The unsustainable nature of ignorance: measuring knowledge to effect social change - Measuring Knowledge to Effect Social Change. First Results of an On-line Survey of Aboriginal Knowledge in an Ontario University

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THE UNSUSTAINABLE NATURE OF IGNORANCE: MEASURING KNOWLEDGE TO EFFECT SOCIAL CHANGE FIRST RESULTS OF AN ON-LINE SURVEY OF ABORIGINAL KNOWLEDGE AT QUEEN’S UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Based on research carried out at Queen’s University, Ontario, this paper argues that one of the principal problems for Native education in Canada is the unawareness about Aboriginal people in Canada. Through consultation with Aboriginal educators and community members, educators and survey design specialists, the authors designed an awareness survey and delivered it to over 3,000 first-year university students. The results of the survey and a discussion of its implications are presented. The results are provocative as are the words of these students. They performed poorly on the test, failing it on average by over 22%. They performed best on questions reflected in the curriculum, suggesting that any effort spent on teaching this material is worthwhile. They performed second best on historical questions, arguably because Aboriginal material is largely restricted to history courses in the Ontario curriculum. They performed least well on questions related to the contemporary issues and status of First Nations, Métis and Inuit. The small number of Alberta and British Columbia educated students in the sample suggest that Alberta and British Columbia students may be a little better informed than Ontario students, but not much. On the whole the students felt that they had been taught poorly and many of them held the educational system responsible for their unawareness.

Résumé

Fondé sur des recherches menées à l’Université Queen’s (Ontario), l’article

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met de l'avant que la méconnaissance générale des Autochtones est l'un des principaux problèmes de l'éducation des Autochtones au Canada. Après avoir consulté des éducateurs et des membres des collectivités autochtones, d'autres éducateurs et des spécialistes de la conception des enquêtes, les auteurs ont mis au point un questionnaire sur la sensibilisation et l'ont envoyé à plus de 3 000 étudiants universitaires de première année. L'article présente les résultats de l'enquête et une discussion de leurs conséquences. Les résultats sont aussi provocants que les déclarations des étudiants : ces derniers ont obtenu de faibles résultats au test, qu'ils ont échoué en moyenne par plus de 22 %. Ils ont eu les meilleurs résultats pour les questions reflétées dans le programme d'études, ce qui suggère que tout effort déployé pour enseigner le matériel en vaut la peine. Leurs deuxièmes meilleurs résultats visaient les questions d'ordre historique. On pourrait dire que c'est parce que le matériel autochtone est en grande partie confiné aux cours d'histoire dans le programme d'études en Ontario. Les résultats les plus faibles étaient associés aux questions liées aux questions et au statut contemporains des Premières Nations, des Inuits et des Métis. Le petit nombre d'étudiants de l'échantillon qui ont été éduqués en Alberta et en Colombie-Britannique semble indiquer que ceux-ci sont peut-être un peu plus informés que les étudiants ontariens, mais pas beaucoup plus. Dans l'ensemble, les étudiants croyaient qu'ils n'avaient pas été bien éduqués et bon nombre d'entre eux tenaient le système d'éducation responsable de leur méconnaissance.

Many Aboriginal leaders contend that Canadian unawareness of Aboriginal cultures, ways of thinking, and issues makes it impossible to address the conditions of life for Aboriginal people in Canada in a sustained or coherent way. The authors of this paper suspect that this is true, and point to the lack of empirical evidence about what students know about First Nations, Métis and Inuit people, and thus what they have been taught in school, at university and in teacher training programs. In this paper, we outline an ongoing project based at Queen's University that builds on the work of the Coalition for the Advancement of Aboriginal Studies (CAAS, 2004). In partnership with Aboriginal educators in Ontario we have developed an instrument that directly measures the knowledge undergraduates in Ontario, whether Aboriginal or not, possess about Aboriginal culture, societies, experience and history. The purpose of the project is to benchmark students' knowledge; to describe the gaps in knowledge and the implications for curriculum and program development in both secondary and higher education; and to stimulate thought and discussion amongst students, parents, teachers, and citizens of the knowledge necessary for responsible and reflective citizenship.

Aboriginal leaders and public figures as well as scholars of Aboriginal culture and history contend that a general ignorance of the very considerable Aboriginal presence in Canada has systematically disadvantaged Aboriginal peoples in Canada and weakened Canadian society. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples report (Canada, RCAP, 1996) superlatively captured this argument; which has since been re-expressed in a variety of venues. For example, the Six Nations Traditional Chiefs declared a review of the Ontario curriculum an essential precondition to resolving the dispute at Caledonia (Martin-Hill, 2007; Alexd, 2008). Also, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, both the old and
the new, place great emphasis on the importance of revealing the truth of how Aboriginal people have been injured and marginalized in Canada (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2009). Similarly, Aboriginal playwrights, novelists, artists, musicians and educational advocates have struggled to educate Canadians in non-threatening and engaging ways (Moses, 2000; King, 2003; Sainte Marie, 2000, 2008; Wright-McLeod, 2005; Yuxweluptun, 1990; Castellano et al, 2008; amongst many others). In 2004, the Race Relations funded Learning About Walking in Beauty report, suggested that, in spite of all efforts to date and significant social change in Canada since the 1970s, most young Canadians learn little more about Aboriginal life and issues than did their parents’ parents (CAAS, 2004). Clearly, this is an issue that goes beyond Aboriginal people themselves and must be solved by non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people working in concert.

What knowledge should be valued is constantly negotiated, forever changing, reflective of where we stand as individuals and as a society, and deeply political. The knowledge valued by individuals’ changes with age, social role, circumstances and social and geographic position. Socially shared knowledge, or what should be known and taught, is subject to on-going negotiation, particularly concentrated in knowledge institutions: schools, colleges, universities, public media, and government. Yet knowledge institutions can be profoundly conservative and defensive of the status quo. It is widely recognized that education can – and has – functioned as a tool of colonialism and racism (Haig-Brown, 1988; Lobo and Talbot, 2001; Bonvillain, 2001; Freire, 1970, 1995 and 2004). Many education theorists have argued that silence, both in the curriculum and in the classroom, has perpetuated unawareness and incomprehension of Aboriginal issues (Sleeter and Grant, 1985; Churchill, 2004; Paquette 1991; Ghosh and Abdi, 2004; Lemisko et al, 2002; Godlewska et al, 2010). The “National Crime” of the residential schools is increasingly well recognized and analyzed (Miloj, 1999; Kelm, 1996; Miller, 1996, 2000; Jung, 2009; Regan, 2010). Yet most Canadians consider the problem of Aboriginal education to belong to Aboriginal people rather than to Canadians (Godlewska et al, 2010). Aboriginal people deserve much better education from Canada (Battiste, 2000; Castellano et al, 2000; Smith, 2005; Deyhle et al, 2008; Cherubini and Hudson, 2008; Peters, 2009; and also Drummond and Watts, 2011) and the role of the schools in creating and perpetuating unawareness of Aboriginal peoples, cultures and issues in the Canadian population is a key problem for Aboriginal people and all Canadians.2

For colonial and post-colonial theorists there is a strong link between not knowing and colonialism. What is colonialism but the willful and sustained ignorance of the rights and interests of subject peoples to favour those of colonial classes (Said, 1978, 1993; Bhabha, 1994; and Spivak, 1988)? Even in a post-colonial era, colonially inspired unawareness informs our thinking in the most profound ways. From our sense of time (Fabian, 1983), to what seems in and out of place (Cresswell, 1986; Agamben, 2005; Mountz, 2008, 2009), to our hierarchies of importance (e.g. art versus craft ([Bourdieu, 1984; Berlo et al, 1995; Prior, 2005]), to what is of central and what is of marginal importance in the everyday (Lefebvre, 1971, 1991; Certeau, 1984) colonial knowledge constructs our frames of reference. This is perhaps no more overt than in the more specialized realms of science (Godlewska and Smith, 1994; Bell et al, 1995), medicine (Cunningham and Andrews, 1997; Livingstone, 1992), anthropology (Thomas, 1994; Trigger, 1989; Washburn and Trigger, 1996; Clifford and Marcus, 1988) and

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the law (Tully, 1965; Godlewska and Webber, 2007). Unawareness was deeply linked to issues of class, race, and gender in the colonial era and remains so in the world continually (re)constructed by colonialism (Sullivan and Tuana, 2007).

