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## **Book Review: A Digital Bundle: Protecting and Promoting Indigenous Knowledge Online**

By Jennifer Wemigwans. University of Regina Press, 2018. 256 pp. ISBN: 9780889775534. \$29.95

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When Indigenous Knowledge is made openly available, it enables members of Indigenous communities to resist colonialism to pursue self-determination as well as cultural transformation for Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous Peoples alike. Jennifer Wemigwans' *A Digital Bundle: Protecting and Promoting Indigenous Knowledge Online* explores what opening cultural heritage entails from an Indigenous perspective.

Jennifer Wemigwans spent over five years developing an advisory committee, finding funding, and producing FourDirectionsTeachings.com to be the widely impactful tool it is today. Because of her efforts and support from the Canadian Culture Online Program of the Department of Canadian Heritage, Indigenous communities across Canada are finding and establishing connections with their heritage, with wide-reaching health, legal, and educational benefits. FourDirectionsTeachings.com is the first site of its kind in Canada, and there is high demand for other Indigenous communities to contribute or develop their own tools, but it is difficult and slow, as government agencies do not want to risk infringing on the cultural rights of communal Indigenous Knowledge.

*A Digital Bundle* explores the way Wemigwans paved her path, navigating the complex ideological duality that Indigenous Knowledge should be available in a way that anyone can participate but via culturally ethical means. Wemigwans theorizes with various Indigenous scholars and thinkers about the benefits and ways forward for digital Indigenous Knowledge sharing. *A Digital Bundle* is a rich read for anyone interested in applying decolonial processes, with the understanding that its focus is within Indigenous communities who are most directly impacted by colonialism historically and currently.

### **Situated Meanings and Understandings**

Jennifer Wemigwans uses her own website FourDirectionsTeachings.com as a reference point for Indigenous Knowledge online, a new tool and opportunity to support the ways in which Indigenous communities decolonize the digital. Unlike a knowledge commons project, which was derived from a European tradition of



battling the enclosure of intellectual resources threatened by property rights and privatization of knowledge, and where several people access the same digital collection without affecting their quantity or quality (Mansell, 2013, p. 256), Wemigwans situates FourDirectionsTeachings.com as a new genre that is more accessibly conducive for Indigenous knowledge production and dissemination rather than a knowledge commons project (Wemigwans, 2018, p. 38). The reason Wemigwans makes this important distinction is because Indigenous communities rarely see their knowledge authentically appreciated in public spaces, so FourDirectionsTeachings.com has a different impact on Indigenous communities.

Wemigwans lays the groundwork for readers to understand how Indigenous Knowledge differs from Western understandings of knowledge production; Indigenous Knowledge does not create new knowledge for the sake of progress, but rather reproduces long-existing Indigenous teachings in new formats in relation to new contexts (Wemigwans, 2018, p. 3). Wemigwans refers to dominant colonial systems of knowledge in Canada, where knowledge is rooted in Elders and Knowledge Keepers, which is a perspective shared among many if not all traditional Indigenous and Native perspectives. FourDirectionsTeachings.com serves as a legitimate source of Indigenous Knowledge online by facilitating the voices of diverse Indigenous Peoples who want to share Indigenous Knowledge in respectful and responsible ways while also inspiring new knowledge production. This is what it means to, as Wemigwans and many other Indigenous and Native Peoples describe, do things, “in a good way.” And so Wemigwans defines FourDirectionsTeachings.com as a bundle: a collection of things regarded as sacred and held by a person with care and ceremony—a lifelong commitment (Wemigwans, 2018, p. 35).

There are two forms of Indigenous Knowledge: sacred teachings passed through ceremonial protocols and personal knowledge from individual educational pursuits and empirical processes (Wemigwans, 2018, p. 3). The digital bundle Wemigwans defines represents traditional cultural expressions carrying responsibilities and protocols that differ across Indigenous nations, and only when one is gifted a bundle can they share and transfer it. From an Indigenous perspective, cultural intellectual property is about relational strength and communal sensibilities regarding tribal, clan, or family ownership through a caretaking type of relationship as opposed to individual ownership. Understanding that protocols are also copyrights is a way of honoring “diverse copyright” or legal traditions of diverse Indigenous nations (Wemigwans, 2018, p. 80). Canadian copyright is insufficient for the rights and needs associated with Indigenous Knowledge because copyright is ideologically opposed to the values and characteristics of Indigenous Knowledge. There needs to be an alternative system of

ownership, acknowledgment, and consumption that considers an Indigenous perspective.

