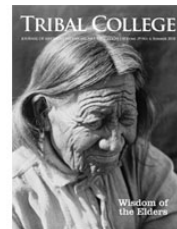


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“The Fire that Is Beginning to Stand”: Teaching Historical Trauma at Stone Child College

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V.P. Allery ♦ February 19, 2017



History at its best helps the present make sense of the past. History at its best tells the nation’s story through the voices of all the people. These voices enlighten and provide wise counsel for the present, creating healthy and creative communities. History at its worst not only ignores the different voices, but eliminates them altogether. The resulting silence lives on and is seen and heard in the painful, dehumanizing community stories etched out regularly on American Indian reservations today. Yes, history at its worst is the narrative lived and experienced currently by the Indigenous peoples in the United States. This aftermath of the near extinction of the original peoples is still felt today, and its adverse effects are carried down from generation to generation. This phenomenon is known as historical trauma. In order to combat its adverse effects, it is critical to create new stories that are alive with the hope

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July 23, 2018 | By Scarlett Cortez

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and determination reflective of a rich past that is not entirely lost.

Beginning in 2013, Stone Child College (SCC) engaged in a three-year process of designing and developing a comprehensive curriculum on historical trauma with the ultimate goal of individual and community healing. The title, Iskotew Kahmahch Opikik in Cree and Biskanewin Ishkode in Chippewa, is a metaphor for each Indigenous nation to begin reclaiming itself as a people. Each Indigenous nation has to fan the fires of rebirth to begin standing as a people, as a community with a sense of knowing how to connect to the trauma of the past in order to heal. Each nation needs to be the fire that burns—healthy and resilient, integrating the past and the present as a proud people.

THE CONTOURS OF HISTORICAL TRAUMA

Cultural traumas are created when attempts are made to eradicate part or all of a culture or people. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, widely regarded as the mother of historical trauma consciousness among Native Americans, describes the phenomenon as “the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over one’s lifetime and from generation to generation following loss of lives, land and vital aspects of culture” (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). This historical trauma is manifested in multiple ways and becomes more pronounced for each succeeding generation. As Carolyn Yoder (2005) asserts, the effects are cumulative and are seen in individual and group attitudes and in succeeding generations. The transgenerational transmission of these traumas can occur even when the next generation is not told the trauma story, or knows it only in broad outline. A “conspiracy of silence” surrounds events for which grieving and mourning have never taken place.

Unaddressed traumas affect not only those directly traumatized, but their families and future generations as

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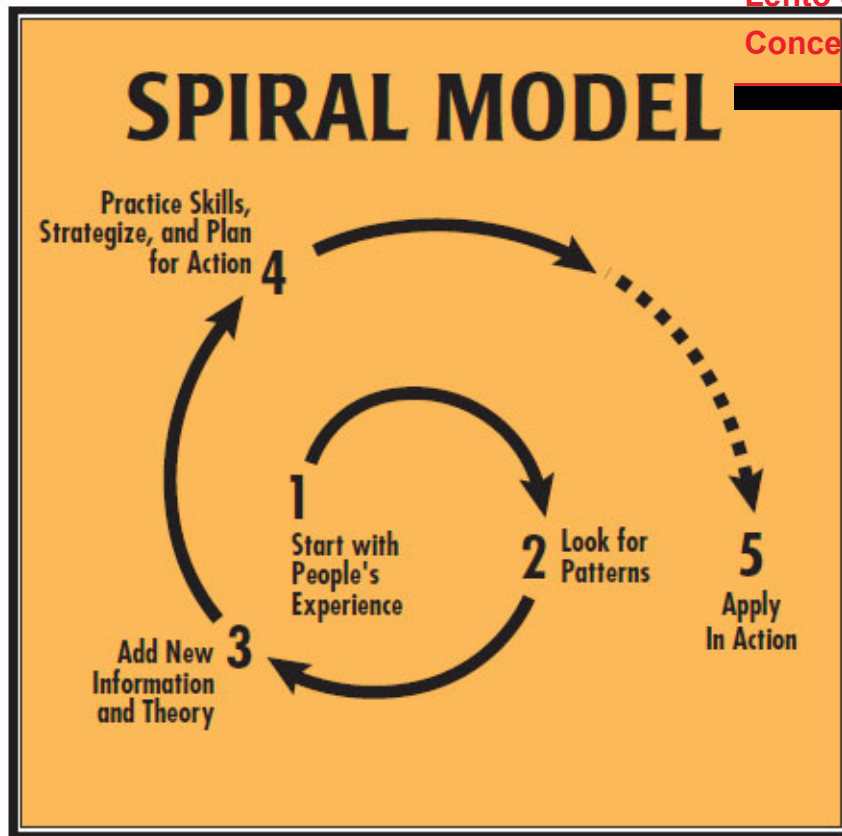