Unawareness of Aboriginal peoples and cultures has a particular history and flavor in Canada. From the missions to the Royal Proclamation and its subsequent interpretation, to the Indian Act, to Trudeau's White Paper, to the residential schools and the scoop, each aspect of Canada's history of unawareness has served the interests of Canadian settlers and immigrants at the expense of Aboriginal peoples and a healthy and inclusive Canadian society. This unawareness is so profound that the initial reaction of Canadians to aspects of this story, such as residential schools, is shock and disbelief. In Ontario, and we suspect in much of the rest of Canada, the secondary school curricula have been complicit in maintaining this state of affairs (Godlewska et al, 2010). Most theorists agree that the first and most challenging step in changing ignorance is its recognition. If progress is to be made in the education of Canadians about Aboriginal Peoples, we must first measure, document, and understand the current level of ignorance. This is the first step in initiating social change through education.

The Awareness Project

The Awareness Project is designed to measure what students are learning about Aboriginal peoples, cultures, and issues in high schools, universities, and teacher training programs. Focusing on first-year university students allows us to assess the education received by some of the most highly performing secondary graduates. Assessment of exiting undergraduates allows us to measure what is being taught and learned across the spectrum of disciplines in university. Assessment of students graduating from undergraduate programs in faculties of education shows us the knowledge and attitudes of those who have recently chosen to teach as well as the effectiveness of the work being done by the colleges of education in this area.

In this article, we present the findings of the first administration of the instrument to first-year students at one mid-sized university in Ontario (Queen's University). We chose this university because we are at Queen's, we know how this institution works, reform begins at home, and we had the contacts to secure access to student e-mails. More importantly at the time of data collection there was much tension on campus between the administration and the university Aboriginal community. A major contributing factor to the tension was prolonged, deep-rooted and systemic ignorance of Aboriginal peoples on the part of administrative decision-makers. Also, at the time of the data collection, Queen's was in the early stages of developing a new academic plan. Concern over racism and ignorance about Aboriginal peoples led to the elaboration of its third pillar, “Reaching Beyond: Globalism, Diversity and Inclusion at Queen's.” It was, in part, in response to this environment that we sought to benchmark “current” levels of knowledge, to measure change over time. Universities across Ontario are just beginning to grapple with these issues. Our Queen's survey represents the first step in a broader assessment that will encompass Ontario universities from the north to the south, the large to the small, the urban and the less-urban. The larger aim of the project is to measure this knowledge across the provinces and territories of Canada. We plan to repeat this every four to five
years for a period of fifteen years so we can identify and measure outcomes associated with changes to the curriculum if and when they are implemented. Some First Nations, Métis and Inuit realities are national in scope, some are shaped by provincial jurisdictions (especially as education is a provincial matter in Canada), and some are far more local. As a result, the direct and indirect measures of knowledge will have to change in response to the particular provincial or territorial curricula and to advice from Aboriginal and educational specialists as we cross the country. Further, the test must be responsive to the identity cultures of the regions, nations and school systems. Importantly, however, the test must also allow for regional and national comparisons. Therefore, a core group of questions will remain the same as the project expands.

The Questionnaire And The Test

Knowledge is inherently political and, therefore, the most important question to ask of any knowledge test is why it is important. Or more precisely, is it a valid test of important knowledge? On a statistical level the test is certainly valid. The question of the importance of the knowledge being tested is vital. Every teacher should pose him or herself that question before and after giving a test; but it is not a question that can be answered definitively. It can only be argued. We argue that the knowledge we test and describe fully in this paper is very important to Canadians, whether they realize it or not.

Our instrument to measure students’ knowledge of Aboriginal realities is derived from the test developed by the Coalition for the Advancement of Aboriginal Studies (CAAS), which was generously published in the Learning About Walking in Beauty report. The CAAS instrument provided an excellent foundation for the Assessing Awareness test and questionnaire. It provided rich content and highlighted important administrative and analytical challenges that we have sought to address.

The CAAS instrument consisted of forty-six questions including a mixture of questions of fact, attitude and opinion on issues including residential schools, land claims/rights, Aboriginal treaty rights, Métis, people in different parts of Canada, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the Indian Act, the Royal Proclamation, urban Aboriginal populations, Federal versus Provincial responsibilities, eligibility to vote, etc. The rich content provided an excellent foundation of question formation in our study. However, many of the questions on the CAAS test were discursive, requiring hand-written responses from the students. This made answers very difficult to compare and quantify. In addition, the way the questions were framed demanded that students know many aspects of the answer to answer the question: they could not rely on ancillary or contextual knowledge. The final limitation with the structure of the CAAS instrument was that its design required the examiner to be in the room for the test and debrief the students after the test. This makes regional and certainly national observations impossible resource intensive.

Through a process of consultation with Aboriginal educators and community members, educators, educational administrators and survey design specialists, we have sought to build upon the strengths of the CAAS instrument and address some of the limitations. For this first survey at Queen’s, we retained the eighteen factual questions on the original CAAS instrument, but
transformed these into multiple-choice questions, which makes the Assessing Awareness questionnaire a much more efficient instrument. While there is much criticism of multiple-choice questions, they can be framed to probe for partial knowledge and to educate and inform as they test (Haladyna, 2004). The questions in the CAAS study did not create those opportunities.

The Assessing Awareness instrument is administered on-line. Earlier versions of the survey were piloted in classes (both a first-year Geography course and a fifth-year Education class). The results on the in-class survey were consistent with those on the on-line survey. As the on-line survey could be delivered to all first-year students at Queen’s, we felt that the on-line survey would be more representative of first-years’ knowledge, experience and views. Arguably, a survey conducted in first-year classes offers an additional level of data security, (e.g. we know the survey is being completed by the person we sent it to). But in fact significant security was built into our on-line survey method: each participant received a unique url. It is true that a participant could forward that email to another person who might have completed the survey but the link embedded in their email would only work once, so there was little danger of large-scale data tampering. We certainly adhered to the highest standards for on-line survey administration. In addition, the quality of in-class data also can be a problem: attendance in classes can be below 60%, somewhere around 10% of the students will leave the class when a survey is presented, and in many first-year courses as much as 30% of the class may be upper-year students. Nevertheless, in future surveys we plan to continue to run an in-class and an on-line version of the survey, perhaps simultaneously, and in cases where we cannot secure access to student emails, we will conduct the survey entirely in class.

The survey instrument has undergone a significant process of development since 2008. The Ontario version of the survey was designed with knowledge of the Ontario curriculum (Godlewska et al., 2010). In the 2010 version delivered to first-year students at Queen’s, the direct assessment section of the instrument consisted of thirty-four factual questions. Subsequent versions will have additional questions. But enough questions will remain the same to allow comparison between institutions. The thirty-four questions were categorized into six broad subscales: eight historical questions, seven contemporary questions, ten cultural questions, four geographic questions, five questions that reflected material covered by the Ontario curriculum, and seven structural/legal questions which are best described as questions fundamental to the condition and rights of First Nations, Métis, and Aboriginal peoples in Canada today. Amongst these there were three questions on residential schools, and four on land and treaty rights. One particular pairing of questions asked students a question without Aboriginal content and the same question with Aboriginal content. No question on the test is incidental or unimportant. We did not ask for precise information on unimportant events and we tried to phrase the questions for clarity and simplicity. It is possible to justify every question on the objective test.

