WoLakota Learning Model

One key barrier to the embedding of the Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings (OSEU) into the educational practice of SD schools, and indeed into the educational practices within any state, is the gap between Western, non-native educational models and more indigenous approaches to learning. Indeed, this is certainly one of the key factors in the "Native American achievement gap" that so concerns American education today: the "Western" model of learning creates problems for native or indigenous learners whose learning cultures operate differently. Many, of course, have theorized that our "Western" model of learning is creating problems for non-natives as well, problems we have attributed to other sources and so continue to treat symptoms while the source of the illness goes unchecked.

Four Arrows (Don Trent Jacobs') recent book, *Teaching Truly*, brings many of these voices of critique, both native and non-native, to bear upon the problem. Four Arrows suggests

that we must "not look at the curriculum as something to cover, but rather as a catalyst for discovery. A more self-directed approach to education is thus preferred when possible to teacher-directed learning" (Four Arrows, p. 65). He goes on to suggest, "An indigenized approach weaves the empirical and the symbolic, nature and culture, self and community, power and love into a unified and unique vision of the world. It sees rituals, ceremonies, rights (sic) of passage, places and family histories and connections as integral and vital to the learning experience" (p. 65).

Four Arrows argues that what are sometimes considered "Indigenous learning styles" are not really "cultural" but are natural for all children. With that in mind, he gives the following list of guidelines for modifying mainstream education to "bring forth more natural learning in the classroom" (p. 70-71).

1. Allow for ample observation and imitation rather than verbal instruction. Also allow students to take their time before attempting a task so that the chances for success are higher even on the first effort.
2. Make the group more important than the individual as often as possible in terms of both the learning process and learning goals.
3. Emphasize cooperation versus competition whenever possible.
4. Make learning holistic rather than sequential and analytic. Spend more time in dialogue talking about the big picture associations before looking at details.
5. Use imagery as often as possible. Einstein wrote that "imagination is more powerful than knowledge," and Indigenous education takes advantage of this fact.
6. Make learning connect to meaningful contexts and real life.
7. Be willing to allow spontaneous learning opportunities to change pre-planned lessons.
8. De-emphasize letter grading and standardized evaluations and use authentic narrative assessments that emphasize whet is actually working best and what needs more work.

Four Arrows also gives a handy list of "requirements" from *Teaching Virtues: Building Character Across the Curriculum*, suggesting that the more a teacher incorporates the items on this list, "the more automatically will Indigenous ways of learning emerge to counter the mainstream…" (p.79-80).

1. Field experience
2. Cooperative learning
3. Intrinsic motivation
4. Student ownership of subject matter
5. Critical reflection
6. Intuitive work
7. Visualizations and dream work
8. Honoring student pace
9. Using song and music
10. Honoring place
11. Using natural world as teacher
12. Involving community
13. Doing activism and serving others
14. Remembering that everything is connected/related
15. Using humor whenever possible
16. Employing wellness/fitness considerations
17. Using peer teaching
18. Allowing for observation rather than participation
19. Using storytelling prolifically and interactively that is related to the students' world
20. Being aware of sustainability issues in the class, school and home environment

It should be clear to any educator that these lists are good not only for our native students but for all of us who would learn—any subject at any age. Mainstream research says as much. But it's also clear that there are many mainstream barriers to such approaches, the least of which is not our reliance on observable, measurable data, a relationship that has grown in recent decades from data poor, to data rich, to data driven, to data saturated.

To clear some of the barriers to both native and non-native learning, we must find a more balanced approach. We are proposing the WoLakota (balance) Learning Model.

