

Module 2 Video Transcript

First Peoples Principles of Learning

Jo Chrona

So, when we think about the integration of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives in our classrooms and schools one of the tools that we've come to understand is increasingly important are the First Peoples Principles of Learning. I had a friend and colleague who was asking teachers in a school what they were doing to integrate Indigenous content into the classrooms and one person responded by pointing to the wall and saying, "There, I've got the poster on the wall." And I think many of us here would understand that that's probably not what's going to create systemic change. So, we came to understand that the challenge was not in the answer the challenge was that we had to create a different question.

So, when we're thinking about the integration of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives into our classrooms if we frame the question as, "How are you using the First Peoples Principles of Learning to inform the choices that you make in your classroom or in your school?" Then we come to a very different place of understanding and a place to move forward from. So, before we talk more about the individual First Peoples Principles and provide you with an opportunity to engage in thinking and talking and learning about each principle in a little bit more detail, we want to remind ourselves what we know about them. They're not a set of unit plans and lesson plans they're a framework for approaching learning. They've come to have a significant impact on BC's education system not just because we understand the importance of integrating Indigenous knowledge into our system, but we've come to understand that they are a powerful approach to learning in general.

I have a friend who once shared with me her frustration when we were talking about the new approach to education that we're seeing filter around the globe, an approach that has an emphasis on relationship, on meaningful learning, on going deep with learning, on making connections, on understanding concepts, on connecting to the world around us. And she said, "This is not a new approach for us, for some people it's new." And she shared the story she said, "Sometimes it feels like somebody stole my car, painted it a different color and is trying to sell it back to me." What she was highlighting is that this approach to education has been a part of Indigenous knowledge with respect to teaching and learning since time immemorial.

Yes, education jurisdictions from non-Indigenous contexts have come to understand the importance of these approaches, it's something that we've known for a long time. The First Peoples Principles of Learning were first articulated in 2006 and '07 and I say articulated because they weren't developed, they've existed for centuries. But what happened in 2006 and '07 was the Ministry of Education partnered with the First Nations Education Steering Committee to create a unique course unheard of in the province up until that time in English language arts and it was the English First Peoples 12 course, a course that had the equivalence of English 12 that was soon to be recognized by post-secondary secondaries in BC and across Canada as the equivalent English 12.

The course was unique because the development of it was also guided by an advisory committee which included mostly Indigenous knowledge keepers, scholars, and educators. And a question that they were wrestling with was, "How is this course going to be different than the current English 12?" They didn't want to just plunk in Indigenous literature into the current

English 12 structure they wanted something that reflected an Indigenous understanding of education. And it was the answer to that question of how this course would be different that led to the articulation of the First Peoples Principles of Learning.

The people in the advisory committee came from different First Nations around the province, from different Indigenous organizations and they didn't intend, and they still don't intend for the First Peoples Principles of Learning to reflect any single Indigenous community or organization. Instead, they reflect a common understanding from Indigenous communities and peoples in BC about powerful approaches to teaching and learning.

Our Own Learning

Jo Chrona

So what else is important to know about the principles? As indicated, they're connected to Indigenous educators, knowledge keepers, and scholars in BC. We need to continually remind ourselves about the diversity of Indigenous knowledge. And so, recognizing that this comes from Indigenous peoples in BC is important. The principles encompass both the what and the how. There are principles there related specifically to Indigenous knowledge and many more that relate to how we approach teaching and learning. We've come to understand that engaging with these principles works for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners. They connect our practice to students' learning and to place. They're interconnected, yes there are nine principles, but they don't exist in isolation. And they're the original inclusive approach to education.

If we're honoring the principles and the decisions that we make each day we are going to find access for all learners and we're going to be able to meet the diversity of needs in our classrooms much more effectively. And probably one of the more challenging aspects to think about with these principles is that they rely on who we are. Honoring these principles cannot be done unless we think about our own philosophies and dispositions in what we do. If we're honoring these principles, we have to think about patience, and we have to think about respect.

Not only do we have to think about patience in respect to our students' learning, but we have to think about that concept in respect to our own learning. We have to think about respect and curiosity. We have to understand that we are in places of learning. As educators for some of us that's not an easy place to be. We have to have humility we don't know it all. Our education systems that we went through, the K to 12 education system and post-secondary education system generally did not teach us what we need to know to do this work now. So, we have to be in places of questioning being able to ask respectful questions of Indigenous communities to help us learn, ask respectful questions of each other so that we can do this learning together.