As well as direct measures of knowledge, the instrument also includes indirect measures of knowledge and reflective items designed to gauge students’ perceptions of their own knowledge, personal and family attitudes about the realities of Aboriginal Peoples and as sources of knowledge. Table 1 summarizes the structure and content of the Assessing Awareness instrument.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Question</th>
<th>Summary of Categories</th>
<th>Example Question/Subcategories of questions</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct Assessment</td>
<td>34 factual questions</td>
<td>8 historical questions, 7 contemporary questions, 10 cultural questions, 4 geographic questions, 5 K-12 education questions, 7 structural/legal questions</td>
<td>Multiple choice questions consisting of four possible answers (a-d) plus the option &quot;I don't know&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect Assessment</td>
<td>12 questions about where participants learned what they learned; one open ended</td>
<td>In elementary, middle and high school</td>
<td>Asked before the direct assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Questions</td>
<td>5 questions about how well participants felt they had been taught</td>
<td></td>
<td>Two of these are repeated after the direct assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 questions about their interest in learning about Aboriginal peoples and issues, whether they feel they should have been taught more and whether they feel informed about Aboriginal people</td>
<td></td>
<td>Two of these questions are repeated after the direct assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 question about the reasons for limitations to their knowledge</td>
<td></td>
<td>This question is structured to allow them to write as much as they would like and is also repeated after the direct assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 question asking students to comment on the test.</td>
<td>We are interested in whether they consider it a good measure of their knowledge</td>
<td>This question is structured to allow them to write as much as they would like.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Information</td>
<td>23 questions.</td>
<td>How they would identify themselves.</td>
<td>Measures include gender, age, country and region of education, level of education of their parents, whether they were educated in the country or the city, in private, public, separate or home schools, their field of study, and the nature of their interaction with First Nations, Métis or Inuit peoples.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Questions</td>
<td>7 questions.</td>
<td></td>
<td>To measure completion time, seek consent, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Question Type and Category on the Questionnaire

Quantitative and qualitative analysis methodologies were used to assess students' knowledge of Aboriginal issues. With respect to the quantitative method, Stata 11.1 (Stata Corp) was used to generate descriptive statistics and chi-square ($\chi^2$) tests of association. Additionally, we created a summary.
measure of Aboriginal knowledge from all the objective test questions using the principal component analysis (PCA). In coding the students' responses to the test questions, correct responses were coded (1), wrong responses coded (2-4), and "don't know" coded (0). With a re-coding of right and wrong, (right=0, wrong=1) and the use of the PCA, lower values on the index scale indicate high knowledge about Aboriginal issues, while higher values indicate low knowledge. Three components were then created to distinguish those who were more likely to answer correctly on the test questions (high knowledge) from those more likely to get the answers wrong (low knowledge) and those more likely to respond "don't know." The PCA was used to assess the predictive validity of the survey questions as a measure of Aboriginal knowledge, with a solid factor score of 0.90. The qualitative method involved a thematic analysis of students' responses to the open-ended questions.

We also measured how long it took students to complete the 88-question instrument (figure 1). The vast majority of students (524) finished the questionnaire in less than twenty minutes. 145 students finished the questionnaire in less than ten minutes. 103 finished the questionnaire in less than thirty minutes. 149 took longer than thirty minutes, with fourteen to taking as long as two to three weeks. A bivariate analysis of time used in completing the questionnaire and test performance revealed that respondents who completed the questionnaire in under ten minutes were most likely (56.70%) to respond "don't know" while the only group significantly more likely to respond correctly to the test were those who took twenty to twenty-four minutes to complete the test. This suggests that those who took weeks to complete the test were not engaged in research to answer the questions correctly. They were simply fitting it into their schedule.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time (Minutes)</th>
<th>Correct</th>
<th>Wrong</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below 10</td>
<td>20 (20.62%)</td>
<td>22 (22.68%)</td>
<td>55 (56.70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14</td>
<td>96 (30.97%)</td>
<td>97 (31.29%)</td>
<td>117 (37.74%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>92 (39.48%)</td>
<td>90 (38.63%)</td>
<td>51 (21.89%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>41 (40.59%)</td>
<td>32 (31.68%)</td>
<td>28 (27.72%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>12 (37.50%)</td>
<td>13 (40.63%)</td>
<td>7 (21.88%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>10 (34.48%)</td>
<td>13 (44.83%)</td>
<td>6 (20.69%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 40</td>
<td>38 (30.65%)</td>
<td>42 (33.87%)</td>
<td>44 (35.48%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$X^2 = 47.9927; Pr = 0.000$

Table 2: Bivariate analysis of the time used in completing the questionnaire and test performance.
Figure 1: Students were allowed to answer the survey at their leisure and could respond over a period of slightly over seven weeks. The majority completed the survey in under thirty minutes.

We believe the knowledge test designed by the Awareness Survey group has five principal strengths:

(i) it is based on a survey designed by a group of Aboriginal educators in the early 2000s who were trying to grapple with and define the problem of lack of knowledge across Canada; and is therefore grounded in an Aboriginal understanding of important knowledge.

(ii) has been redesigned to take twenty to thirty minutes and for delivery on-line, facilitating the administration of the instrument to large numbers of students across the country.

(iii) it seeks to ask a balanced array of questions relevant to Aboriginal people in Canada;

(iv) it is designed exclusively for each educational jurisdiction (the first version is for Ontario); and

(v) each question on the test has been the subject of considerable discussion with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators from across Ontario.

As the Assessing Awareness project progresses and expands, continuing
consultations with educators (Aboriginal and not) and institutions is essential. Consequently, we anticipate the objective portion of the test will ultimately include at least forty-two questions and the total test will be approximately 100 questions in length. The Awareness Project seeks to measure and critique how students are taught about Aboriginal Peoples in contemporary Canadian education systems. We recognize that the process of participating in an on-line test is in and of itself an opportunity for education. By participating in the survey, students identify their level of knowledge. As educators, we are therefore committed to providing participants access to appropriate resources to further develop their understanding. To that end, we have developed a dedicated website that provides high quality sources on each question on the test, so that students can consult them in the order in which they were asked: www.assessingawareness.ca. The website allows us to share information efficiently with participants across the province (and ultimately the country), in a format they appreciate, while protecting our questions, and therefore the on-going viability of the test.

Results: Performance on the Test

In March 2010, 3,189 first year students (all of the first-year students enrolled at Queen’s) received an email invitation to participate in the study. The invitation included a unique url directing them to the on-line instrument. In all, 1,124 first-year students participated in the survey. Out of these, 198 did not complete the questionnaire. The descriptive analysis is therefore based on the 926 students who responded to all questions on the survey (response rate of 29%). As this survey sought to test knowledge and therefore is less pleasing to complete than an opinion survey and as opinion surveys managed by Student Services at Queen’s had a response rate of between 30% and 35% in 2010, we consider 29% a very good response rate. If we score the marks as a percentage, 2.9% was the lowest score achieved by a student while 82% was the highest. The average score was 27.7%, with 50% of the students scoring below 25.5%, the median. As the mean is greater than the median, and as figure 2 clearly shows, the distribution of the scores is positively skewed, implying that relatively more students scored far lower marks than their counterparts who scored above the mean.

![Performance of 1st-Year Students](image)

Figure 2: The distribution of student grades on our direct assessment suggests pervasive unawareness, with rare exceptions.

