

Learning Commons & Wisdom Circles: Supporting Reconciliation of Self & Other

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Wisdom as a form of knowledge is highly valued in our society and it is often used to address complex issues in the personal and collective realms. It is generally viewed as a type of knowledge that contains a mix of mind, virtue, character, and intellect, which offers a holistic approach to life's problems (Ferrari & Potworoski, 2009). Additionally, wisdom is not sought to serve only individualistic interests, but to positively guide and serve humanity in some way (Kunzmann & Baltes, 2005). With the explosion of the design-thinking movement in education, there is more intentional action geared towards fostering wisdom and utilizing complex theories in teaching and learning compared to educational practices that focus on learning that "separates body from mind...self and other," and creates other dichotomies like the "the knower vs. the world" (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2007, p. 69). Within traditional rationale models, learners are separated not only from knowledge, but also from an integrative process that cultivates wisdom needed to address complex problems through connection.

Holistic approaches to teaching and learning are not new, as many ancient and indigenous cultures were/are representative models of this perspective. More recently we have observed similar approaches used in the library learning commons, which invites connectivist practices such as collaboration, reflective thinking, cross-curricular perspectives, and integration of the personal aspect in the teaching and learning process. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of how an indigenous inspired framework for personal and collective development in a public school was enhanced through the practices inherent in the library learning commons model. Utilizing teaching and learning practices that support holistic development of the individual and the collective helps to foster wisdom and other important 21st century competencies necessary for both students and educators to develop and enhance effective problem-solving, inclusivity, and diversity in schools and communities.

Building a Framework of Connection

As a citizen and educator living in a western, North American culture - I am influenced by both its healthy and unhealthy aspects. Growing up on the Canadian prairies, I deeply appreciate breath-taking sunsets over wheat fields, the fresh crisp winter air, vegetables from carefully hoed and tended gardens, and being known by others through a thread of prairie ancestry. On the other hand, as with many rural Canadian communities of the 1960's and 70's, I was raised in a culture that was primarily patriarchal, homogenous, and prejudice against people from indigenous or non-white backgrounds, or people from low socio-economic groups. Hard work and "pulling oneself up by the bootstraps" was the remedy to personal, community, and social problems such as poverty or unemployment. In this prairie scene, roles and parts were often played out against a backdrop of a homogenous "white mind". People with a "white mind are trained to believe there is only one right answer, one right way of perceiving the world" (Wilson-Schaefer, 1996, pp. 2-3). Although an appreciation and practice of diversity, inclusivity, and racial understanding has evolved to a certain degree in our current age, there is still much work to do.

After moving to the urban landscape for post-secondary education and teaching positions, I noticed that issues on the macro level were not much different than the micro fishbowl of my former prairie home. Similar social problems were magnified on a grander scale, and poverty was pronounced as disparate social-classes lived side-by-side. Many people appeared to be individualistic and lonely. Although my experiences as a student and an educator offered semblances of community in some educational settings, at times this wasn't the case, and I felt pangs of loneliness and a growing thirst for authentic connection. As a beginning teacher I struggled to support my students' growing list of needs, and I realized that many were also struggling to find their own connections and "a place in the heart of the village" (Meade, 1996, p. xxi).

Thus in my own quest for connection, I sought to better understand how Indigenous cultures bridged the individual and the community. From a young age, I respected the aboriginal customs and culture I was exposed to from my experience of living next to a First Nations community, and from my parents' friendships with many aboriginal peoples. Additionally, I began to learn more about Medicine Wheel teachings from elders who visited the school communities where I worked. As a new guidance counsellor, I sought to locate a framework that was inclusive of various cultural backgrounds, as many school-wide guidance and teaching/learning approaches did not mirror connections for students from aboriginal or other non-white backgrounds. Additionally, I understood that culture is a much broader concept – similar to a "kaleidoscope" (Collins & Arthur, 2010, p. 70) of many intersecting multiple identities composed of personal, ideological, cultural, contextual, and universal elements.