Beings and Doings
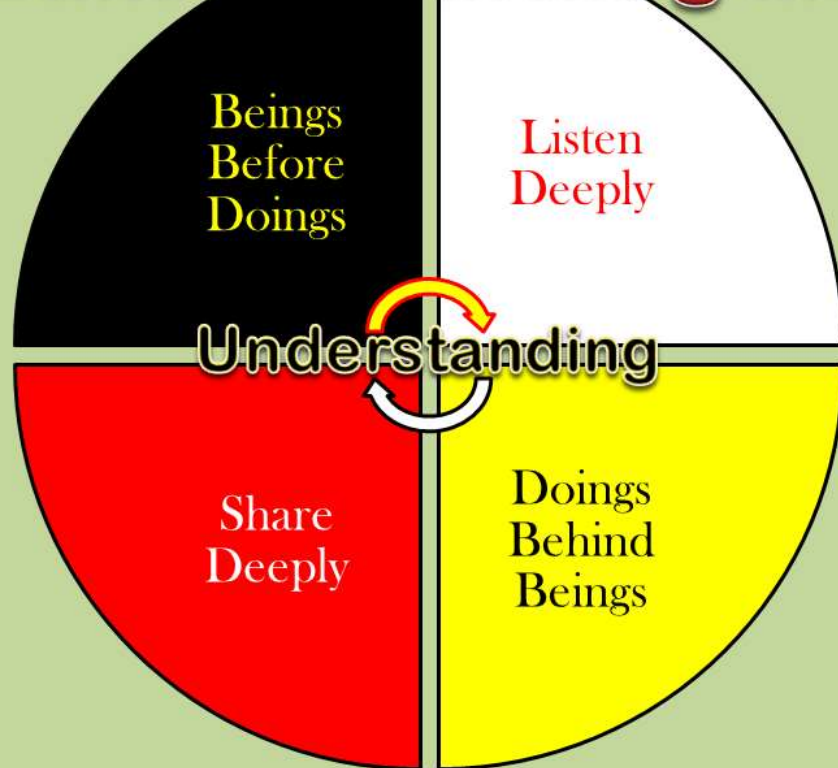
In education, we are focused on *doings* more so than *Beings*. Skills, standards, assessments—all of these put a premium on *doings*. We deal in an educational economy of *doings*. We are held accountable for *doings*. *Doings* are the observable actions performed by entities around us, whether those entities are thunderstorms, volcanoes, viruses, pigeons, third-graders or lawyers. Doings aren't the entities themselves, doings are the cause and effect impact on the environment that anything or anyone has or might have (*potential* doings). In education, we like these things because we say they are observable. We can record them, collect them, analyze them and evaluate them. They serve our methods and purposes much better than less tangible things. If we develop a teaching method, for instance, designed to cause a student to be better able to solve quadratic equations, we can collect data on our teacher doings (the exact methods I employed) and we can collect student doings data from an assessment that we give

both before and after we apply our *treatment* (pre and post assessments) and we can determine if there was any *value added* by our teaching.

In other words, we often assume we can, by measuring concrete, collectable data, make targeted analyses of human beings that will aid us in charting future interventions ensuring they will do what we believe they ought to do. This process puts a premium on what can be measured: it puts a premium on doings, and not even all doings, only the ones we can collect data on. Sociologist Daniel Yankelovich described a process he called McNamara's Fallacy to explain why some of us have a tendency to under-value what cannot be measured.

McNamara's Fallacy is a process having 4 steps.
1. Measure what can be measured.
   (This is fine as far as it goes).
2. Disregard that which can't be measured or give it an arbitrary quantitative value.
   (This is arbitrary and misleading).
3. Presume that what can't be measured easily really isn't very important.
   (This is blindness).
4. Say that which can't be easily measured really doesn't exist.
   (This is madness).

Behaviorism

Behaviorism is a science that owes much of its origin to work with domesticated animals. Behaviorism is the science of getting other beings to perform particular doings, doings that wouldn't just happen on their own. Even though pure behaviorism is generally viewed as an outdated approach to teaching in most circles, it is still the central driving pattern in much of our educational thinking. It's behind the incentives we create to motivate schools, educators and students. It's behind the punitive measures we adopt in response to the failure to meet certain targets that have been set. Behaviorist assumptions are the engine under the hood of most of our accountability systems, grading policies and school-improvement plans. We measure and

evaluate ourselves by our doings, our goals are about doings and so it only makes sense that our ways of driving whatever we have defined as "progress" would be doings-oriented as well. Behaviorism is the tool for that.

