

ORAL TRADITION IS ALIVE AND WELL:  
LIVING LITERATURE IN THE SIKSIKA (BLACKFOOT) COMMUNITY

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## INTRODUCTION: DEFINING ORAL TRADITION

Social scientists of various allegiances have long been acquainted with the Indigenous orientation to utilizing the oral tradition in passing along traditional cultural knowledge. As a self-reliant culture in precontact days, the Indigenous peoples relied completely on their own creative social structures in maintaining valued beliefs and practices. Self-reliance was backed by a severe self-discipline needed to stand alone against uncertain climatic conditions and topography. As Helin (2006: 82) notes, in precontact days there were no government transfer payments, welfare cheques, or employment insurance. Viewed positively, this lack spurred additional effort on the part of a nation's creative juices.

In so far as communication was concerned, the First Nations relied entirely on individual and group perceptions and memory to preserve valued information. There were few recorded accounts of past happenings, except in the form of scattered clusters of pictograms and petroglyphs. There were no taped interviews, videotapes, or DVDs. The oral tradition defined for the First Peoples the meaning of life, individual and group responsibilities, and related duties (Battiste and Henderson, 2000: 9), and this package of conscious moral duty was carried exclusively in their hearts. With the Old Testament psalmist they could say in response to the Creator, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:11 NIV). Another way of putting it is in the words of Mary Lou Lahtail, "I have no written speech. Everything that I have said I have been carrying in my heart because I

have seen it. I have experienced it” (Castellano, 2000: 148).

Some researchers have described Aboriginal oral tradition as a series of narratives in which knowledge and experience are expressed in entangled beliefs and practices that are linked in articulation to language and myth, ritual and stories (Valaskakis, 2005: 185). Part of the “entanglement” occurred because the First Nations included all living phenomena in their communication patterns. As the late Chief John Snow (2005: 4) of the Nakoda Sioux (Stoney) Nation wrote, “We talked to the rocks, the streams, the trees, the plants, the herbs, and all of nature’s creations. We called the animals our brothers. They understood our language; we, too, understood theirs. Sometimes they talked to us in dreams or visions.” It was at once a complex and diversified narrative phenomenon.

Harrod (1995: 99-101) notes that the meanings evoked by particular oral traditions formed the specific cultural content of what was experienced in the natural and social worlds. Each of the interacting experiences with human or nonhuman (society and nature) partners developed a certain typicality among members of the group who shared the same general environment. Each group also developed specialized sensibilities concerning the meaning of nonhuman others—plants, animals, birds, and fish—as well as the other features of their world such as mountains, rivers, and streams. Finally, oral traditions evoked powerful memories of predecessors and these memories were periodically revitalized in rituals. Their enactment constituted an extension of the oral tradition, because their repetition ensured a safe and accurate transmission to the next generation.

The connection between knowledge and narrative has long been of

interest to nonNative social scientists, and the increase of academically educated Aboriginal social scientists has fostered a new interest in oral tradition. Interestingly, much of oral tradition is being reclaimed through the recording and printing of stories. Native writers like Scott Momaday (1976) promote the belief that the Aboriginal oral tradition is deeply dependent on language that relates not only to a conception of the sacredness of words, but also to the singular role words play in constructing personal perceptions of reality. Blackfoot elders believe that language itself is spiritual in that use of a particular concept simultaneously releases or stimulates a spiritual experience. A serious difficulty arises when a sacred concept is translated into another language because it may convey something quite different in translation (Mosher, 2003: 160).

Emberly (2001: 107) points out that Aboriginal autonomy has been and continues to be tied to the historical and current re-configuration of an Aboriginal oral tradition. North American researchers tend to regard oral tradition as a category of “unmediated, closer-to-the-bone” forms of discursive exchanges along with the various forms of transcriptions, taping, translations, and publications. This orientation tends to muddy the waters in terms of appreciating the finer complexities of a very ancient form of communication and cultural transmission.

According to a Canadian government source, “oral traditions are narratives transmitted by word of mouth over at least a generation. Oral histories are recollections of individuals who were eyewitnesses or had personal experiences with events occurring within their lifetime” (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2004). This definition has legal implications. In 1997, for example, the Supreme Court of Canada

overtaken a judgment against the Gitksan and Ewet'suwet'en of British Columbia with the argument that the lower court had not given enough weight to oral tradition. This implies that the laws of evidence must be adapted to place oral history on an equal footing with other types of evidence accepted in law, instead of being classed as hearsay, as was the prevailing practice (Dickason, 2006: 269).