Wemigwans laughs at the “information wants to be free” memes and cultural commons, citing Kim Christen, creator of the 2007 Mukurtu Wumpurrarni-Kari Archive: “open access [undoes] the social bearing of information circulation and [denies] human agency” (Christen, 2012, p. 2889). Wemigwans applauds the Mukurtu Archive because cultural protocols were at the core of the project but does not explore its use of Traditional Knowledge (TK) or BC (Biocultural) labels, which are tools that add cultural and historical context and political authority to cultural heritage content. Traditional Knowledge labels identify nation or community-specific rules and responsibilities regarding access and use of sacred and ceremonial material, material with gender restrictions, and material designed for outreach purposes; biocultural labels designate provenance and integrity to ensure Indigenous people are accurately represented (Local Contexts, n.d.). Wemigwans was also asked about these labels during her keynote at the Open Access Scholarly Publishing Association (OASPA) 2022 conference, but she did not engage in depth.

When Wemigwans refers to open, it does not implicate a transition of reuse rights, nor does it simply mean freely available. It is worth noting that FourDirectionsTeachings.com has all rights reserved. While FourDirectionsTeachings.com is free to access, it is not openly licensed. It is unclear whether the site is not openly licensed because an open license is not appropriate for any or just some uses. The human agency element in how Indigenous communities produce and disseminate knowledge ignites questions of downstream users and use—how should bundles be “kept alive,” cared for, and legitimized in proper ways without human intervention in the (digital) world of research and information sharing?

The specific context and type of Knowledge and its legalities Wemigwans engages in invites non-Indigenous readers to question how research might be conducted, distributed, and understood differently using a humanized approach. Indigenous land, natural resources, cultural objects, and remains have been forcibly taken from nations and communities, and the lack of Indigenous voices and record, which has historically been represented differently compared to those of colonizers, has largely erased this context from memory and has left Indigenous communities to be seen as communities of deficits from non-Indigenous peoples. Would an openly licensed approach entail a superficial understanding of Indigenous Knowledge, or an understanding removed from the source, that would perpetuate harm for Indigenous communities? Wemigwans argues that a more intimate approach can touch and connect people in order to address racism. But while the internet makes this intimacy possible, Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals alike live in a different reality where Westernized concepts of ownership reign. How

these two realities may harmonize and how information sharing can be used for good rather than harm is something Wemigwans problematizes but doesn't resolve.

### **Grappling with Insiders and Outsiders**

The fear of appropriating cultural knowledge is another theme returned to throughout the text. Wemigwans wrestles with a catch-22: that while providing knowledge about Indigenous ceremonies opens up opportunities for misinterpretation, the silencing and removal of Indigenous Peoples creates opportunities for more stereotyping and commodification of their knowledge (Wemigwans, 2018, p. 20). FourDirectionsTeachings.com returns to the tradition of oral-visual presentation and the storyteller's credibility.

Indigenous stories have always played a crucial part in Indigenous people's survival, and Wemigwans goes further to call on Indigenous communities to come together to discuss Indigenous Knowledge online as a necessary educational strategy (Wemigwans, 2018, p. 104). Wemigwans' work and call to action is important for protecting ceremonial ways and languages that have historically been illegal to practice. Boarding schools and the foster care system removed countless Indigenous children from their families, making this work of reconnection life changing. At the same time, something like Indigenous ceremony cannot possibly be shared in a virtual environment, but Wemigwans believes there are other essential teachings that can be shared online (Wemigwans, 2018, p. 221).

Projects like FourDirectionsTeachings.com "can act as boundaries or markers that reinforce the power of insiders" (Wemigwans, 2018, p. 39). Only teachings transferred through cultural protocols become "real" teachings. Anything else is speculative when it is processed through a single individual outside the community and outside cultural protocols (Wemigwans, 2018, p. 45). For example, an Anishinaabe researcher must acknowledge the personal connection to the research because the protocols of Anishinaabe-izhitwaawin require that one always explains his or her personal and intellectual background (Wemigwans, 2018, p. 10). Elders and Knowledge Keepers exert cultural authority and authenticate knowledge through cultural protocols.

