

## **Indigenous Education**

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**Synonyms:** Native education, Aboriginal education, Indigenous education

### **Definition:**

A form of educational practice associated with traditional lifestyles, world views and ways of knowing. Traditional education processes of indigenous peoples have been carefully constructed around observing natural processes, adapting modes of survival, obtaining sustenance from the plant and animal world, and using natural materials to make their tools and implements. All of this is made understandable through demonstration and observation accompanied by thoughtful stories in which the lessons are imbedded.

### **Description:**

Indigenous people have had their own ways of looking at and relating to the world, the universe, and to each other. However, indigenous views of the world and approaches to education have been brought into jeopardy with the spread of western social structures and institutionalized forms of cultural transmission. Many indigenous as well as non-indigenous peoples have begun to recognize the limitations of a mono-cultural education system, and new approaches have begun to emerge that are contributing to our understanding of the relationship between indigenous ways of knowing and those associated with western society and formal education. Efforts are underway around the world to devise a system of education for all people that respects the epistemological and pedagogical foundations provided by both indigenous and western cultural traditions.

While western science and education tend to emphasize compartmentalized knowledge which is often de-contextualized and taught in the detached setting of a classroom or laboratory, indigenous people have traditionally acquired their knowledge through direct experience in the natural world. For them, the particulars come to be understood in relation to the whole, and the “laws” are continually tested in the context of everyday survival. In western terms, competency is often assessed based on predetermined ideas of what a person should know, which is then measured indirectly through various forms of objective assessments. In the traditional indigenous sense, competency has an unequivocal relationship to survival or extinction. For an indigenous student imbued with an indigenous, experientially grounded, holistic world view, typical approaches to schooling can present an impediment to learning, to the extent that they focus on compartmentalized knowledge with little regard for how academic subjects relate to one another or to the surrounding universe. Learning occurs best when the subject matter is based on something useful and suitable to the livelihood of the community and is presented in a way that reflects a familiar world view.

Given the critical role of groundedness in the context of traditional education, the assessment of educational indicators can be problematic when relying on conventional measures of learning in western institutional environments. Consequently, numerous

initiatives have been implemented to develop indicators that capture the cultural underpinnings of traditional educational practices. These include the *Survey of Living Conditions in the Arctic* ([www.arcticlivingconditions.org](http://www.arcticlivingconditions.org)), and the *Arctic Social Indicators* (<http://www.svs.is/ASI/Report%20Chapters/Report%20Chapters.htm>), both of which were sponsored by the Indigenous Secretariat of the Arctic Council. Similar cultural indicators have been developed by Alaska Native Educators for use in assessing learning opportunities for Alaska Native students (Assembly of Alaska Native Educators 1998; Alaska Native Educators 2012).

The study of indigenous knowledge systems as it relates to education falls into three inter-related research themes: documentation and articulation of indigenous knowledge systems; delineating epistemological structures and learning/cognitive processes associated with indigenous ways of knowing; and developing/assessing educational strategies integrating indigenous and western knowledge and ways of knowing. These issues encompass some of the most long-standing cultural, social and political challenges facing education in indigenous societies around the world. Public debate on these issues has revolved around apparent conflicts between educational, political and cultural values, all of which are highly interrelated, so it is essential that future research address the issues in an integrated, cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary manner, and with strong indigenous influence.

Indigenous scholars have begun to identify the epistemological underpinnings and learning processes associated with indigenous knowledge systems and ways of knowing. Comparative research has been undertaken to gain a better understanding of the inner-workings of the many and varied indigenous knowledge systems around the world. By utilizing research strategies that link the study of learning to the knowledge base and ways of knowing already established in the local community and culture, indigenous communities are able to find value in what emerges and are able to put the new insights into practice toward achieving their own ends as a meaningful exercise in sustained self-determination. In turn, the knowledge gained from these efforts has applicability in furthering our understanding of basic human processes associated with learning and the transmission of knowledge in all forms.

**Cross-references:**

Indigenous knowledge, Native education, Aboriginal education, Indigenous epistemology, Native science, Traditional ecological knowledge, Ways of knowing, First Nations education

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