

Learning in Ethical Space: Reimagining Social Innovation Education

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Abstract

Social innovation and systems thinking are acknowledged as emerging academic and professional disciplines; however, they reflect ways of knowing that have long existed within Indigenous worldviews. Grounded in relationality, renewal, and ethical responsibility, Indigenous ways of knowing offer rich, complex understandings of systems and transformative change. The author introduces Indigenous pedagogies as living practices and a potential driver for reimagining social innovation. Drawing on personal narrative, Indigenous scholarship, and educational practice, this paper critiques the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge within social innovation education and proposes a trans-systemic approach rooted in ethical space and relational systems thinking.

Background & Context

I enrolled in an Introduction to Social Innovation course during my undergraduate studies. Not by choice, but due to course availability. What began as a reluctant enrollment soon became a pivotal moment in my personal and professional journey. The course introduced systems thinking and foundations of *social innovation*,¹ but it also stirred a deep frustration in me that I could not initially explain.

Despite the instructor's thoughtful approach and engaging content, I felt disoriented. It wasn't until I began to dive deeper that I recognized the source of my discomfort. To me, the social innovation frameworks felt inherently Indigenous, yet the course lacked an Indigenous presence. The course, like many in academia, failed to recognize and acknowledge the Indigenous roots and parallels embedded in the very principles it celebrated. As I continued to learn more about social innovation, my appreciation for the community-based systems education that I received within my home community grew. While many Canadian post-secondary institutions are in the process of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, there remains a gap in the meaningful inclusion of Indigenous voices, worldviews, and practices within social innovation education.

Introduction

Oki, niiksokowa nisto annista maatomiikamotsakii noohtoodo Kainaiwa. My name is Latasha Calf Robe, and I am a Blackfoot² woman and a member of the Kainai First Nation. Before I ever heard the term 'systems thinking' in a university classroom, I had already received in-depth

systems-based learning rooted in a Blackfoot worldview through the teachings and experiences growing up within my home community.

Since that initial Social Innovation course, I have been on a journey of exploration to better understand the parallels between Indigenous worldviews and social innovation. I have worked as a social innovation facilitator and educator, where I have found ways to ethically weave together Indigenous and social innovation practices to deepen systems learning and inspire transformative learning. This journey has guided me to the question: *how might Indigenous pedagogies support the transformation of social innovation education?*

Indigenous Worldviews & Relational Systems Thinking

Indigenous epistemology is a dynamic, relational, and experiential knowledge system that honors the sacredness and interconnectedness of all beings,³ viewing the natural world as a living system.⁴ Central to Indigenous worldviews are ideas of “constant motion and flux, existence consisting of energy waves, interrelationships, all things being animate, space/place and renewal, and all things being imbued with spirit.”⁵ Vine Deloria describes an Indigenous relational worldview in which knowledge is gathered through observation and relationships with the natural world.⁶

For Indigenous peoples, complexity and systems thinking are inherently rooted in relationality⁷ and the fulfillment of ontological responsibilities.⁸ Anishinaabe scholar Melanie Goodchild introduces *relational systems thinking* to describe the relational foundations of Indigenous paradigms and the inherent systems thinking embedded in Indigenous ways of knowing.⁹ Relational systems thinking is a theoretical framework that expands complexity science by grounding it in Indigenous worldviews and creates opportunities for cross-cultural and multi-worldview understanding of systems.

Indigenous peoples have long demonstrated systems thinking, social innovation, and abilities to address complex societal challenges,¹⁰ while offering frameworks that are holistic, ecological, and inherently innovative. Through intergenerational knowledge transfer, systems thinking is woven into Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. With complexity woven into the lifeways of Indigenous peoples, a new question is formed: *how can Indigenous knowledge support systems leadership and transformative change?*

Parallels between Indigenous and Social Innovation Education

Social innovation education is transdisciplinary by nature and aims to support the development of changemaker attributes, such as reflexivity, critical thinking, self-awareness, perseverance, and creative problem-solving.¹¹ Social innovation education is built on three key learning theories: critical learning, transformational learning, and epistemological development.¹² *Systems thinking*,¹³ a core component of social innovation, depends on critical learning experiences that encourage reflection, creativity, and knowledge integration.¹⁴ These foundations closely align with Indigenous knowledge systems, which encourage the transfer of knowledge and responsibility¹⁵ and the embodiment of community values such as reciprocity, interconnectedness, respect, and kindness.¹⁶

Despite these strong parallels, the acknowledgment and recognition of Indigenous knowledge and practice are often excluded or appropriated within the social innovation education. When exploring a path forward, McGowen et al. caution educators on the impact of *dominionizing*—a process within academia where Western-trained scholars assert control over what counts as legitimate knowledge, often devaluing Indigenous ways of knowing and reconciliation efforts.¹⁷ Without intentional, respectful, and reciprocal engagement with Indigenous peoples, social innovation educators risk reinforcing assimilative and anti-Indigenous practices.¹⁸ This can result in Indigenous knowledge being misinterpreted, marginalized, or co-opted, undermining the integrity of both Indigenous and social innovation pedagogy.