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If you were the instructor for a course in which this percentage of students performed poorly, you might conclude that the test is flawed in some important way; most likely that it does not reflect what was taught in the class. In fact, this is the case. The test was designed to reflect the information Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators who are paying close attention to Aboriginal issues in Canada today consider critical knowledge. It does not reflect the curriculum as, in Ontario in any case, the mainstream curriculum covered little in the way of Aboriginal content when these students were going to school (Godlewska et al., 2010).

There were four questions on the test that reflected the Ontario primary and secondary school curriculum. Did students perform any better on these questions? These included the question with no inherent Aboriginal content about Nunavut (average score 88%), a related question about the Inuit (75%), two questions about Louis Riel (62% and 55%) and one about what land might mean to Aboriginal people (44%). The students did perform better on these questions, suggesting that material covered in school, even if it is covered in elementary education, is retained by students. It is worth pausing and noting the significant 13% drop in score between the Nunavut and the Inuit questions which were essentially the same question without and with Aboriginal content respectively.

The significant number of historical questions on the test resulted from the conviction of Aboriginal educators that the situation Aboriginal people in Canada find themselves in today has a great deal to do with the decisions and rulings of governments in the past. Students performed relatively well on the three residential school questions addressing the schools' aims (63%), when they were active (43%) and who administered them (51%). This suggests either that the subject was covered in schools, which might be the case for a minority of students who graduated in 2009, or that students learned about residential schools in the media. Given the timing of the popular media's coverage of the residential schools issue, the latter is most likely and the higher score perhaps not surprising. Students scored much more poorly on the other historical questions: about the Peace and Friendship Treaties on Canada's east coast (15%), on Aboriginal languages spoken on contact (29%), on when Aboriginal people received the Federal vote (21%), on the meaning of the British North America Act (21%), on the Indian Act (17%), and on the Royal Proclamation (6%). The overall score for historical questions was 30.4%, so higher than the student average. This may reflect the fact that Aboriginal issues are confined almost exclusively to history courses in Ontario's secondary school curriculum. But students scored particularly poorly on those historical questions that we would also consider questions fundamental to the condition and rights of Aboriginal peoples in Canada today: The British North America Act, the Indian Act and the Royal Proclamation. There were other questions on the test of this nature that were less historical: recent rulings on the use of oral testimony in land claims (8%), the UN declaration of Aboriginal Rights (9%) which at the time had not been signed by Canada, the 1985 amendment to the Indian Act (5%), and Canada's constitution (26%) for which the scores were mostly similarly low. It would seem then that the students surveyed know relatively little about Canadian history as it concerns Aboriginal people and are particularly unaware of events or legislation, whether historical or contemporary that have shaped the lives of First Nations, Métis or Inuit peoples in Canada.

The small number of geographic questions are too few and diverse.
to offer conclusions about geographic knowledge. But the answers to questions about where the greatest number of registered Indians live (13%), the Aboriginal languages spoken today (14%), whether the Aboriginal population is in decline or on the rise (8%) and the reserve closest to their institution (13%) suggest a profound unawareness of the Aboriginal realities surrounding them, sometimes very immediately so.

After questions on the curriculum, students performed best on cultural questions, perhaps because they had some contact with Aboriginal culture in elementary school. The meaning of Raven (29%), the powwow (47%), sacred plants (22%), and the medicine wheel (31%) were all above the average score on the test. The anomalously high score on the powwow question may result from the educational powwow offered every September at Queen's, which is highly advertised, suggesting that universities have power to shape understanding through both curricular and co-curricular activities. Student performance on questions of culture that might be expected to encounter as young adults: world-renowned Canadian Aboriginal artists (12%) and authors (7%) was significantly less good. A question about the Haudenosaunee (Six Nations) that presupposes knowledge about how this people see themselves draws a blank for most students (5%).

Results: Sources of Knowledge

Our first questions asked students where they had learned what they know about Aboriginal people: was it in school, from their families, from their friends, from an Aboriginal elder, or as a result of their own personal initiative? We found that 42% of those who claimed to have taken no personal initiative in getting to know about Aboriginal issues were more likely to respond “don’t know” on the test while only 8% of those who took most personal initiative were more likely to respond “don’t know.” On the other hand, 46% of those who took quite a bit and most personal initiative were more likely to respond correctly to questions relating to Aboriginal peoples, cultures, and issues. The relationship between an individual’s personal initiative or experience and his or her knowledge of Aboriginal issues is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 24.0599; \Pr = 0.002$). Students who learnt most (average score of 36%) or quite a bit (average score of 36%) about Aboriginal issues from elementary school seem to be a little more likely to respond correctly to the test. The relationship between elementary school as a source of knowledge of Aboriginal issues and an individual’s ability to answer correctly to the test is however not statistically significant. This is not very surprising: the knowledge tested is for the most part not elementary material and elementary school was a long time ago for these (on average) eighteen-year-old students. Compared to other students, those who claimed to have learnt most (5.46% of students with an average score of 61%) and quite a bit about Aboriginal issues from high school (18.88% of respondents with an average score of 41%) are more likely to answer correctly to the test. High school as a source of knowledge about Aboriginal issues relates significantly with an individual’s ability to respond correctly to the test. The probability associated with the chi square value is 0.000. There does not appear to be a statistically relevant relationship between good performance on the test and having learned most or quite a bit from the media or from friends. This raises some interest-
ing questions about the role of the media in public education. The first time we asked students to explore the causes of the limitations of their knowledge, prior to taking the test, 31% of those who responded discursively blamed the media. However, after taking the test, this cause vanished from their explanation. This suggests student recognition that teaching knowledge of this sophistication is not the responsibility of the media, which, notwithstanding the excellent work of John Stackhouse, Peter Gzowski and a number of other excellent reporters/commentators, can hardly be expected to overturn what is taught in homes, schools, colleges and universities. Interestingly, there is a negative association between performance on the test and having learnt most from the family ($\chi^2 = 22.9988; \Pr = 0.003$), suggesting family bias and social norms are very influential in the development of students' views. This is supported by an occasional comment made in the discursive section of the questionnaire.

I feel perhaps my family life and particularly some of my grandparents diminished the issue with aboriginals and any struggles they have had to simple aggression [Canadian non-Aboriginal male, b. 1991, educated in Ontario, studying Mining Engineering, "my grades are mixed Bs and Cs"]

The relatively small number of students (thirty-three students or 3.18% of the students) who responded that most of their knowledge comes from an Aboriginal person or Elder are more likely to perform well (average score of 48%). Those who answered quite a bit are slightly more likely not to answer correctly to the test. The relationship between knowledge of Aboriginal issues gained from an Aboriginal Elder and an individual's ability to respond correctly to the test is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 27.7352; \Pr = 0.001$). Students don't seem to be learning much about Aboriginal people when they have claimed to learn from work or internship experience, which raises questions about the quality of the educational pedagogy that underpins these experiences.

We also asked students to judge how well they had been taught about Aboriginal issues in grades K-6, in grades 7 and 8, and in grades 9-13. We used a Lickert-type scale on this question giving the students the choice between "Not Taught," "Poorly Taught," "Adequately Taught," "Taught Well," "Taught Excellently" and "Not Applicable." The Lickert-type scale is a psychometric scale designed to plumb perceptions and feelings, which are not possible to standardize. Only 20% of students considered that they had been taught well or better than well in elementary school. Only 26% considered that they had been taught well or better than well in grades 7 and 8 and only 24% considered that they had been taught well or better than well in grades 9 to 13. On the whole their assessment of the quality of their education is accurate: those who claimed to have been poorly taught or not taught in grades K-6 are less likely to perform well on the test. Those who were taught excellently are more likely to perform well, while those who thought they were taught well are marginally less likely to perform well. Those who claimed to have been poorly taught or not taught in grades 7 and 8 are less likely to perform well on the test, while those who were excellently taught as well as those who were taught well are more likely to perform well. The perceived quality of the instruction is significantly related to a person's ability to perform well on the test ($\chi^2 = 34.6398; \Pr = 0.000$). Those who

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claimed to have been poorly taught or not taught in grades 9-13 are less likely to perform well on the test. Students who claimed they were excellently taught and those who answered taught well have a higher likelihood of performing well. The quality of the instruction on Aboriginal issues at grades 9-13 is significantly related to a person's ability to perform well on the test ($\chi^2 = 44.8863; Pr = 0.000$).

