



Stop Talking: Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning and Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education

Mercurieff, Ilarion and Roderick, Libby
University of Alaska Anchorage, 2013

Book Review

Tags: difficult conversations | epistemologies | indigenous learning | student learning

Reviewed by: Lisa Withrow, *Methodist Theological School in Ohio*

Date Reviewed: November 30, -0001

In 2009, authors Ilarion Mercurieff and Libby Roderick participated in the second of two higher education projects sponsored by the Ford Foundation's national Difficult Dialogues initiative. This project was designed to "turn the tables" on traditional academic professors so that Alaska Native people would become their own teachers (iii). This book, *Stop Talking*, tells the story of the second project, laid out in a format that parallels the experience gained in a faculty immersion workshop with Alaska Native teachers, followed by an ongoing community of inquiry (chapters 1-5). The final chapters show the nature of change in pedagogy designed by faculty participants for one academic year and the assessment of the entire project, reflections, and strategies for changing higher education through indigenization (chapters 6 and 7).

The goal of this project was to instill deeper understanding of traditional indigenous worldviews, issues, and pedagogies by fostering respect for different ways to be teachers and learners (x). Sixteen faculty members participated in experimenting with Native ways of teaching and learning and introducing "difficult dialogues" regarding Alaska Native concerns during a week-long intensive workshop. The flow of the intensive time together is outlined in the first four chapters.

The format for teaching during the workshop included much silence, a slower pace, and no note-taking. Learning occurred by non-verbally internalizing that which was important because words, in the Aleut tradition, are considered a constraint on intelligence, getting in the way of living in the present; therefore, ground rules for the intensive workshop included paying attention to being part of a whole through deep connection, often wordless, thereby making

one a “real human being.” Participants learned that Native pedagogies occur out of teaching practices such as slowing down to be in relationship with each other and the Earth, close observation and emulation, use of all senses in silence, storytelling, dance, and games. Participants used these practices throughout the week during daily workshops, and were invited to think about the courses they normally teach in light of such practices. The difficult conversation topics followed later in the week, when faculty participants began to deal with the institutional racism and the Western methodology of science and research used in institutions that ignores or devalues Native ways of learning and teaching.

During the intensive, faculty began to integrate the particularity of their course material with a wider, deeper pedagogy. Afterward, the group agreed to meet monthly for one academic year to continue their community of inquiry. They conducted formal assessment of their work, and engaged in deep reflection together.

Roderick’s call to this indigenizing of higher education is important: “If we can do these two things – learn from these ancient cultures fresh ways of approaching the tasks of learning while simultaneously working to overthrow the ongoing legacy of colonization that still plagues modern indigenous peoples – we will have accomplished a great deal” (ix). Indeed, such work is essential for equitable, deep education. This work is our future. This book, filled with story and wisdom, is our guide.

https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/book_reviews/stop-talking-indigenous-ways-of-teaching-and-learning-and-difficult-dialogues-in-higher-education/