Figure 1: A spiral model informs Stone Child College's historical trauma curriculum.

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well. Not releasing the trauma causes freezing, or trapping it in the nervous system. Brain researchers tell us that neurons which fire together, wire together. The more intense the experience, the tighter the neural association in the brain, making it difficult to release past memories and behaviors. Furthermore, reenactment behaviors are common in people who experience historical trauma. Such behaviors turn unhealed trauma energy against the self (acting in) or on others (acting out). Paradoxically, reenactments represent attempts to resolve the effects of trauma. Reenactment behaviors are a major public health issue and indicate that people and groups need psychosocial and spiritual help.

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In addressing historical trauma at SCC, we began with these philosophical and educational tenets in mind: 1) education is an effective way to heal from our historical trauma of loss of land, loss of people, loss of family, and loss of culture; 2) each person must take responsibility for self-healing; and 3) as a communal culture, healing takes place within the context of community.

In regards to healing, we believe in: 1) Coming with gratitude— becoming more present to the wonder of being alive in this amazing world. 2) Honoring our pain— dedicating time and attention to honoring our pain ensures space for grief, outrage, and sorrow. This caring derives from our interconnectedness with all of life (a core Native belief). 3) Seeing with Native eyes—envisioning what is possible with a new understanding of our power to make a difference. 4) Going forth—clarifying our vision of how we can act for healing of our world, identifying practical steps that move our vision forward.

In teaching, we believe in the experiential—bridging theory with real world practice. We also believe in employing a high context, using multimedia formats with a variety of visuals so students can observe and listen. And we seek to be interactive, because processing in both small and large group formats helps internalize concepts and course content.

OUR CURRICULUM

When organizing the course content, it became apparent that there were core concepts that needed to be revisited over a three-course sequence. The depth and expanse of the coverage varies from course to course. Using a spiral model (see figure 1) provided the opportunity for in-depth and repeated explorations of the key concepts of historical trauma from different perspectives, always with a focus on: What does historical trauma look like? How does it feel? What does it feel like to be healed?

BISKANWIN ISHKODE		
COURSE 1	COURSE 2	COURSE 3
UNIT ONE Nowhere Left to Go	UNIT ONE The Cycle of Trauma and Addiction	UNIT ONE Phenomenology: Researching Our Stories
UNIT TWO Rewriting Our Story: A Hero's Journey	UNIT TWO Ethnic Identity: Who am I as a Native Person?	UNIT TWO Data: Collecting Our Stories
UNIT THREE: Tribal Paths to Recovery and Wellness	UNIT THREE: Bidmadziwin: The Good Life Path	UNIT THREE: Creating New Stories

Figure 2: SCC's historical trauma curriculum is divided into a three-course sequence.

The curriculum consists of three courses (three credits each), with each course organized into three units (see figure 2). These nine credits are designed to cover the topic of historical trauma in 135 hours of instruction. The three

courses also serve as core requirements in several of SCC’s Associate of Science degree programs. The first course begins with an overview of the theory of historical trauma from confronting, understanding, and releasing the past to healing and transformation. Sherman Alexie’s book, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, was used as a real-world connection of how historical trauma plays out in the main character’s life. This novel was also used to illustrate the various phases of “the hero’s journey,” as articulated by Joseph Campbell (2008).