Fostering Ethical Space in Social Innovation

For institutions teaching social innovation, the ethical co-creation of curricula alongside Indigenous scholars, Elders, and communities is a relationship waiting to be explored. However, for this to happen, social innovation educators must commit to the establishment of *ethical space*.¹⁹ Ethical space is the intentional engagement between differing worldviews and is not about assimilation or dominance, but about dialogue, respect, and mutual transformation. The building of ethical space calls for genuine relationships, mutual transformation, and critical reflection on the underlying assumptions of educators.

Mi'kmaq scholar Marie Battiste suggests a *trans-systemic* approach that respects both Indigenous and Western knowledge systems without forcing synthesis.²⁰ To journey ahead, we must thoughtfully and self-critically examine social innovation through an Indigenous lens while simultaneously developing relationships with Indigenous peoples.²¹ Creating a new question: *how might Indigenous knowledge systems support trans-systemic approaches to reimagining social innovation?*

This question reminds me of the Indigenous elders, stories, and experiences that have shaped my understanding of the world and the spirit that lives within these teachings. The acquisition of knowledge within an Indigenous paradigm is a sacred and continual journey that inspires transformation and responsibility.²² Indigenous pedagogies foster the spirit of transformation and are not merely tools of learning; rather, they are living practices that teach and embody transformation and ethical space. Creating a greater question: *are Indigenous pedagogies the key to reimagining social innovation?*

Below are Indigenous pedagogies that foster systems thinking but also provide transformative frameworks for creating ethical spaces, fostering transformation, and enabling trans-systemic approaches.

Storytelling

Storytelling is foundational to Indigenous knowledge systems. Storytelling is more than a method of sharing information; it is a relational practice that uses narratives to illustrate complex relationships and interdependencies, encouraging learners to see systems as animate.²³ Indigenous stories often embody values, teachings, instructions, protocols, or even decision-making frameworks. Storytelling as a driver for transformative change teaches listeners how to understand and navigate the complexity while building relationships and collective responsibility.

Reflective Practice

Reflection is central to both Indigenous learning and systems thinking. Indigenous pedagogies emphasize continuous cycles of self-assessment, renewal, and growth. Reflective practice deepens individuals' understanding of their role within the natural world (the system), creating cycles of care, accountability, and responsibility to all beings.

Land-Based

The land is our greatest teacher. Land-based pedagogy centers the land as a living teacher, fostering relational, place-based learning rooted in reciprocity and respect.²⁴ Learning with the land shifts education from extractive models to transformative ones, nurturing systems thinking, co-existence, and ethical engagement.²⁵ The land is not only a teacher but the spiritual embodiment of transformative change across knowledge systems.

Ceremony

Ceremony grounds innovation in spirituality and *relational accountability*,²⁶ reminding us that transformation must be approached with reverence and balance. Ceremony is a process of renewal, responsibility, reaffirming one's role within a broader system, and cultivating a holistic understanding of interconnectedness and systems thinking. Ceremony maintains the ethical boundaries of our existence while simultaneously encouraging transformation in all forms.²⁷

Reimagining Social Innovation

The future of social innovation education lies not in merely incorporating Indigenous pedagogies, but in allowing them to reshape and expand the very foundations of how we think about change, systems, and learning. Indigenous teachings remind us that systems change is not just intellectual work, but deeply emotional, spiritual, and communal. Indigenous knowledge systems also offer far more than parallel insights; they provide a trans-systemic and spiritual framework for transformative action and learning.

While my introduction to social innovation began with discomfort and dissonance, my journey has since become one of transformation. This journey has shown me that innovation must begin with truth, respect, and a willingness to be transformed. The invitation now is not just for recognition of Indigenous contributions, but for social innovation educators, practitioners, and institutions to engage in ethical, relational partnerships with Indigenous peoples. The question is

no longer whether Indigenous pedagogies can contribute to social innovation, but whether the field is ready to walk alongside us, with humility, in reimagining social innovation.

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¹ Frances Westley, et al. “Tipping toward sustainability: emerging pathways of transformation”, *AMBIO*, 40(7), 762–80(2011). <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13280-011-0186-9>. Westley, et al. define social innovations as any initiative (product, process, program, project, or platform) that challenges and, over time, contributes to changing the defining routines, resource and authority flows or beliefs of the broader social system in which it is introduced. Successful social innovations have durability, scale and transformative impact.