It is a tall order to find an encompassing model for personal and social development that could mirror the wide-spectrum diversity of students. Along the way, I was introduced to a framework engineered by Angeles Arrien (1993) called "The Four Fold Way". Arrien (1993) identified cross-cultural commonalities amongst many indigenous and non-indigenous perspectives. Included in the model is a balance between *Leading*, *Healing*, *Visioning*, and *Teaching*, and the development of four corresponding human resources: *Power*, *Vision*, *Love*, and *Wisdom*. These four ways are described as universal and available to all regardless of culture. During trainings and workshops with Angeles Arrien, and I was delighted to learn that some schools were using her model for fostering personal and communal connections. However, I also didn't want to use a "packaged" program, and I sought to develop a cross-cultural framework that could offer a holistic perspective on effective academic and social/emotional learning based on the needs of a given school culture.

Thus the first iteration of the "Wisdom Circles" framework was born. The framework represented various layers or circles of human needs and connections aligned with cross-cultural values and practices – wisdom born out of a collective humanity and available to many. I put the "Wisdom Circles" to the test in my first job as an assistant principal, and I found that it intersected effectively with the philosophy and practices utilized in the library learning commons model, which will be discussed in the upcoming section.

Wisdom Circles and the Library Learning Commons

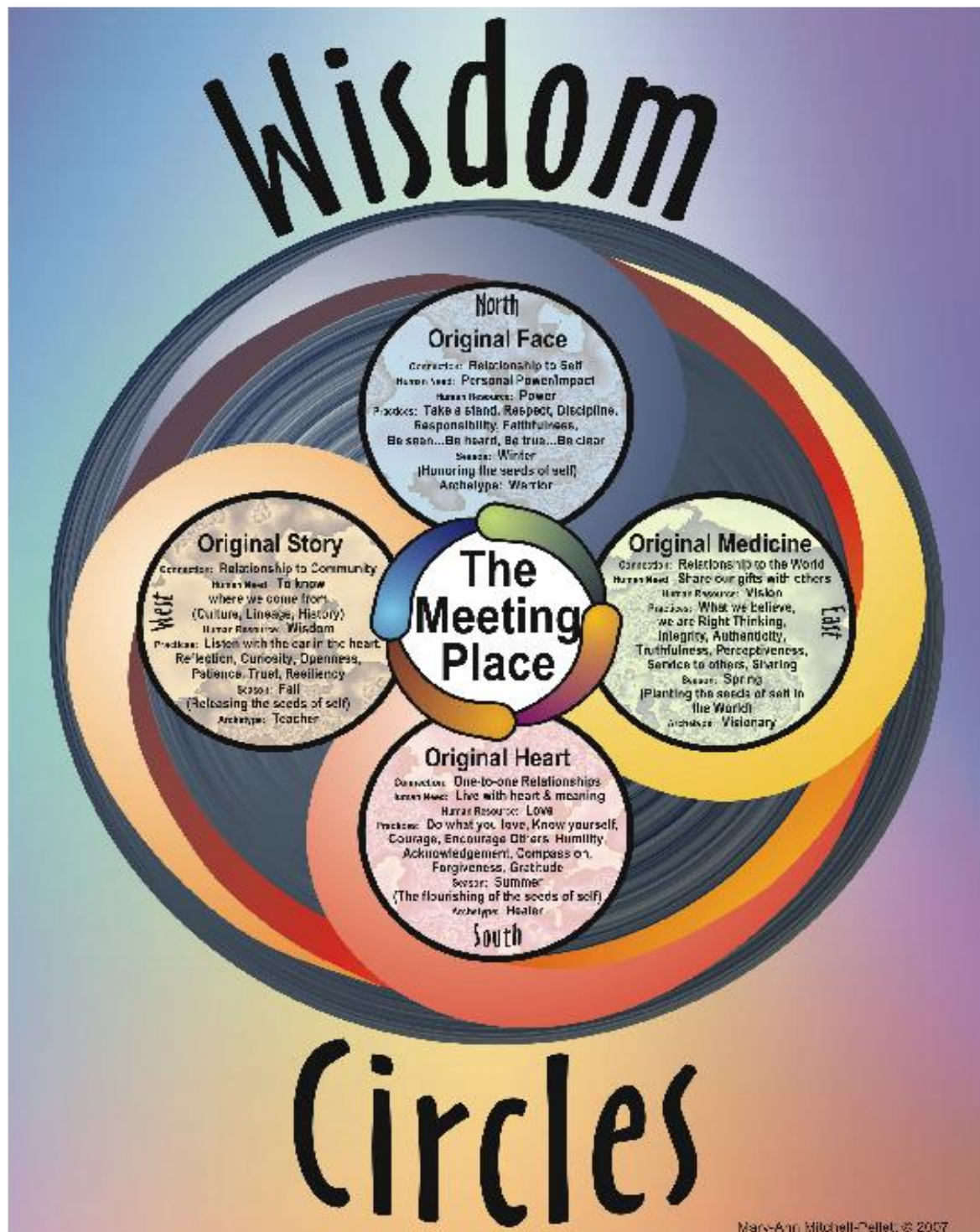
In my first placement as an assistant principal at School X (an arts-centred and technology infused learning environment), I had the opportunity to work with an insightful principal who later was to become the project coordinator for the Canadian Library Association (2014) publication entitled, *Leading Learning: Standards of Practice for School Library Learning Commons in Canada*. While at School X, I witnessed the transformation of the school's traditional library into a library learning commons. Students and teachers began to work collaboratively in the library learning commons space on research projects, literacy centres, and day-to-day learning was brought to life through the integration of a variety of art practices, technology infusion, and cross-curricular ties. The library learning commons was the virtual and physical learning hub (Canadian Library Association, 2014) of collaborative teaching and learning that cultivated 21st Century competencies, and helped students foster and integrate wisdom from within their own selves, and outwardly from others.