FPPL Themes

Jo Chrona

So for the activity that you're going to be asked to do in the next section information is being used from a blog site called firstpeoplesprinciplesoflearning.wordpress.com. You may have documents printed out with information from that site or you may be using the site as it is. But before you do the activity and look at the individual principles what I'd like to do is just identify some of the themes that run through those principles.

One of the themes that you will see that run through the First Peoples Principles of Learning is the emphasis on relationship, the relationship between the teacher and learner, the relationships that learners have with others, the relationships that learners have with themselves. We understand that for the majority of learners a strong relationship between the learner and the teacher is important for effective learning to happen. When we're looking at Indigenous approaches to teaching and learning we also have to understand that the learner needs to be able to understand the learning in the context of not only who they are but who their families are, how they identify the communities to which they belong. Learning needs to support families and communities and the larger society. And when we're talking about relationship to self, it's understanding that if we're able to identify what our strengths are, we use our strengths to continue learning.

One of the other themes that runs through the First Peoples Principles of Learning is the holistic nature of learning and this has two aspects. One is taking into account the mental or cognitive, the physical, social, emotional, and the spiritual aspects of ourselves. We're used to talking about the mental and cognitive aspects of who we are and who learners are. That's been embedded in our education system for as long as we've understood it in a post-industrial British European model of education. We more recently in the last number of decades have come to understand how important our physical health is and that it needs to be reflected in our education system. And even more recently in BC we've been focusing on the links between learning and our social emotional selves and that these need to be in balance for effective learning to happen.

When we talk about the spiritual aspect of a person's being, we're not talking about a necessarily a religious doctrine we're talking about those parts of ourselves that we cannot identify in those other realms, this will mean different things for different people. So, when we're talking about the spiritual aspect of a holistic approach to education it's understanding that we can make room for people to attend to these parts of who they are. The holistic nature of learning is also reflected in understanding that learning needs to be relevant. It needs to be connected to what value in our lives outside of the walls of our schools and classrooms. And we need to help students understand the relevancy. Sometimes that means questioning what we do, sometimes it just means unpacking what we do so that students are understanding and seeing the relevancy for themselves.

Another theme that runs through the principles of learning is connection to land in place and this is a theme that cannot be underestimated. Indigenous knowledges, Indigenous perspectives are linked to the land that we are on and the question that can be asked is, "If we are wanting something to be learned in our school system does that learning support the health of the land that we're on? If we're asking students to be learning things that do not support the health of the land why?" There are some critical questions that we might need to be thinking about. The connection to land in place also is reflected in an awareness of how where we are right now affects what we value. So, teaching on the west coast of Canada in the 21st century has

implications on our education system. If we were teaching elsewhere in the world at a different time, we might have different values about what's important to learn and about how we go about teaching.

An additional theme that runs through the principles of learning is connection to identity. Identity is inextricably linked to learning, it's what connects us to each other as human beings, it's what connects us to the world around us, to the land that we are on. It not only impacts learners, how do learners connect what they are learning to who they are, it also impacts us as educators. How does who we define ourselves as affect what we think is important for students to learn whether it's knowledge base or content base or skill base? And how does what we value relate to who we are and then relate to how we think learning should happen in our schools and classrooms?

Our ways of understanding the world influence what we think is important to learn and influences our pedagogical choices. Some of the questions that we can ask ourselves are how have we come to hold the values about education that we do? As an educator how do I embrace the learning that I might still need to do? We see research that reflects the understanding that people are more resilient and can overcome challenges in life when they have a strong sense of who they are. That understanding has led to the inclusion of the positive personal and cultural identity core competency. And I think we can only do better for our system when we understand the links between identity and learning in our schools and classrooms.

Valuing Indigenous Knowledge

Jo Chrona

The final theme that I want to touch upon before we move into our activity is the role of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives. We've talked a little bit about the devaluing of Indigenous cultures and peoples that have led to the devaluing of Indigenous knowledge. I think we're at a place now in this country of understanding that Indigenous knowledge has power for everybody.