Occasionally the term oral tradition is used to describe a process of communication, rather than the corpus of communicated messages. Some scholars recognize oral history as a method or technique of collecting information about the past through the use of interviews. Some scholars also differentiate between oral history and oral traditions, but objection to such a dichotomy originates in the argument that a single oral narrative may include traditions, eyewitness accounts, hearsay, and other forms of support. In fact, narrators may even conflate various pasts or a past with a present.

Researchers seem to be in agreement about the positive features of oral tradition, namely that it is flexible, and requires that individuals remain alert during discourse as well as during other kinds of interactions. Oral tradition also has the benefit of changing with the times. A special feature of oral tradition is that its content is so often tied to stories that make facts, details, and experiences so much easier to recall. On a spiritual note, ancient teachers relying on oral tradition believed strongly in the interconnectedness of all creation; "all things are alive and related to each other" (Meili, 1991: xi). Even today elders who extol the virtues of oral tradition collectively believe that all things have a spirit and one can learn a great deal by becoming attuned to all forms of life. Naturally the process requires being in tune with all dimensions of nature including

the spiritual domain.

## UNIVERSITY OUTREACH PROGRAM AT SIKSIKA

In 1972 the University of Calgary initiated its Native Outreach Program that contracted instructors to deliver university programs onsite in several First Nations communities. The program began at Old Sun College on the Siksika (Blackfoot) Reserve, which is located one hour's drive east of Calgary. Other program locations have included the Woodland Cree/Chipewyan community of Fort Chipewyan in northeast Alberta, the Nakoda Institute on the Stoney (Nakoda Sioux) Reserve, and Muskawchees Cultural College on the Four Band (Plains Cree) Reserve at Hobbema, Alberta. One or both of us have been involved in all of these programs, particularly at Old Sun College where we have delivered courses together since 1990. Course titles for which we have been responsible include "Native Education in Canada, Native Peoples of the Canadian Plains," and "Canadian Native Art and Cultures." Course enrolment has ranged from ten to 26 students ranging in age from 20 to the mid forties.

As has often been said, teachers learn just as much as their students do in the teaching/learning milieu, and this has certainly been our experience at Old Sun College. Many times our students have informed us about First Nations customs and beliefs, and this knowledge has greatly enriched our on-campus course content. At Old Sun College we have made it a practice to begin each class with a Sharing Circle Exercise variously labeled; for example, "Bits of Blackfoot Background, Anecdotes of Aboriginal Awareness," or "Indigenous Ideas on

Instruction.” This practice has allowed individual students an opportunity to share family or personal information with the class pertaining to the nature of the course. Illustrations from the various student presentations will provide the primary substance of this paper.

## BLACKFOOT TEACHING THEORY

Despite being hammered by many outside influences over the years, many traditional Blackfoot beliefs and practices remain intact. Specifically, at least so we were so informed by one of our students, the traditional Siksika approach to learning comprises four specific steps: (i) listening; (ii) observing; (iii) participating; and, (iv) teaching. The fact that there are four steps to effective learning is not surprising since the sacred number four figures in so many Siksika practices. There are, after all, four directions, four faces of the human being—the face of the child, the adolescent, the adult, and the aged. There are four kinds of things that breathe—those that crawl, those that fly, those that are two-legged, and those that are four-legged. There are four things above the earth—sun, moon, stars, and planets, and there are four parts to green things—roots, stem, leaves, and fruit (Friesen, 1995: 119). The medicine wheel symbolizes the four directions and four components of the human makeup—spiritual, mental, social, and physical—in its very composition and in its various activities.

The first step to effective learning is to listen and listen carefully. In traditional Siksika culture, grandparents and elders who were highly respected did the major portion of teaching. Elders possessing varied gifts traditionally served the Siksika people. There were elders who were

acknowledged and consulted for their medicinal knowledge while others had the right to conduct certain ceremonies. There were elders who were corporately acknowledged as wise people who were consulted as counselors might be today (Hare, 2003: 414; MacKay, 2003: 298).