- If we were chemists, we might measure our progress by what we can make our chemicals do.
- If we were farmers, we might measure our progress by how much our fields could yield.
- If we were ranchers, we might measure our progress by how much high-quality beef we managed to produce.
- If we were animal trainers, we might measure our progress by what tricks our pets can perform.
- If we were investment bankers, we might measure our progress in how much we've increased the value of investment portfolios.
- If we were professional athletes, we might measure our progress in wins and losses.

But since we are in the business of dealing with Human Beings who are more than the reactions of their chemicals, more than the size of their yield, greater than the quality of their flesh, who exceed the excellence of their tricks, the efficacy of their economic choices, the execution of their athletic prowess, or, indeed, the demonstration of their intellectual expertise, what should the "progress" process look like?

If we fall into McNamara's Fallacy and say by our words or our actions that whatever can't be easily measured doesn't exist, then we have just reduced our students to a list of what they can or can't do.

It would be easy to come away from this discussion with the impression that a focus on Beings is good and a focus on doings is bad, but that would be a misunderstanding. Doings aren't bad. But when it comes to human beings, getting the doings and the Beings in the wrong order of importance leads to a diminishment of everyone involved. We can look at the importance of sequence through this analogy of 1s and 0s.

Let's say *Beings* are 1s and *Doings* are 0s. So together, a Being and his/her doings could be seen as a 1 and several 0s.

If we start with a Being, a 1…

<p align="center">1</p>

We can add as many doings, 0s, in front of that 1 as we'd like and the value is unchanged.

<p align="center">00000000000000000000001</p>

But if we start with that same Being… that same 1…

<p align="center">1</p>

We can add a doing behind it…

<p align="center">10</p>

And suddenly, we don't have diminishment… we have ten-fold increase…

<p align="center">100</p>

And now a hundred-fold…

<p align="center">10000000000000000000000</p>

When a Being is placed ahead of his/her doings, not only does Learning expand the Being… it also makes each and every new Doing or skill that Being picks up exponentially valuable.

Another more communal way of looking at this is the campfire circle. At the center--the flame, the hearth, the warmth—is a shared sense of Being, a coming together for sharing on equal footing, each person around the circle an individual Being of unsurpassable worth. Moving out from the center are concentric circles of doings… the things each individual brings to the circle. The more doings each brings to the circle, insights via stories of success or failure, the richer the center becomes and the wider the communities circle of warmth grows. It's when we turn backs to the center, away from that shared sense of Being, that we are left wandering alone

in the dark woods, doing battle with others with doings as weapons, competing, fearing difference, defeating, envying the doings of others that put us to shame, or taking advantage of the doings of others that fall short.

Systems that value student data over students, turn us toward doings over the Beings. Systems that acknowledge only the measurable (doings) deny the inherent value of the immeasurable center (Beings).

Data systems are helpful the way photography is helpful. They give us a snapshot of a student that we can analyze, admire, even come back to over and over again to reassess. However, a photograph has its limits.

I've seen remarkable photos of sunsets. If I mat and frame and hang those photos of sunsets, you might want to go there to that moment in time and soak in that sunset. But if the power fails, if the lights go out, and you are left in the darkness of a windowless basement, you will gain no light from a beautifully framed photo of the sunset. If we forget that the photo is a photo, not the sun, we'll believe we are attending to the sun when all we are attending to is a snapshot.

The WoLakota Model of Learning is about placing *Being* in front of *Doing* so the two can work together to add up to more rather than less.