This is not an easy road that we're on, we've come out of a century and more of policies that attempted to dismantle cultures. Some knowledge was lost, some knowledge went underground, and we're now just at places where Indigenous people or many Indigenous peoples around the province and country are reclaiming that knowledge. And we have to understand as well that not all knowledge will be shared but what we can ask is that non-Indigenous educators and others work with Indigenous peoples in respectful reciprocal relationships to determine what Indigenous knowledge can be shared and learned in our schools and classrooms.

One of the things that will be required is for all of us to understand that Indigenous knowledge has inherent value. And some of the challenge around that understanding is that we often don't know what we don't know. When we're thinking about the integration of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives in our classrooms we need to be reminded of a few things. One is the significant diversity of Indigenous peoples in this country. Not only do we understand that there's diversity between Indigenous and First Nations peoples across the country but there's also significant diversity between First Nations, between First Nations that are based in BC and First Nations that are in other parts of the country and between Nations within BC itself.

If we are talking about integrating Indigenous knowledge in our classrooms in respectful ways, we have to honor that diversity. We also have to ensure that we are naming where knowledge comes from. We're moving out of a time where we tried to erase Indigenous knowledge and perspectives and now in order to deal with that legacy, we need to name it. So, for example, the First Peoples Principles of Learning themselves are an example of Indigenous knowledge in the area of teaching and learning. When we see how powerful they are as an approach to education for all learners we might think about other areas of knowledge within Indigenous communities that also might be beneficial for people whether they're Indigenous or non.

Moving Forward

Jo Chrona

So now you've had the opportunity to participate in an activity that allows you to examine one of the principles of learning. This is an activity that you can replicate over a period of time. You can go back and look at the same principle of learning that you just examined, or you can take a look at other principles of learning. And the intent of this is to create space for conversation, to create space for collaborative learning. Ideally, it's the starting of a conversation not the ending of one.

So, the next question that often gets asked is, "Well, how do we do the work? What do we do?" And I think at this point hopefully we've come to understand that we need to be willing to reflect on and challenge some of the assumptions that we have about education, about Indigenous education specifically and about education in general. We need to recognize that we cannot rely on others to do this work. Every single one of us in the system has a role to play no matter what our formal or informal roles are within our schools, classrooms and school districts.

If we think about the roles that we have we can start defining what are our spheres of influence within those roles and what are the actions we can take within our spheres of influence whether we're classroom teachers or administrators, or support people in the school district or somebody who meets and greets students at the beginning of the day, drives students to and from home and school. Every single one of us has an opportunity to be part of the transformation to create an equitable education system but that means understanding that we need to continue our own learning. And that doesn't mean it's going to be an easy process, but it is a vital one. And that learning can be enhanced if we think about how we can do it collaboratively, how we can support each other. The learning can happen when we develop strong, effective, positive relationships between schools, school districts and Indigenous communities. That learning can happen effectively when we find the people in our own spheres who we can work with, people who might have the same questions, who might be on similar learning journeys.

We also need to recognize that often we hold onto our own obstacles. We're afraid to take risks because we will make mistakes. We know that a part of learning, the same thing we ask of our students, is to be able to be willing to make mistakes, to take thoughtful risks, to recognize that we're going to make errors. And the best thing that we can do is recognize when we've made a mistake, apologize for it and do better next time.

Ultimately, we start where we can. We take the next step forward no matter where we are in our learning journey. We continue to challenge ideas that we hold or ideas that we see reflected in our schools that are barriers to students' learning and we understand that this is going to be a process that will take time. We're not going to create an equitable education system overnight.

but if we're committed to doing it, if we're committed to saying, "I have a role to play. What is it that I can do?" We're going to create the system that we want to see for all of our learners.

So, in terms of the continued learning that we can do there are a number of different ways to approach this. For some people they are looking to see what are the local Indigenous events that are open to educators, open to the public that they can participate in. Either people are trying to create strong relationships with local First Nations communities and other Indigenous organizations. Some learners might decide that they want to take the UBC massive open online course which focuses on reconciliation through education. For some people it's immersing themselves in authentic First Peoples literature. There will be a number of different paths that people can take to embark on their own learning or continue their own learning journey.

The things to remember are that in order to create a responsive education system we need to challenge sometimes our habits of thinking and acting. We need to ask ourselves the following questions, "How are we honoring Indigenous knowledge and perspectives in our classrooms, schools and districts? What is my sphere of influence? How do I use it to make change? And what is the learning that I need to do not only to inform the role I have in education but to learn beyond what I see as the need within my role?"