Settler educators, policy makers, and governmental bodies also need Indigenous Knowledge. Wemigwans does not provide further details on applying cultural protocols to the internet appropriately with regard to how different Indigenous nations may relate to each other and issues of appropriation. This shortcoming can partially be addressed in that it is one thing to call on Indigenous Peoples to join in dialog in this new virtual way, but it is another to ask them to police all possible appropriated uses. Non-Indigenous individuals' frustration with nontransparent protocols is also somewhat of a moot point because Indigenous knowledge sharing doesn't work in this way—the protocols, in part, depend on the

unique uses. However, authenticity in and near Indigenous communities remains a great challenge and is worth addressing further.

### **Toward a New Kind of Knowledge**

While Elders and Knowledge Keepers vet uses through community identification and individuals' purposes through relationship building, there is a question of addressing this at the scale that it needs, and there is the question of how authentically this can take place in a virtual space. While it's true that the information overload, data dumps, and hurried timelines we face call for greater human attachment and context, FourDirectionsTeachings.com may not reach and engage with the communities it needs to due to lack of access to the Internet in some areas, issues with digital literacy, awareness of the site, and uncertainty in following protocols. Wemigwans recognizes that perhaps there should be parameters and protocols to address how to interact with the site as well as how to address conflicts regarding what information being shared is appropriate or accurate, which will inherently arise with the site being accessible (Wemigwans, 2018, p. 102).

As an added conundrum, *Digital Bundle* was written pre-pandemic, and yet almost four years later, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike perhaps didn't anticipate that we did not adapt virtual spaces to be as engaging as we thought we would; instead, many of us are fatigued with the virtual world and find it difficult to balance the inaccessibility of place with the hollowness of the virtual.

The pandemic might have contributed to an education system in which individuals would take more ownership and responsibility of their own learning, but there continues to be resistance to reforming pedantic pedagogical behaviors. Wemigwans is inspired by Linda Tuhiwai Smith's idea that real learning is an act of demystification, decolonization, and liberates all knowledges (Wemigwans, 2018, p.139). This bright light toward a new kind of knowledge is an area of ripe exploration in our misinformation age, and it also speaks toward our equal right to cultural heritage as a product and a process.

*A Digital Bundle* is a remarkable read that unpacks why legal traditions of diverse Indigenous nations are needed for Indigenous communities, how relationships come into being, and the importance of culturally ethical means of protecting and sharing Indigenous customs and practices. FourDirectionsTeachings.com is a compelling case of a bundle of sacred resources and ceremony to be protected and shared with great care. Canadian Indigenous communities, especially those with severed ties, will greatly benefit from FourDirectionsTeachings.com, in which *A Digital Bundle* serves as a value proposition. *A Digital Bundle* can also serve as a primer for those seeking and

working to build relationships with Indigenous communities such as settler educators, policy makers, and governmental bodies. A logical next step may be to expand this primer into a roadmap for reaching fuller reciprocity.

The sole focus on FourDirectionsTeachings.com at times feels limiting. Perhaps comparisons to similar initiatives would have added necessary complexity to both leverage the benefits FourDirectionsTeachings.com brings as well as expand on the ways it might be improved. The author goes to lengths defending FourDirectionsTeachings.com as a new genre when other issues such as why Indigenous Knowledge is in tension with Canadian copyright would have been helpful to further unpack.

Future research may examine whether Indigenous and non-Indigenous understandings can or should be harmonized via protocols as well as whether and how Indigenous Knowledge's authenticity might be measured. Since *A Digital Bundle* was published in 2018, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted populations of Indigenous communities that are often sites for tourism, and it has disrupted notions of engagement in digital spaces. What has been the role of FourDirectionsTeachings.com during the time? And while artificial intelligence technologies and tools have been in existence before 2018, how has their growth and hype resonated with Indigenous communities? How has the response to protect and carefully share Indigenous Knowledge via protocols changed? Given the questions and threads presented, readers are left wondering where Wemigwans' call to action may lead for future open Indigenous heritage initiatives.

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