In this rich learning environment, I was intrigued with the potential of the instructional practices and approaches inspired by the library learning commons to support an understanding of the principles and practices found in the "Wisdom Circles" framework. As a school community, we decided to explore the "Wisdom Circles" framework as a means to social, emotional, character, and community development. Through a "Conversation Café" process and other methods of input such as face-to-face discussions and questionnaires, a school-tailored version of the "Wisdom Circles" framework was created and a copy of it is available in figure #1 on the following page.

Original Face

To begin our implementation of the Wisdom Circles framework, we started with the concept of *Original Face*, which involved the exploration of self and included identifying strengths and fostering leadership abilities. Within their scheduled time in the library learning commons, students studied literature related to identifying and implementing the best part of their selves and how this part could support their academic, personal, and social lives. For example, based on the book, *The Best Part of Me: Children Talk About Their Bodies in Pictures and Words* (Ewald, 2002), students created digital portraits of the best parts of themselves, and they described how these parts helped them to be compassionate and effective citizens in the world. In another example, the storybook, *Only One You* (Krantz, 2006) helped students recognize and explore their strengths, and how their strengths contributed to making a school community a better place. An arts-integration activity was also incorporated as each student painted an individualized "rockfish" representative of the technique used in the storybook. Each student's rock became part of an art installation that featured the rocks in the shape of a heart. This beautiful metaphor hung prominently on our newly opened library learning commons - and captured the *heart space* of collaborative teaching and learning that helped students develop an understanding of curriculum within the context of wisdom-building about others and their own unique selves.

Figure 1- Wisdom Circle (Mitchell-Pellett, 2007).



Original Story

Stories move in circles. They don't move in straight lines. So it helps if you listen in circles. There are stories between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. And part of the finding is the getting lost. And when you're lost, you start to look around and listen.
(Fischer, Greenberg, & Newman, 1978).

Stories are another tool from the "Wisdom Circle" that was effectively facilitated with the support of the library learning commons. Using the *Original Story* aspect from the "Wisdom Circle", we partnered with the University of Calgary to study how the creation of digital stories could support students transitioning from Grade 6 to junior high school. The study was entitled, *Assisting Students in Finding Meaning and Preparing for Change Through Personal Storytelling* (Mitchell-Pellett, Massfeller, & Hovey, 2010). As we worked within the library learning commons in collaborative teams to help students develop and create digital stories, students explored how finding and listening to their own and others' stories could be useful in locating their own inner resources and wisdom in order to successfully deal with change and transition.

Students were first introduced to the concept of the "Hero's Journey", which Joseph Campbell (2008) identified as stages that a character of a story or hero experiences, which causes him/her to transform or change. Students were taught to recognize the stages of the "Heroes Journey" through appropriate short stories, fables, and media such as *Shrek*. Students wrote their own personal "Hero's Journey" stories based on their school experiences from Kindergarten to Grade Six, as they explored the following essential question: As the Hero of my life journey, how can my personal story assist me in preparing for change? The 250-300 word stories were then made into emotive digital stories using I-Movie, which incorporated voiceovers, visual images, and music. Students then presented their digital stories to an audience of peers, teachers, and parents.