There have always been elders who serve as esteemed storytellers in Native societies. Mary Muktoyuk of the Yupiaq First Nation described the attitude towards elders in this way; “The elders, in those days, we held in great respect. Whatever they told us, we would listen very carefully, trying not to make mistakes when we listened, because we respected them so highly, because they knew so much more than we did” (Friesen, 1998: 9). Much of what the elders taught was in the form of stories. Parents were for the most part excluded from the responsibility of child-raising since it was thought that they were mainly involved in the day to day activities of providing food and taking care of home life. Generally, speaking, however, raising children was a community responsibility.

It was traditionally considered a privilege to be taught by Blackfoot elders, particularly when they were relating sacred truths. At other times they would tell stories of entertainment or moral instruction, or stories to explain why things were the way they were. Commonly known as Indian legends, the essence of these stories was often common to Indian tribes all over North America. These stories, legends, myths, and parables were told and retold, and through them the people demonstrated that they valued life and revered the Creator who bestowed blessings on them. These accounts also established tribal identities and reinforced them, with each generation retelling accounts passed down by their elders. In this manner the same basic values held steady in society as the people

tried to understand the path the Great Mystery had set out for each of them (Fixico, 1997: 35). While the main storyline remained constant there were times when recognized storytellers provided unique details as to their personal preference (Friesen and Friesen, 2005).

The second step of the Siksika teaching/learning scenario occurred when an elder considered a youthful listener ready to observe the practice of a certain cultural custom or important sacred ceremony or ritual. When deemed ready, an elder might invite a youth to observe the proceedings. Observers of a Sundance, for example, had to follow a strict protocol and learn to respect the various attending requirements.

The third step to effective learning is participation or, as the common expression has it, “learning by doing.” Traditionally, elders from many plains tribes insisted that children must learn their culture by accessing traditional forms of education on the land. A sense of connectedness to the natural world, as well as to people in it, was developed through extended experiences on the land, either in the company of an elder or alone (Ward and Bouvier, 2001: 8). When a youth was given the privilege of participating in a specific ceremony it was always under the supervision of a responsible individual. Participating in a sacred ritual or ceremony requires use of all five senses, encompassed in an attitude of spirituality. This, in Siksika terms, implied adding a sixth sense—spiritual awareness. Participating in a sweat-lodge ceremony, for example, would itself verify the readiness of the participant. If the lodge was entered with negative thoughts, the individual might afterwards experience uneasiness or even illness. If on entering the lodge participants had the right attitude, they would feel spiritually refreshed after participating in the ceremony.

One of our students described how she learned to dance the various Blackfoot dances by dancing alongside her father. As the eldest of several children, she had the privilege of accompanying her father to pow-wows where he performed as a traditional singer and drummer. He fashioned his own drum from deerskin, sinew, and wire and encouraged his daughter to watch and ask questions as she observed the process. Later she was encouraged to follow along as her father sang and develop that talent for herself. The student recalls that when her father was satisfied with her performances, she was “turned loose of his tutorship” and allowed to dance “till the early hours of the morning.” After several years her singing talent lay dormant but was revived when she lost her daughter in death. Now she sings in honor of her daughter and to keep her memory alive.

Fourth, and finally, Siksika learning theory posits that the final step towards grasping the meaning and significance of a particular concept or practice is to try to teach it to others. Such would be the case for the Siksika initiate charged with transmitting a particular item of information to other. At this point learners would probably be more mature adults, and would likely be dealing with spiritual subject matter and procedures of a more sacred nature. No doubt they would have stamped indelibly into their hearts the sacredness of what they were about to do and they would be adequately prepared to undertake the task. The slogan, “learning by doing” would have special meaning in this scenario.

## ONSITE EXPERIENCES

We are confident that the content of this material is not available elsewhere since our students generally relate information deduced strictly from personal, family or tribal experiences and we share some of them now in an effort to document the proposition that oral tradition is alive and well in Siksika country. Much of this information is specific and ancient in origin, and its substance gives every indication that it has been preserved for many generations. We are grateful to the Siksika elders who care so much as to preserve and pass along their information and insights, and to our students who value it enough to transmit to their offspring and, secondarily, with us.