² Blackfoot, also known as the niitsitapi (the real people) or siksikaitisitapi (Blackfoot Confederacy), are First Nations peoples who descend from the Kainaiwa, Siksika, Ampskapi Piikuni and Piikani Nations. <https://blackfootconfederacy.ca/our-story/>

³ Betty Bastien, *Blackfoot Ways of Knowing: The Worldview of the Siksikaitisitapi* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2004), 98-105.

⁴ Little Bear, forward to *Native Science*, xi.

⁵ Leroy Litte Bear, forward to *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*, by Gregory Cajete. (Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 2000), x. Notions of flux are also described in Little Bear’s most recognized article, Jagged

Worldviews Colliding in *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, ed. Marie Battiste, (UBC Press, 2000), 77-85, https://www.law.utoronto.ca/sites/default/files/documents/hewitt-leroy_little_bear_on_jagged_worldviews.pdf.

⁶ Vine Deloria, "Relativity, Relatedness & Reality," in *Spirit & Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr. Reader*, ed. Sam Scinta and Kristen. Foehner (Fulcrum Publishing, 1999), 32-39.

⁷ Melanie Goodchild, "Relational Systems Thinking: That's How Change Is Going to Come, From Our Earth Mother," *Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change* 1, no. 1 (2021): 75-103, <https://doi.org/10.47061/jabsc.v1i1.577>.

⁸ Bastien, *Blackfoot Ways of Knowing*, 84.

⁹ Goodchild, "Relational Systems Thinking," 85.

¹⁰ Rona Glynn-McDonald, "First Nations Systems Thinking," *Common Ground*, last modified October 20, 2022, <https://www.commonground.org.au/article/first-nations-systems-thinking>.

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¹² Rivers et al., "Social Innovation Education," 389.

¹³ Donella H. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*, ed. Diana Wright (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008); Peter M. Senge et al., *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, rev. ed. (New York: Crown Business, 2014).

¹⁴ Joshua Cubista and Daniela Papi-Thornton. "Systems Change in Social Innovation Education," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.48558/NW2P-NM08>.

¹⁵ Bastien, *Blackfoot Ways of Knowing*, 140-142.

¹⁶ Red Crow Community College, "Niitsitapi (Blackfoot) Values," last modified 2023, accessed June 13, 2025, <https://www.redcrowcollege.com/about/niitsitapi-blackfoot-values>. Indigenous values are nation specific and rooted in place-based and natural law. I have referenced Blackfoot values, as I; the author; am Blackfoot and embody these values in my writing, research and life.

¹⁷ Katharine McGowan, Andrea Kennedy, Mohamed El-Hussein and Roy Bear Chief, "Decolonization, Social Innovation and Rigidity in Higher Education," *Social Enterprise Journal* 16, no. 3 (2020): 307, <https://doi.org/10.1108/SEJ-10-2019-0074>. This paper examines how dominionization suppresses systemic change by marginalizing Indigenous knowledge, reinforcing rigidity and limiting transformative innovation. Collaboration with Elders throughout the research led to shared teachings and a new framework emphasizing the value of Indigenous perspectives in higher education.

¹⁸ Katharine McGowan, "An Innovative Opportunity? Social Innovation, Entrepreneurship, and the Pedagogical Possibilities for Indigenous Learners," *Canadian Journal of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research* 9, no. 2 (2018): 17, <https://anserj.ca/index.php/cjnser/article/view/268/171>.

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²⁰ Marie Battiste, *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit* (Saskatoon, SK: Purich Publishing, 2013), 100.

²¹ McGowan et al., "Decolonization, Social Innovation," 303.

²² F. David Peat, "Coming-to-Know," in *Blackfoot Physics: A Journey into the Native American Universe* (York Beach, ME: Weiser, 2005), 55-84.

²³ Sara Florence Davidson and Robert Davidson, "Potlatch as Pedagogy," in *Potlatch as Pedagogy: Learning Through Ceremony* (Winnipeg: Portage & Main Press, 2018), 67-75.

²⁴ Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*, (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

²⁵ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation*, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 3 (2014): 7.

²⁶ Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2020). *Relational accountability* refers to the responsibility of maintaining respectful, reciprocal, and responsible relationships with all aspects of their research and learning, including people, communities, the environment, ideas, and the knowledge systems themselves. This reflects Wilson's idea that research itself is a ceremonial act, and engaging in ceremony helps researchers stay grounded in their obligations to Indigenous knowledge, communities and spiritual integrity.

²⁷ Bastien, *Blackfoot Ways of Knowing*, 113-115.