In short, most students are not learning about Aboriginal people and they know it. Those who claim to be learning most from high school perform significantly better than average and, while those who claim to be learning most from elementary school also perform a little better on the test, it is not surprising that their performance is not significantly better given the sophisticated nature of the knowledge being tested. As the students seem to be saying that they are not being taught about Aboriginal issues particularly well in any level of schooling, it is unsurprising that the students who perform best on the test have either learned through their own personal initiative or from an Aboriginal person or Elder. The interest that students declare to have in learning about Aboriginal history, cultures and issues (with 74% of students claiming that they are somewhat to very interested in learning) is not a good predictor of performance on the test, nor is being very interested in learning.

**Results: Attitudes/Values**

Students were given several opportunities to consider and discuss their knowledge about Aboriginal peoples and issues. Three multiple choice questions asked both before and after the objective test measured whether participants considered they should have been taught more, whether they felt informed and what might be the cause of any limitations to their knowledge (the limitations question also included a text box allowing the students to comment). After the students had completed the objective test and immediately after the three questions reflecting on their knowledge, we also asked them whether they considered the test a valid measure of their knowledge. This last was a yes/no answer with an invitation to elaborate discursively.

Before taking the objective test, 49.18% of participants reported they should have been taught more about Aboriginal people and issues, with 18.29% responding no and 29.64% unsure. After taking the objective test 65.19% of the students felt that they should have been taught more about Aboriginal people and issues, with 16.70% saying they should not have been taught more and 16.27% still unsure. It is important to note that some students did not complete the objective test portion of the survey so while there were 1039 respondents for the first time this question was asked, there were only 928 respondents for the second time it was asked (the quantitative analysis was based on the 926 students who completed the survey).

The question about the limitations to their knowledge provided some interesting results. For this question students were able to select multiple answers. We gave the students seven possible answers to this question, including the possibility of declining to answer and a text box for comments. Again, this question was asked both prior to and after the objective test. Prior to the test 74.35% (85.28% post-test) of respondents felt that there was inadequate coverage of these matters in school or university; 34.42% (40.49% post-test) considered there were time and opportunity constraints; 28.78% (27.61% post-test) considered other
issues are more important in Canada today; 8.43% (10.45% post-test) said they did not want to know about these issues, and 8.61% (5.97 post-test) said that Aboriginal people need to take responsibility for themselves. It seems that students took more advantage of the flexibility of the question the second time it was asked to express themselves fully. It is interesting and perhaps a hopeful sign that fewer students choose the option "other issues are more important in Canada today" in the second round. On the other hand, more (fifty-six versus forty-nine people) said that they did not want to know about these issues. But these numbers are very small. Very few respondents declined to answer.

Forty-two students responded to the opportunity to write to us about their views on the limitations of their knowledge prior to taking the test. Of these the largest number (thirteen) held poor media coverage responsible for their lack of awareness. Seven took this opportunity to tell us that they were immigrants or foreigners or had not been educated in Canada and seven blamed the school curriculum. Interestingly, those who blamed the school system tended to use the expression "ignorance," while no other respondents used this phraseology. Five used one or other variant of "I do not feel it pertains to me," though in one case the form of expression reveals ambivalence: "Issues were taken too lightly as it does not affect us." Four people gave some variant of the response we most wanted to see: "I need to take responsibility." Three made the point that with so many cultures in Canada it really is not possible to focus on one in particular. Two argued that there are insufficient resources to learn about Aboriginal people. And one made the somewhat peculiar point that the important issues in the world today are poverty, lack of education, and poor social support, which do not pertain to Aboriginal people in Canada.

Unsurprisingly, fewer students responded to the question the second time it was asked but after taking the test more students focused on the inadequacy of their education. One implicitly challenged our test: "I know about the issues and history. Not the details of their culture," while another student expressed his or her views in the clearest of terms: "I don't really care."

The "Valid Measure of Your Knowledge" Question: Students Voice Their Views

Our question about whether our test was a valid measure of their knowledge about Aboriginal people elicited 927 responses. Approximately 60% said that yes it was valid and approximately 40% said that it was not. Of the 377 respondents who said the test was not a valid measure of their knowledge, 337 (or 89%) provided reasons. As is frequently the case, their choice of words was often unintentionally revealing. The vast majority of students who considered the test invalid found the questions too specific. Approximately 100 of the 337 students who provided reasons used the word "specific" to describe the test. Some used the word repeatedly:

Having a direct knowledge of specific treaties and specific problems faced by individuals does little to provide understanding. I do not know the specific number of land claims nor remember specifics from treaties from history class, however after much discussion with native individuals at the height of the caledonia land claims I understand on a
individual and consensus level understand how they feel about these issues. The survey also interchangeably uses the term “Aboriginal” and “Indian”, the later being a term most native americans would find offensive. [Canadian, non-Aboriginal, male, educated in Ontario, studying commerce, “my grades are mostly in the As”]

The question about land claims allowed students to choose between 1,000 and 10,000 claims before the courts in Canada, so, the order of magnitude difference between the two responses was large. No questions were asked about particular treaties, though we did ask about the Indian Act and its relationship to Aboriginal rights.

Some students argued that the knowledge was too Ontario-specific and felt that coming from Alberta or British Columbia they were at a disadvantage. There is some truth to this concern, although only two of the thirty-four questions were Ontario-based: one that asked for the reserve closest to Queen’s and one that asked about the Haudenosaunee.

I feel it is more important to know about local Aboriginal culture, and this did not showcase my knowledge of the Coast Salish. Furthermore, the questions were very specific. With such a small population, I don’t feel that such specific details are at all relevant in context to the entire history of Canada. [Canadian, non-Aboriginal, female, educated British Columbia, studying Global Development Studies, “my grades are mostly in the As”]

This particular response is fascinating for its contradictory nature: on the one hand, the only important knowledge about Aboriginal people is local. On the other, no local knowledge can be important in the grand scheme of things. It would seem that this student has not yet had the opportunity to work through her own thinking on important knowledge.

The survey clearly raised questions about what is knowledge. As one student put the matter: “Many of the questions are too specific to test peoples general knowledge.” This raises the questions: what is general knowledge? and should knowledge of Aboriginal people be part of general knowledge in Canada? Another claimed that students do know about Aboriginal people, just not in the way that we tested:

It is not a valid measure because not knowing about different types of aboriginals or not knowing about certain years that main events occurred does not make me ignorant to what Aboriginal people have been through. The most important thing is to know how they have mistreated, what have been done to apologize for this mistreatment and stastics that speak for them. And, in way or another most people do know these facts. [Canadian and immigrant to Canada, non-Aboriginal, female, educated in Nova Scotia, studying Kinesiology, “my grades are mixed As and Bs”]

Again, on the rare occasion that we asked for dates for particular events we offered options with a considerable spread between them and the events were of
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importance. Some students considered that too much knowledge was expected.