We begin, necessarily, by recognizing the care taken by members of the various Siksika sacred societies who have been and are concerned with the process of cultural maintenance. It was these groups who guarded the spiritual secrets of the Siksika through the period of cultural oppression brought about by encroaching explorers, fur traders, settlers, and missionaries. Today, individuals charged with imparting special information before an audience are first expected to introduce themselves. The process is basically begun by expressing appreciation for being given the honor of introducing oneself. The individual begins by giving his or her name and their tribal affiliation, preferably in the Blackfoot language. Individuals listening to the speaker might honor the speaker by acknowledging his or her family's success or how well they might be respected in the community.

Names, among the Blackfoot, are highly esteemed and each family name has a story of its origin behind it. The tradition of name-giving is based on recognizing a special characteristic unique to an individual and

then assigning a particular name to him or her. Individuals also have the right to change their names during their lifetime, and individuals might do so based on their unique experiences or accomplishments. When the Europeans arrived some Aboriginals changed their names because the newcomers could not pronounce their traditional names. Many families also took surnames for much the same reason.

One student story about names is as follows; “The Blackfoot gave my grandfather the name, ‘Medicine Traveler,’ because, although born Cree, he was adopted by the Blackfoot and learned all about their spiritualism, medicines, and language....I never knew my grandparents. They both died before I was born.... This is why the Blackfoot people see the circle of life as sacred; it never ends. Those of us who remain, continue the cycle of life and we pass our spirituality and our culture down to our children. In the centre of life is the Creator, the sun, the earth, and the stars are all circular. We are all connected to the centre, the Creator.”

Much of Siksika society life emphasizes the process of transfer, the Horn Society being one of several primary vehicles for this kind of activity. Horn elders always transfer teepee designs, family names, or medicine bundles according to strict protocols and philosophies, and in turn further transfers have to be made in exactly the same way that the last transfer was made. Today elders caution their younger relatives to accept any knowledge given by elders either formally or through family socializing moments and continue to pass along those teachings to future generations in order to protect Blackfoot history. Gifts of knowledge come in many forms, so listeners are cautioned to be aware of movements, language, stories, geography and anything related to

community history. Once something has been appropriated, the cycle of teaching it to others is expected.

One of our students observed that Blackfoot today are well aware of the cultural transitions that are underway. In response they are keeping many of their valued past through implementation of Blackfoot language and culture classes, both in their elementary as well as secondary schools. The role of elders remains an important strategy for teaching respect among students. In this sense, Blackfoot education has changed to accommodate the evolution of society while continuing to maintain forms of traditional education. Two specific examples include family life and customs and special knowledge.

#### Family Life

Much is made in historical accounts of the different manner in which raising children was viewed in precontact Plains Indian communities.

Traditionally, family relatives—uncles, aunties, and even older cousins—freely took part in child discipline and surprisingly to outsiders, this still happens today. In the words of one student, “There are lots of times when someone is called on to talk to a person about his or her actions. This helps in my life right now as I am comfortable talking to anyone who is doing wrong or being just plain disrespectful. An example of this would be my friend’s son and how he talked to his mother. If things did not go his way he called his mother names. His mother did not want to yell at him or worse, strike him, so she generally put up with his behavior. One day I took him aside and talked to him about this. After a few days I pulled him aside and asked how he felt about the situation. He said he knew I was right and he should not have talked to his mother that way. To

this day he is respectful to his mother. This event did not make my relationship with his mother any less friendly; she was actually glad that someone cared enough to talk to her child. I expect this same sort of action from my friends and family when dealing with my children.”

Historians who write about Native ways have a penchant for using past tense when describing traditional practices, but there are surprises. As one of our students related, the habit of telling legends to explain things is still very much underway. For example, a little girl was getting into the family automobile to travel to school. She became excited and turned to her mother asking to know what that white stuff was all over the car. Her aunt, who was present, explained that it was frost. “Yup, Old Man Frost was out last night.” The little girl insisted, “Who is Old Man Frost?” Her aunt gave birth to a story. Old Man Frost, it seems, is only seven and a half centimeters (three inches) tall, and was made of Napi’s (the trickster) hair. Napi never prepares for winter, so originally he cut off some of his long white hair and made Old Man Frost. Old Man Frost goes out every night during the winter and paints frost on everything. He does this so everyone will know that winter is coming and it is now time to make sure that a supply of warm clothing and footwear are available.

