cairns, Ed., 2015, *Shifting Cultivation and Environmental Change: Indigenous People, Agriculture, and Forest Conservation*. As with many other places where colonialists literally could not and likely also and later, would not see, deep-rooted agriculture has often involved intricate cumulated knowledge enabling rotations of desired species and micro-ecologies lasting for decades, and often involving two hundred species of plants in combinations and succession. People would have many of these plots going, at different stages in the temporal succession. Europeans seeing such things almost unfailingly did not understand them. And, colonists were so often preceded by disease epidemics that they misunderstood “slash and burn” as barely supporting small remnants of cultures. (Posey’s volume includes many contributions on this.)

Relevance of Cultural Transmission to Mentoring

Considering cultural transmission as the ways of sustainable subsistence, arts, and religion – inextricably interwoven – is not only disturbing as a contrast to the present, and questions about sustainability *per se*; it is also stimulating to consider present industrialized life. This motivates interest in learning about mentoring in the present sense. We may be doing more than we think, but we may also be doing less than we should.

Children learn a great deal more than we acknowledge as “education”, of course, and we call some of it “socialization”, but the deep penetration of the mass media has brought us much deeper understandings than may meet the eye. There has been discussion of the “mean world” syndrome in which fear of crime rates motivates us, and appears to be now driving much of our politics. Another example may be the most undesirable and underappreciated deception: walking away from terrible car wrecks, or running after someone else running away from another wreck. How can that not teach children, or anyone uncritically watching, that in the next episode, you will be fully recovered, and not crippled or worse?

One part of current U.S. education is the scientific method, which relies on testing for intervention impacts on a dependent variable. The world is far more complex, but we seldom appreciate that in science, despite our own experiences of art and living. Romance is distinguishable from prostitution, perhaps by the many variables in the outcome. Less metaphorically, the sophistication of linked highly complex models is rapidly advancing our understanding, or perhaps, our potential understanding in too many cases, of climate and climate change and climate change impacts (e.g. any issue of more than a dozen journals, or the National Climate Assessments (US Global Change Research Program, 2018 and previous.) But some very important conclusions can be reliably drawn from much simpler models, including those from the very beginning of systems modeling (Turner, 2008), and those we use in daily life (on which there is a literature you probably know better than most; e.g. the work of Daniel Kahneman, most recently 2011).

We, here and now, have industrialized a great deal of education, belittling the importance of mentoring and experiential learning. Where high school used to include home economics, and shop, and other skilled activities, we graduate students only as prospective participants in higher education, in the vast majority of cases for those who do not drop out. Are all of those drop-outs socially disadvantaged or are some of them gifted or just more interested in other kinds of learning? Thorstein Veblen called this the instinct for workmanship (1914). Instead of holistic and intentional cultural transmission outside the home, we have forced ourselves into industrial lives.

As taxpayers, we far too often attack teachers and disrespect them. Far too many students cannot afford to be teachers, with or even without student debts, because of the low pay, bad attitudes of the public, and then increasing personal costs to stock classrooms. But, there are huge increases in the last decades in administration – largely to comply with and enforce standardization and its metrics. Indeed, there are now standard metrics for rating everything in the process, from student performance at every level, to teacher performance at every level, to schools themselves, colleges and universities, and graduate programs, and text-books and for that matter, best-sellers in about everything. Some of that is clearly useful, as in whether an appliance will perform well; or was it made so long ago that it still works? But for humans, industrializing seems to be the very opposite of mentoring, and what mentors do is often done in personal time.

We also force children into peer groups. The definition of a peer group, is that small group of people who can show you and teach you the very least of any group, because they are the most like you and because your sense of worth is terribly limited at a very young age to your acceptance or rejection by your peers, and your comparative performance ranking. Not all of that ends after school.

We ask too little from mentoring. We seem to treat it as a tail fin, while industrial-style education is treated as the only path to real success. We hang onto a reliable automobile mechanic, but fail to appreciate how much unspoken learning that skill-set takes, and how much mentoring. But such things do not appear on the SAT or the ACT, or the GRE, etc. Looking back, we can learn a great deal from thinking of socialization and education as explicitly necessary, rather than accidentally usually treated in the absence of industrially measured qualities or behaviors.

A last quotation, from a contemporary Amish farmer (Posey: 305), may serve as a guide to behavior. “We should conduct our lives as if Jesus would return today, but take care of the land as if He would not be coming for a thousand years.”

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