I would not necessarily be able to answer many of these questions even if they were specific to Canada or another country's history and culture etc. The questions were based on very specific facts. [Canadian, child of immigrant(s), non-Aboriginal, female, educated in Ontario, studying Global Development Studies, "my grades are mixed As and Bs"]

Apart from the fascinating construction here that separates Aboriginal people from Canada and Canadian history (not at all uncommon in the responses) there is implicit in this response a sense of the norm (in terms of volume and type of information) established by the school system. For some students, if it was not taught in school it is not important information. No, "because i wasn't taught about aboriginals" then is a reasonable response to "Is this test a valid measure of your knowledge?" One student took that view a step further, apparently defending what she was taught (though there is no elaboration): "Some of these questions are very specific and perhaps show that I was taught DIFFERENT things about aboriginals, rather than not taught enough." This touches upon the next two important themes to emerge from the negative responses: what these students have to say about their education and the contention that we were not asking them about what they knew.

The students who used this space to comment on their education (twenty-six students) made clear that they had not been taught this material in school. For some their only contact with these issues was in elementary or middle school.

I wasn't living in Canada while History was a mandatory course to be taught - elementary school. I only learned this in Gr 7 and 8, and Gr 10 briefly. All you learn in Gr 10, when I was actually capable of understanding course materials in English, was WW2. So my only knowledge about Aboriginal people is on the curriculum of Gr 8... which only covers Louis Riel for a period of 4 weeks. Ask me more about Louis Riel [Child of immigrants, non-Aboriginal, female, educated in Ontario, studying education, "my grades are mostly in the As"]

This corresponds to what we identified in the curriculum: mandated coverage of Aboriginal topics is concentrated in elementary education (Gdiewska et al, 2010) and it is possible and even likely that most students will have little if any exposure to them after grade 8.

Certainly it seems true that:

... the information that was taught about Aboriginal people differed greatly from the questions that were just asked - a different approach to Aboriginal history was taken [Canadian, non-Aboriginal, female, educated in British Columbia, studying Life Sciences, "my grades are mostly in the As"]

What, then, were they taught? The students are largely silent on this matter.
but there are a few hints that correspond to what we know of the curriculum:

We did not learn so much about dates and laws, more about the conflicts and battles between the aboriginals and the government. Most of all the aboriginal teachings however were about Louis Riel, except for the stories told by aboriginals in my elementary school years. These stories were strictly aboriginal beliefs and spiritual stories, nothing about government or conflict. [Canadian with Aboriginal ancestry, non-Aboriginal, male, educated in British Columbia, studying Applied Science, "my grades are mostly in the As"]

The test was good but maybe I know how aboriginal people live such as gathering food, making tools, or building their homes etc. There is a lot of stuff this does not cover. [Canadian, non-Aboriginal, male, educated in Ontario, studying Applied Science, "my grades are mixed As and Bs"]

I have more knowledge of Aboriginal people before Confederation as that's what I learned most about in history class. [Canadian, non-Aboriginal, female, educated in Ontario, studying Biology, "my grades are mixed Bs and Cs"]

In my Elementary school, I learnt about more of the cultures that the Aboriginals have such as the stories they told and important myths that were passed. I rarely touched on the history until I got to University. [Canadian and immigrant to Canada, non-Aboriginal, female, educated in Ontario, studying Drama, "my grades are mostly Bs"]

The only information I have learned on Aboriginal people was in a World Religions course in grade 11 and briefly in elementary. Most of the knowledge I have forgotten and the information was very brief. [Canadian, non-Aboriginal, female, educated in Ontario, studying Life Sciences, "my grades are mixed As and Bs"]

The key phrases here are "elementary," "brief," "nothing about government, laws and conflict" (apart from Louis Riel). That most students had not been taught anything about Aboriginal people since elementary school led many to comment that they might have learned this but too long ago to remember anything for the test, thereby invalidating the test and minimizing the importance of knowing (or not knowing) the answers. Many students felt aggrieved that we were not asking them about what they knew but expressed this in terms that give little insight into their knowledge. In some cases it is clear that students feel that they have knowledge that comes from knowing Aboriginal people and that that knowledge is not tested: "it does not ask me to list any events or people that I know." For others, it seems clear that as the test does not reinforce well-engrained prejudices it cannot be valid.

Because it doesn't get at the root problem of Canada's aboriginal people. It does not ask whether or not people know how much money
get[s spent on them. [Canadian, non-Aboriginal, male, educated in Ontario, studying Political Studies, “my grades are mixed As and Bs”]

The first-hand experiences I have had with Aboriginal people are not at all represented in these questions, save for a few. In Saskatchewan, where I am from, the behavior of the MANY native people is outrageous. Their association with gangs, alcoholism, and unemployment is often over exaggerated but that does not make it untrue for a large minority. I have personal stories from different people (some of who are native) that paints a clear picture of what growing up in a native society is like. I understand this questionnaire is about the traditions of native people as well as the effect the past 500 years have had on them. It does not, though, take into account personal experience with native people which is what I can honestly say I know most about them. [Canadian, non-Aboriginal, male, educated in Canada, studying physical sciences, “my grades are mixed Bs and Cs”; on question 81 this student claimed to have had occasional but significant contact with Aboriginal people]

Well I think this test is a valid measure of knowledge of Aboriginal history (which I do not know much about) but doesn’t really address the issues going on in Aboriginal reserves today as much as it should. It is not focused on the political and economical differences between natives and normal citizens, nor does it address military history and historical land exchange. Also, it does not address the concept of land won by nations through force. [Canadian, non-Aboriginal, male, educated in Ontario, studying language and linguistics, “my grades are mostly in the As”]

For these students the test is invalid because it neither reflects what they were taught in school, nor does it reinforce what they have come to believe living in Canadian society. It is particularly worrying that university students uncritically position K-12 education and common knowledge established through social norms construction as the only (or at least most important) source of knowledge.

Underlying the criticism of a large number of students is the view that historical knowledge is unimportant, irrelevant and unfair as a test subject, especially if they have chosen to avoid history courses in their high school and university courses.

It’s a valid measure of knowledge about their history. An awful lot of Canadians don’t know their history like that, and I’d say they were experts in their culture. [Canadian with Aboriginal ancestry, non-Aboriginal, female, educated in Ontario, Studying Global Development Studies, “my grades are mostly in the As”]

It focused largely on historical and trivial issues... Few of the questions were about the issues facing natives today on reserves. [Canadian, non-Aboriginal, male, educated in Ontario, studying electrical engineering, “my grades are mostly in the As”]

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The phrases used by these students to describe the test questions include “trivial,” “unimportant,” “random,” “obscure,” “irrelevant.” For many students there is no evident link between the past and the present: history is an arcane academic subject with no relevance to anyone living today. This framing of history denies the existence of systemic prejudice and inequity with deep historical (colonial) roots.

Most of the questions asked were extremely specific facts about Aboriginal history. Most of what I have learned recently through several courses is Aboriginal discrimination and suppression, and the general ideas surrounding that. [Canadian, non-Aboriginal, female, educated in Ontario, studying sociology, “my grades are mostly Bs”]

There is a larger issue here about whether people substantially unaware of the past and unequipped to think critically about how history is constructed can function responsibly in a world largely shaped by the actions of our predecessors.

I don’t feel like I should know this off the top of my head. I doubt aboriginal people know anything about Spanish people, African American people, or French people etc.. I thought Canada was supposed to be like a “mixed salad” we’re not allowed to judge one another but we shouldn’t be forced to learn about them…. [Immigrant to Canada, non-Aboriginal, female, educated in Ontario, studying Applied Science, “my grades are mostly Cs and below”]

As much as we would love to see the Ministry of Education integrate history into the education of every Ontarian and into the teaching of most subjects, the need for history education is not the focus of this paper. Finally, although an unconscious apartheid has already been alluded to, it is worth reiterating in the context of historical knowledge as it is particularly in the context of discussions of “our” history that it comes up: a significant number of students do not consider that their history has anything to do with Aboriginal people: “…I would probably not do well on a similar test about Canada…”

Some students are clearly conflicted and perhaps even confused about how well the test measures their knowledge.