In another scenario, a little girl was told to go to bed, but noticed that her mother was busy putting away food left over from supper. When she inquired as to her mother’s actions, her mother replied, “We have to put the supper dishes away because we don’t want the stoai (ghosts) coming in and eating up all our food.” Naturally the little girl tried to pursue the conversation and learn more about ghosts. It was time for bed, however, and she was given the impression that she would learn more about the story at the appropriate time. Much of correct or

inappropriate child behavior is reinforced by such stories. Not only do the stories hold the interest of the child, but their content offers direction for future patterns of behavior.

Further examples of the functionality of telling legends is borne out in the experience of one young Siksika woman who lived with her mother and her grandmother during the time when she was expecting her first child. She was cautioned never to stick her head out of a door, but to make certain that she would either go all the way out or stay in. Never pause in the middle of a doorway. The expectant mother was also told to cover her stomach with a blanket and not stay out late in order to protect the unborn child. She was told never to sit on a baby's clothing, never leave clothes out on the line after dark, and forbid her children to look out of the house after dark.

Although she and her husband lived with her mother and her grandmother, the older women never directly addressed the young woman's husband. If they wanted to say something related to his behavior, they would speak to the young woman about him even if he were sitting right beside his wife. It was as though he was not even in the room. It was up to the young wife to communicate with her husband what was being said.

All grandmothers traditionally played a very significant role in Siksika culture and many still do. One student recalls growing up in her grandmother's home and experiencing the deep spirituality the older woman fostered. As a medicine woman, the grandmother awoke early each morning and walked out onto the porch to greet the day. She offered prayers and songs to the Creator, at the same time sending forth in thanksgiving smoke from her pipe as incense. On waking up, her

grandchild (our student) would quietly make her way onto the porch and silently sit beside her grandmother, trying not to disturb the elder's time with the Creator. The moment comprised a mixture of peace, love, and compassion as the two sat silently together enjoying creation. Today this young woman observes the same daily ritual by rising early, greeting the sun outside her home, and offering early morning prayers and songs to the Creator in her native language.

It used to be the custom among Siksika women to grow their hair long. One individual informed us that she had always complied with this custom until her grandmother died. At that point she cut off her hair and placed it in her grandmother's casket. Among the Blackfoot, this action was viewed as a sacrifice on the part of the woman. Long hair was viewed as a gift from the Creator, and if it was discarded in a careless fashion, it was believed that the individual would have bad luck; bad spirits on the other side would take the hair and use it for ghost bullets. It is a sacred truth that members of the Buffalo Women Society keep their sheddings when they are in the sacred lodge and place them at the center pole for the next year. They also have a sacred bundle that is part of a ceremony to keep track of gathered hair. However, out of respect, no more will be written about this. Even this brief description is convincing evidence that many oral teachings are being carefully transmitted to succeeding Siksika generations.

#### SPECIALTY KNOWLEDGE

During the 1970s the Siksika Tribal Administration authorized artist Mark Wolf Leg Jr. to design a logo for the Nation. Among other

components of the design, there are seven pieces of an arrow that represent the traditional seven sacred societies of the community—Horn, Crow, Black Soldier, Motoki (Buffalo Women), Prairie Chicken, Brave Dog, and Ma'tsiyiiks. Today four of the societies remain, committed to preserving sacred beliefs, rituals, and ceremonies of the Siksika. These are the Horn, Buffalo Women, Brave Dog, and Prairie Chicken societies. The number seven also represents the seven stars of what is now known as the Big Dipper.

Sacred societies or sodalities play an active role in the preservation of special information such as medicinal knowledge. One student in his mid-forties generously shared information with us about some of the 185 species of plants domesticated by the Blackfoot before the Europeans arrived. Berries, nuts and certain plants were seen as necessary to the survival and maintenance of good health of the Siksika people because they supplied needed vitamins and minerals. Some of the benefits of certain plants familiar to this particular student might be considered common knowledge, but knowledge about others could only be gained through apprenticeship. A few samples of the kind of knowledge that is still being passed on orally and through experience includes moss, which is sometimes still used for diapers because it is bacteria free. Common cattail was once used as sandpaper to polish arrows and other wood articles, with its down being used for burns and scalds. Many Blackfoot still find it useful for various purposes. The root-stick is rich in starch and is edible. Finally, the leaves of the mountain maple are dried and stored and later used as a spice for cooked and dried meat. The dried leaves were also used to treat eye disorders and mouth cankers.