To place Being first we must:

1) Go to the Being first for definitions of that Being
2) Act in ways that remind all involved that Beings are priceless, regardless of the number of doings that follow or don't follow
3) Place all doing-based standards in a place of servitude behind the communicated needs of the Beings
4) Hold ourselves as teachers accountable FIRST to the Beings we serve ahead of the doing-based demands of other stakeholders

What's Essential is Understanding

Placing Being ahead of doings is the only way to develop understanding. Where doings lead to the Dark Woods of competition and defensiveness, keeping Being at the center moves us toward warm compassion and an openness to sharing. "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." — Stephen R. Covey

Education is about coming to a better understanding of the world. That means coming to understand the organisms and processes and structures on the planet (and beyond) but it also means coming to an understanding of the other human beings and coming to understand ourselves in relationship to all the rest. Just like adding up all a person's doings doesn't really amount to a sense of their Being, adding up lots and lots of information and facts doesn't amount to the development of Understanding.

Facts and information about someone or some group are usually made up of a telling of their doings. Placing lots of information about doings ahead of the actual Beings usually ends up in a sort of reduction rather than in anything we might call Understanding—especially when the ones doing the telling aren't the Beings involved. Doings, because of any number of variables, are unreliable measures of a whole person.

If Covey is correct that seeking to understand must take precedence over seeking to be understood, then it follows that the phrase we each learning person should desire most to be able to speak authentically to others is, "I understand you." At the center of the WoLakota Project is the desire for groups of misunderstood peoples to move toward being able to say, with authenticity, "I understand you." We are making use of several tools to accomplish this.

Three Key Tools from Parker Palmer and Courage to Teach

6 Paradoxes for Creating Learning Spaces

1. **The space should be bounded and open.** Without limits it is difficult to see how learning can occur. Explorations need a focus. However, spaces need to be open as well – open to the many paths down which discovery may take us. 'If boundaries remind us that our journey has a destination, openness reminds us that there are many ways to reach that end'. More than that, openness allows us to find other destinations.

2. **The space should be hospitable and "charged".** We may find the experience of space strange and fear that we may get lost. Learning spaces need to be hospitable – 'inviting as well as open, safe and trustworthy as well as free'. When exploring we need places to rest and find nourishment. But if we feel too safe, then we may stay on the surface of things. Space needs to be charged so that we may know the risks involved in looking at the deeper things of life.

3. **The space should invite the voice of the individual and the voice of the group.** Learning spaces should invite people to speak truly and honestly. People need to be able to express their thoughts and feelings. This involves building environments both so that individuals can speak and where groups can gather and give voice to their concerns and passions.

4. **The space should honor the "little" stories of those involved and the "big" stories of the disciplines and tradition.** Learning spaces should honor people's experiences, give room to stories about everyday life. At the same time, we need to connect these stories with the larger picture. We need to be able to explore how our personal experiences fit in with those of others; and how they may relate to more general 'stories' and understandings about life.

5. **The space should support solitude and surround it with the resources of community.**
   Learning demands both solitude and community. People need time alone to reflect and
   absorb. Their experiences and struggles need to be respected. At the same time, they need to
   be able to call upon and be with others. We need conversations in which our ideas are tested
   and biases challenged.

6. **The space should welcome both silence and speech.** Silence gives us the chance to reflect
   on things. It can be a sort of speech 'emerging from the deepest part of ourselves, of others,
   of the world'. At the same time we need to be able to put things into words so that we gain a
   greater understanding and to make concrete what we may share in silence.

Taken from Parker J. Palmer (1998) *The Courage to Teach*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pages
73 – 77.