Although it covered a lot of points, I feel that maybe some of the details were very specific. I might just be very uneducated though in politics. I do feel that I should have known more. [Canadian, non-Aboriginal, female, educated in Ontario, studying Kinesiology, “my grades are mostly Bs”]

I don’t do well with multiple choice Just because I don’t know exact facts doesn’t mean that I don’t know about Aboriginal people I don’t know as much as I would like about Aboriginal people in Canada and hope to learn more through personal study[Canadian, non-Aboriginal, female, educated in Ontario, no field of study indicated, “my grades are mixed As and Bs”]
It’s too specific. Tribe names etc. are questions that should not be of concern, for example, if we were to be asked questions on Chinese culture, it would be unnecessary to be inquired upon the dozens of tribal names and languages. Other than that, this is a most excellent quiz that has allowed me to recognize my personal lack of knowledge in basic facts of Aboriginal culture. [Canadian, child of immigrants to Canada, non-Aboriginal, female, educated in Ontario, studying Political Studies, “my grades are mixed Bs and Cs”]

Others seem to be working out their thinking on the spot, particularly in terms of where responsibility for lack of awareness lies.

...Yes, this test was slightly shocking proving to me that I don’t nearly know enough about Aboriginal peoples and their culture. However, even though I don’t know the cold facts, I do volunteer in the summer on an aboriginal reserves teaching literacy. I do however remember having aboriginal studies all throughout my schooling. Maybe what should be investigated is the quality and type of material being taught in schools rather than the quantity of material. Yes, students need to broaden their depth of knowledge of aboriginal studies in school, the school system however needs tweaking in the actual material being taught. [Canadian, non-Aboriginal, female, educated in Ontario, studying education, “my grades are mostly Bs”]

This is very clear with the responses of ten of the students who identified the test as “invalid.” As they tried to explain their view, they argued that the test did indeed capture their knowledge and that this was important. A small number of students were unequivocal in their dismissal of the test and what they take to be the thinking behind it:

I don’t feel as though I need to be aware of what exactly a “powwow” is or how many languages used to be spoken vs how many are spoken now in order to effectively deliberate on how to resolve the issues. I know (in a general sense) the history of the aboriginal peoples, and I know how they were mistreated (about the same as any other Native peoples). So yeah, basically, I don’t give that much of a damn about which-impossible-to-pronounce Native peoples tribe lives closest to me, no matter how diverse or varied each type of aboriginal group is from one another. It’s irrelevant. No culture in Canada has been preserved completely, and we should stop trying to artificially prolong theirs. If they want to keep their culture, thats their business. No one goes around asking which province most early Chinese settlers were from, or the particularities of 17th century French wedding customs, because everyone knows that they are trivial details. The same is true with Aboriginal culture. The idea that somehow, by having greater knowledge of totem animals or “sacred plants”, we will be better equipped to bring the aboriginals into the 21st century is about as coherent as the idea that we could have better dealt with the cold war if only we had had a better grasp on russian dancing. [Canadian, non-
Aboriginal, male, educated in Ontario, studying Biology, "my grades are mixed Bs and Cs"

Most such respondents were more concise: "I thought Indians came from India."
Five respondents argued that the test was biased and for that reason invalid.

Very specific questions based on material that I may have been taught many years ago, skew the results to make it appear that I have very little understanding of the subject, when in fact I have a general understanding of the subject, when a general one is all that I require as a party entirely separate from the issue. [Canadian, non-Aboriginal, male, b. 1991, educated in Alberta, studying computer science, "my grades are mixed As and Bs"]

The survey is CLEARLY biased with the responses; not everything should be written in favour of Natives. [Immigrant to Canada, non-Aboriginal, male, b. 1989, educated in British Columbia, studying business, "my grades are mostly in the As"]

Some of the questions were leading questions. [Canadian, immigrant to Canada and child of immigrants to Canada, non-Aboriginal, female, b. 1992, educated in Ontario, studying philosophy, "my grades are mixed As and Bs"]

Some of these questions are written with an inherent bias (Canadian, non-Aboriginal, male, b. 1984, educated in Ontario, no field of study indicated, "my grades are mostly Bs")

These questions are a. loaded, and b. trivial in nature. [Immigrant to Canada, non-Aboriginal, male, b. 1991, educated in Ontario, studying economics, "my grades are mostly in the As"]

Interestingly, some of these students were a little older, perhaps suggesting a gradual reinforcing of social norms, or hardening of social attitudes, with age. Given how poorly most students performed on the test, and the large pool of respondents, five is a surprisingly small number.

A number of respondents raised important questions that bear further discussion and thought. One argued that knowledge taught in schools but disregarded in society would not gel. This is partly true although it presents a chicken and egg problem: should teachers and administrators seek to effect social improvement or should education simply reflect dominant social values? Most theorists of education from Dewey to Freire to hooks and beyond would argue the former (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970, 1995, 2004; hooks, 2003). I suspect that many of us are in education because we believe, though at times merely hope, that education does improve society. But effecting social improvement through education raises another issue never far from moral education: at what point does moral education become indoctrination (Tan, 2004; O'Brien and Howard, 1990)? Another student argued that a young person who did not want to learn about Aboriginal issues would not learn no matter how they were taught. This is certainly true but it underestimates the power of a new social
environment to erode reflexive prejudices. Another felt that no objective test could ever really measure knowledge about Aboriginal peoples. This too is true. A direct measure is a powerful suggestive tool. But that is all it is. Another said that the only way to learn about people of another culture is to live with and work alongside them. This is absolutely true. But this opportunity is not open to most students. Should it become available, a student with some knowledge and respect for First Nations, Métis or Inuit people may be more inclined to take that opportunity than one with none. One student held the view that white knowledge about Aboriginal people would make no difference to Aboriginal people, "Better measures could be taken." This reflects the prevailing social view; it is not ours. We believe that one of the greatest obstacles to achievement especially for First Nations and Métis is what "white people" know and think. Finally, one student responded: "you test me on what you think I should know." Behind the comment is a healthy challenge to the authority of those behind the test. At the end of the test, we guide the participants to a website that explains who we are, what we are doing and why. It also provides literature relevant to each question. In time we will establish links on that website to all our publications. All of these criticisms and comments are valid and the teachers in us would dearly love to debate them with the students.

Approximately 60% or 550 of the students considered the test a valid measure of their knowledge and 476 (or 86.5% of these) elaborated on their judgment. Of these most (229) considered the test valid because there was a good variety of questions (129), the questions were of high quality (32), the questions covered basic or fundamental material (24), they were significant questions (16), there was a good focus on legal or political issues (9), the questions covered material that is or should be general knowledge (8), and the test was fair (11). Another group of students (89) responded that the test was a valid measure of their knowledge because it revealed how ignorant they were of Aboriginal people, histories, cultures or issues. A small number (7) commented that while their performance made clear how little they knew, they did not want to know any more about the subject. While some (6) said that they were generally just ill-informed about everything, others (13) said that while they had thought they were informed, they discovered through this survey and test that they were not. A fairly large number of students (76) said the test was a valid measure of their knowledge because it revealed how poor their education had been.