The second course revisits historical trauma but this time analyzes it by looking at the Maori, the Indigenous people of New Zealand. Through their life experience students gain an understanding of how historical trauma feels and what it looks like. They then step back to analyze the “acting out” behaviors (anger, rage, bullying, hypervigilance, nightmares, flashbacks, loss of capacity in working memory) and the “acting in” behaviors (depression, numbness, feeling weak or drained, difficulty concentrating or making decisions, feeling spaced out, unable to act, avoiding others).

The third course addresses historical trauma by taking a hard look at it within the community, using the qualitative research methodology of phenomenology to better understand how historical trauma is evident in the community—always looking at the solutions as well as the problems. Students receive hands-on experience in phenomenological research when they conduct 20 face-to-face interviews, gathering information from a cross section of community members ranging from young adults to elders. It was interesting to observe the students’ reactions when they began word-for-word transcriptions of these personal interviews along with an analysis of these data, noting the different themes that emerged. Suddenly, historical trauma became more real for them. Overall, SCC opted for a curriculum design that focuses on information processing and deep thinking. As illustrated in figure 3, first we begin with the big ideas and outcomes that serve as the

foundation for the unit and course. Next, the assessments are linked to real-world experiences and require the student to demonstrate competence and understanding.

Additionally, assessments are varied in order to appeal to the learning styles of the students, ranging from reading and writing assignments to projects, small and large group presentations, role playing, etc. Third, we develop a detailed lesson plan that gives ideas on how the actual teaching may proceed. Stage three can be adapted and modified according to time, place, and students. Lessons include readings, novels, short stories, dramatizations, discussions, video links, projects, and so on. The emphasis is always on engaging and challenging the students to understand the content and to demonstrate their understanding in their real-world contexts. Each unit has 12 to 15 lessons with options for adapting to fit the students’ needs.

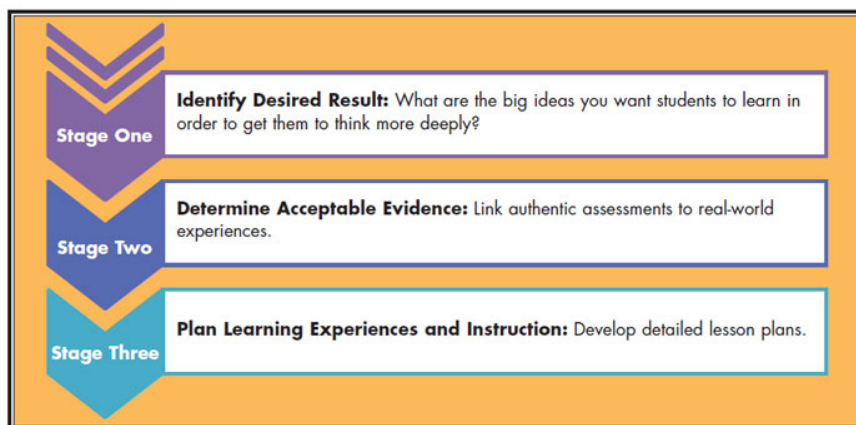


Figure 3: Each of SCC’s courses on historical trauma is divided into three stages.

When studying a phenomenon such as historical trauma, the goal is to look at the experiences from multiple points of view in order to eventually come to a sense of its essence. For example, how is historical trauma manifested today within the Rocky Boy reservation community? What do these manifestations signify for the participants and the community? Additionally, when considering the conscious aspects of a traumatic event, the researcher has to be aware and empathetic to the request of asking the participant to re-

live an experience or set of experiences that may be extremely painful (Creswell, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Stone Child College has now taught the entire historical trauma curriculum during two summer terms and continues to teach it as an integral component of its overall academic curriculum. The college is hopeful that this information will help each person participating in the program to move toward the healing process, and that it will provide inspiration for the community at large, creating new stories that are alive with hope and determination reflective of a rich past not entirely lost.

V.P. Allery, Ph.D. (Cree), is a faculty member at Stone Child College. **REFERENCES**

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