Replacing the Objectivist Myth of Learning Model With the Community of Truth Model
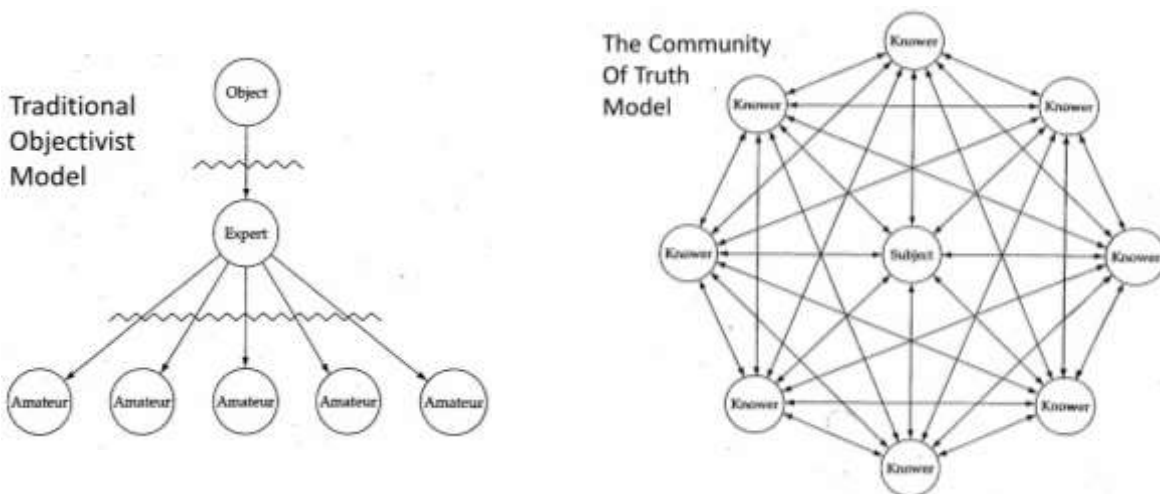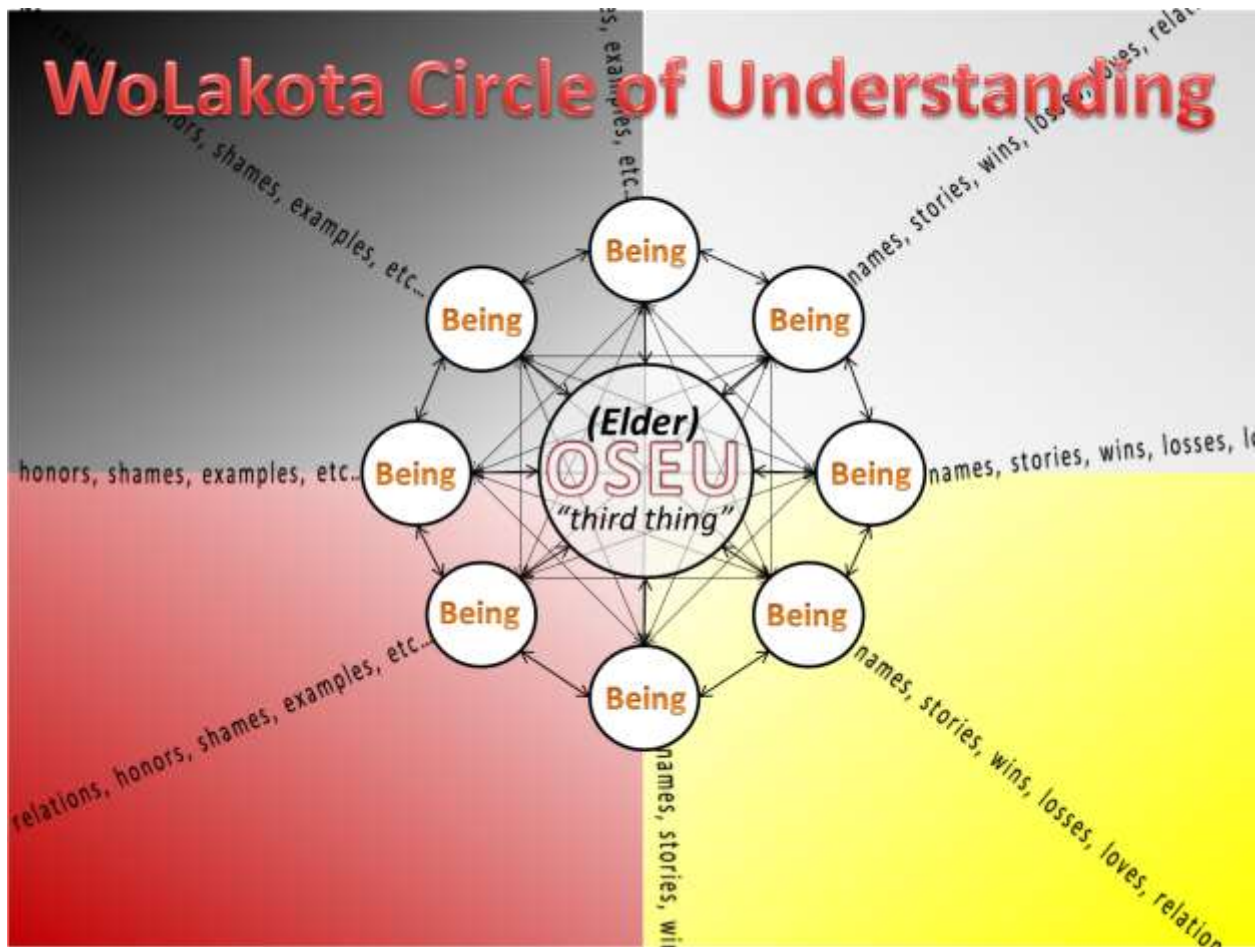
Touchstones for Creating a Safe & Trustworthy Space