It shows how many answers I couldn't even take a guess at because we had never really touched on them in class ever. [Canadian, immigrant to Canada, child of immigrant(s) to Canada, non-Aboriginal, female, educated in Ontario, studying engineering chemistry, "my grades are mostly in the As"]

The questions being asked are an integral part of Canadian history, and it's astonishing that I cannot answer a majority of these questions due to lack of aboriginal history being taught in school. [Canadian, non-Aboriginal, female, educated in Ontario, studying sociology, "my grades are mostly Bs"]

Of course, it is absolutely shameful that I am a Canadian and have no
knowledge on those who founded my country. The education system has failed all Canadians from k-university. [Canadian, non-Aboriginal, female, educated in Ontario, studying psychology, "my grades are mixed Bs and Cs"]

These seem like very important questions, some even simple and should be common knowledge among everyone. Learning about Aboriginal peoples is VERY important, especially to our understanding of Canadian culture and development. Aboriginal peoples are treated very poorly and there is a great concern for their health and their rights. I demand that there be more education about Aboriginals in school!!! [Canadian, child of immigrants to Canada, not Canadian Aboriginal, North American Indian, female, educated in Ontario, studying Health Studies, "my grades are mixed As and Bs"]

This test covered many aspects of Aboriginal history that tend to be ignored. The basic understanding given in schools is the history of Aboriginal people before and around the time the Europeans came. This test brings forward the continuing issues surrounding Aboriginal rights that the school system does not mention and the media generally ignores. [Canadian with Aboriginal ancestry, non-Aboriginal, female, educated in Ontario, studying Global Development Studies, "my grades are mixed As and Bs"]

A relatively small number of students (48) valued the test because it was provocative and critical (22) and thus essential to responsible citizenship (26). There were approximately fifty students who considered the test a valid measure of their knowledge but were critical of aspects of it. Here again, the principal criticism was the specificity of the questions. But also criticized was too strong a focus on central Canada, and what they took to be an excessive focus on history. Some students considered that, while legal and political issues for First Nations, Métis and Inuit were important, knowledge of their culture and the arts was not. Others considered that there were not enough cultural questions. A small number of students (3) wondered how this test would be regarded by Aboriginal people, the assumption being that First Nations, Métis and Inuit were not involved in its design or delivery.

Demographic Questions: Preliminary and Limited Results

Analysis of the demographic data is limited because to date the survey has been conducted in only one institution. In addition, a few opportunities were lost with poorly structured questions. In particular in this version of the questionnaire we asked about the educational background of the students (private school, public school, separate school, etc.) and whether they received their education in the city, country, suburbs in a single question and allowed the students to choose multiple answers, making the data difficult to analyze. There is certainly a sex bias in the respondents. The sex ratio of the university is roughly 49% male and 51% female but 67% of question-
naire respondents were female and 32% were male. So, clearly somewhere we lost some men: we know that men are less likely to answer surveys than women and perhaps they are even less likely to answer this questionnaire. Women also seem relatively more likely to perform better on the test than males but the difference is not statistically significant.

The age profile question was relatively meaningless at this institution, where the undergraduate population is more traditional than in some other Ontario universities, leading to relatively homogenous data: 80% of the respondents were eighteen and 13% were seventeen years of age. It will become more important for institutional comparisons when we move to universities with a more diverse student population.

As 93% of the students received their secondary education in Canada, the cross tabulation of performance on the test and education in or outside of Canada gives relatively little opportunity for analysis with only one institution. But the 93% educated in Canada do not perform any better on the test than those educated in the US (approximately 2%) and internationally (approximately 4%). Similarly, only 5% of the respondents received their secondary education in Alberta and 7% in British Columbia. The performance on the test of those educated in Alberta mirrors closely those educated in British Columbia, with almost 40% likely to respond correctly to the test questions. Among students educated in Ontario, one out of every three (33%) is found to be more likely to respond correctly to the test questions. There was a relationship between the education attained by parents and the ability of their children to perform well on the test. Students whose fathers or whose mothers have a PhD are more likely to perform well on the test relative to the others.

By all the measures available to the institution, there are not many Aboriginal students at Queen's University. Amongst the respondents, only one self-identified as First Nations, no one self-identified as Inuit, six people self-identified as Métis, and sixteen people self-identified with Aboriginal ancestry. The First Nations person performed well above average at 52.9%, or 25% above the average. Four out of the six Métis respondents also performed at least 13% above the average score, with two scoring within 1.2% percent of the average. The picture was more mixed amongst those declaring Aboriginal ancestry: one had a score of 61.8% or 34% above the average score and another of 58.8% or 31% above the average. However, the overall average in this group was only 31%, barely three points above the average. Those who said they had been educated on First Nations Territory or under the direction of an Aboriginal community board were more likely to perform well on the test. Among such students, 50% of them are more likely to respond correctly to the test questions. Given the social nature of the questions being asked it is no surprise that, overall, students from the social sciences are more likely to have greater knowledge of Aboriginal issues relative to the applied sciences and engineering; commerce; health sciences; education and concurrent education; the life sciences; the sciences; the humanities; and fine arts.

Overall grades are not a strong predictor of performance on this test but students who report that their grades are in the A and B range are likely to perform marginally better.

Conclusions

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The results from this first survey of first-year students at Queen's University are provocative and were for at least some of us surprising. First-year students at Queen's University performed poorly on the test, failing it on average by over 22%. Students performed best on questions reflected in the curriculum, suggesting that any effort spent on teaching this material is worthwhile. They performed second best on historical questions, which is not very surprising as Aboriginal material is largely located in history courses in the Ontario curriculum. They performed least well on questions related to the contemporary issues and status of First Nations, Métis and Inuit. On the whole the students felt that they had been taught poorly and many of them held the educational system responsible for their unawareness.

It would be ideal to share the full test and survey with the readership of this article but that is not possible as to do so would be to place it on the internet, making it impossible to continue to run the survey. However, the nature of the questions we asked is very clear in this article. The questions are clear, unambiguous and were designed in conjunction with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators to capture what all Ontarians need to understand about Aboriginal people, cultures, and social realities to be able to function as responsible citizens.

This article has focused only on the results of the survey of first-year students approximately seven months into their university degree. Subsequent articles will look at the performance of students graduating as qualified teachers and compare the first year student performance with that of exiting alumnae. The most interesting results will be generated by taking the survey across Ontario and ultimately across Canada. The survey will have to be modified for each educational jurisdiction and curriculum and through a process of consultation with Aboriginal educators and communities, but a strong core of questions will remain the same. In Ontario we expect to find important regional distinctions between northern and southern universities, between urban and more rural universities and between universities with different characters.

The assessment of knowledge, attitudes and education that young university-bound Canadians have of Aboriginal people is a first step in thinking through the steps to take in making not just our schools and universities but Canadian society a better place for First Nations, Métis and Inuit. But, of course, it is not sufficient. There are signs of progress across Canada with new programs in Saskatchewan, Native Studies increasingly integrated into the mainstream curriculum in British Columbia, and more resources devoted to Aboriginal student success in Ontario. We intend to return to each institution we survey every four to five years to assess the impact of policy changes in the student population.

In most educational jurisdictions across Canada, Aboriginal student performance is being watched and measured with care. To our knowledge, no one is looking at the learning and openness of the rest of the population and what role the educational system is playing in providing all students with an awareness of the realties facing Aboriginal people in Canada and where those have come from. We hope that this paper marks an important beginning.

Notes

1. The authors would like to thank Lorraine Mayer and two anonymous reviewers for their help in improving this paper.

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2. In June 2010, the Assembly of First Nations made a Call to Action on Education but with the emphasis on First Nations control of First Nations education (http://www.afn.ca/calltoaction/default.html).

3. We are not publishing the questionnaire test as part of this paper because to do so would put the larger survey project at risk.

4. A group of twenty-nine Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal anti-racism educators.

5. The quotations used in this paper reflect the writing of the students. All errors, capitalization, and syntax are original.

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