In Blackfoot culture the degree of familiarity with traditional

knowledge is thought to exhibit giftedness or valued behavior. We were informed that a gifted child in Siksika culture should be able to speak the Blackfoot language well. He or she must understand the values, customs, beliefs, and traditions of Siksika culture. He or she must learn and be willing to participate in spiritual ceremonies and comply with the duties that come with them. The gifted child must have a total awareness of Indigenous culture and in particular Siksika culture. The child must value Siksika history and understand and be knowledgeable of the various cultural practices. Related traits such as patience, tolerance, commitment, contentment, and hard work should accompany these beliefs. Giftedness is possessing all of these characteristics and being able to face just about any challenge that arises while gaining an incredible satisfaction from compliance.

The Siksika community recognizes what might be called extraordinary gifts in the same category as those traditionally obtained through dreams or visions. Even today there are individuals in the Siksika community who are viewed as having a special calling. These include men and women of wisdom, those who have knowledge of and authority to conduct certain ceremonies, and those who have gained expertise in the art of special healing techniques. In many cases Siksika youth are selected to become recipients of special knowledge and gradually apprenticed into the appropriate company with the right to perform related rituals and cultural practices. Young people selected to receive this kind of training are viewed as gifts from the Creator, sent to Mother Earth to assist in the practice and preservation of Siksika ways. Often these youth are mature beyond their years and are able to grasp knowledge quickly. They are natural leaders who will be respected as they

mature. They understand the concept of respect and practice it in relation to their elders. They are often first-born children who will have been given a Blackfoot name and taught the values and traditions of the culture right from the start. Their parents and grandparents will have seen to it that they were given opportunity to participate in cultural activities early in life. This approach guarantees to some extent the persistence of Blackfoot ways.

### UNDERSTANDING THE TEACHINGS

NonNatives who have the good fortune to work in Aboriginal communities often find themselves in a potentially enriching laboratory of unique cultural knowledge. This has been our experience and, as we have discovered, the appropriate stance to maximizing the benefits of the experience must be one of respect and anticipation. Above all, such attitudes as patronization, condescension, and ethnocentrism must be avoided. There is much to learn in Blackfoot culture partly because of its traditions have great relevance for today's world. This includes their sense of connectedness, their respect for one another and for living in harmony with the forces of nature, and awe for the Creator. As John Collier, former Indian Commissioner for the United States described Aboriginal philosophy nearly a century ago, "They [the First Nations] had what the world has lost. They have it now. What the world has lost the world must have again, lest it die" (Bordewich, 1996: 71).

Once again our students came to the rescue, offering suggestions to nonNatives who visit their communities. Here are a few examples: outsiders, particularly teachers who want to work in our schools, should

have some knowledge of the First Nations community in Canada as a whole. They also need to realize that not all Natives are the same. Visitors should know that Aboriginal values are based on respect for self, for others, for the Creator, and for Mother Earth. They should familiarize themselves with the traditions and protocols of First Nations. They may unknowingly insult people, especially elders at an interview or on the job if they are not informed. This is very important since reserve institutions involve elders and spiritual leaders on a regular basis. Respect is a prime factor in the Siksika way of life—respect for people, Mother Nature, the Creator, and sacred ceremonies.

Visiting teachers particularly realize that the Blackfoot language is viewed by the Siksika as the key to their cultural survival. The English language is not necessarily their first language, and at times locals may respond differently than expected. Sometimes it may take a few minutes for them to comprehend what has been said since they are digesting new information in their native tongue. Most importantly, much residual knowledge in the Siksika community is oral in nature, that is, it has been appropriated by each successive generation through the four steps outlined above—careful listening, invitational observing and participating, and finally teaching revered truths to others. In many cases the last step also involves interested outside parties such as ourselves, and we are grateful for having had that opportunity. As Blackfoot elder Rosie Red Crow (1995: 110) has stated, “Our culture teaches us about caring and sharing,” and our students at Siksika certainly lived up to that motto during our years at Old Sun College. We owe them a huge debt of thanks and look forward to many more opportunities to grow together in the mutual processes of teaching and learning.

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