(Adapted from Courage and Renewal "Circle of Trust" Touchstones)

1) Presume and extend welcome.
2) Be fully present for yourself and others.
3) Trust and learn from silence; slow down and pay attention to what's happening "beneath, around and between" words.
4) No fixing, saving, advising, or correcting each other; seek instead, through deep listening and open questions, to help each other find clarity.
5) When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.
6) Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth.
7) Observe deep confidentiality.

Why Focus Our State's Attention on the Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings?

1) So that the voices of the people of the Oceti Sakowin may be heard, something that has not been the case, historically. Non-native definitions and ways of being in this region have been diminished because of a history of non-listening. Native definitions and ways of being in this region have been stifled through the silencing of oppression, separation and targeted, forced assimilation.

2) To open up a deeper understanding of the natural environment of South Dakota through listening closely to the experiences and stories of those who have been here longest, and whose traditional culture and way of life were shaped by and within this environment.

3) The Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings are a beginning place to which all of us, native and non-native, can bring our full selves around the circle (placing doing in service to Being) so that the algorithm of our interacting can expand understanding rather than diminishing it.

4) The process of coming to understand my neighbor is interwoven with the process of coming to understand myself.

Most current national approaches to "closing the Native American achievement gap" are doings-oriented. Educators are attempting to solve this problem by in large by collecting doings data, setting doings targets, and implementing doings methodologies designed to move native students' overall test scores up the scale closer to non-native test scores. The only way to begin to address learning needs of any kind is to begin by approaching our neighbor on their own terms with the goal of listening and understanding. In so doing, we bring our full beings to the circle as well. Each new discovery becomes a source of connection and understanding rather than one more reason to envy or pity.

Why Change is So Hard

To close with a final analogy, it's been said that if you give a dog a bone, she will chew it for days tasting the flavor of blood, thinking she is gaining sustenance from the bone. But the

blood she tastes is her own. It's the bleeding from her gums as she chews the bone. The sustenance she tastes that keeps her chewing is at her own expense.

Doings centered education is our bone. We've been chewing it for a long time now, and there are those times when we taste some progress, when it feels as though we are gaining some sustenance, some growth is occurring… so we are reluctant to give it up. But if our progress is made at our own expense… at the expense of our students, then it's time to quit the bone.