The researchers Dr. Richard Hovey, Dr. Helen Massfeller, and myself interviewed the students to glean insights into how the story-telling and the digital story-making process could better prepare them for their upcoming transition from elementary to junior high school. Some of the questions included:

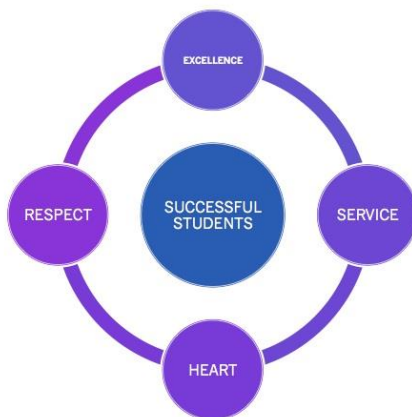
1. Do you feel your journey is similar to the hero(s) you learned about? Do you think that you have the qualities of a hero? Why? Which qualities do you think can be helpful to you?
2. What do stories mean to you? What does your own story mean to you? Are you willing to share it with other? Do you think it would help other people to understand themselves through story?

From this study, we found that the majority of students definitely valued the storytelling process as a way to glean information and cultivate wisdom about themselves and others that could assist them with major life transitions. The story-making and story-telling processes that were cultivated in the library learning commons also helped students to improve self-efficacy, identify personal strengths, and reduce anxiety related to their upcoming transition to junior high (Mitchell-Pellett, Massfeller, & Hovey, 2010). The collaborative space within the library learning commons was especially helpful in both the story-making and story-telling processes. Students worked in groups throughout the writing process, had direct access to technology and the necessary software, and were part of a constructivist process that they been experiencing throughout the year in the new library learning commons with other projects. The library learning commons created a *space* for our “Original Story” project to be told, heard, and shared with others.

New Wisdom & A New Circle

After many years working in a large urban public school system in Alberta, this fall I returned to Manitoba and to the elementary school of my youth, as a K-8 Principal. The school has experienced a tremendous amount of change and I am the third principal within the year. A collaborative process has been initiated with teachers, students, and the community, in order to revision the school’s mission and vision and plan our future direction. I incorporated a barebones “Wisdom Circle” framework for this process, and I am excited to see how it develops (refer to figure #2 below). It is structured to the pillars of *Respect*, *Excellence*, and *Service*, which are of significance to the school’s learning community, and each of these areas have been aligned to one of the four aspects (or circles) of the “Wisdom Circles” framework: *Respect* (Original Story); *Excellence* (Original Face); *Service* (Original Medicine); and *Caring* (Original Heart). Additionally, a recent “Conversation Café” for parents and community members gleaned input into all these areas, and other activities are planned to garner more input and feedback.

Figure #2 – Barebones Version (Mitchell-Pellett, 2017)



To kick off the new school year this September, students and staff identified and displayed their “sparks” (Benson, 2008, p. 17). A spark is “...something inside that is good, beautiful, and useful to the world” and comes in many forms, such as “helping people, making music, being a peacemaker among friends, taking care of the earth...when our sparks glow, we feel whole. We feel useful” (Benson, 2008, p. 17). Each spark is represented on a “Spark Tree” that welcomes visitors as they enter the front foyer of the school. The “Spark Tree” is a reminder to ourselves and others that we value each individual student and his/her spark, and that we are a community of “Spark Champions” (Benson, 2008, p. 17). During the “Conversation Café” process with parents, poignant wisdom arose from the group that linked students’ sparks to the facilitation of excellence – one of the school’s pillar values that is also connected to the *Original Face* aspect of the Wisdom Circle. Thus I am very encouraged that we are on the right track.

Additionally, a transformation to the library learning commons model has also begun for our school. Through the principles and practices of the learning commons model, our students’ sparks will be lit from within and without through quality 21st century practices, where “Everyone is a learner; everyone is a teacher working collaboratively towards excellence” (Canadian Library Association, 2014, p. 5). Through the implementation of the library learning commons model, there will be more opportunities for wisdom to be cultivated, shared, and applied to students’ learning, and in the development of effective teaching and learning approaches.

I have started to document this exciting process of change that involves the intersection of a holistic vision for self and collective development (Wisdom Circle) with complimentary innovative practices in teaching and learning such as those found in the library learning commons, which aims to address, “evolving needs” and encourage “continuous growth” (Canadian Library Association, 2014, p. 7).

Please stay tuned for *the rest of the story...*

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