

Re-Storying Aboriginal Literacy

by **Eileen Antone** and **Tania Córdoba**

...Culturally appropriate and sociologically relevant teaching and healing models must evolve and translate into practice and service delivery that will meet the needs of future generations. (Sinclair, p. ?)

To develop and broaden the field of Aboriginal literacy it is essential to include and acknowledge Aboriginal adult literacy as a distinct philosophy for learning. Acknowledging and owning Aboriginal literacy as a valid, valued and valuable alternate perspective will affirm and strengthen the contribution of Aboriginal Peoples to their own literacy and to the broader Canadian society.

Collaborating and sharing

A national research project in 2004 challenged the boundaries of formal academic research and sought to reflect Aboriginal protocols and philosophy for literacy learning. The research design extended Aboriginal principles of inclusion, reciprocity and mutuality. These principles depend on collaborative cooperation and on a range of people sharing information, experience and expertise: researchers, community organizations, institutions of higher learning, Aboriginal Elders, Aboriginal literacy and cultural practitioners as well as non-Aboriginal practitioners who are involved in literacy work with Aboriginal people. This design allowed for the fertilization of knowledge across disciplinary and cultural boundaries between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.

We organized three Learning Circles with Aboriginal literacy practitioners from various communities across Canada, including Elders and teachers, artist-educators and those who teach literacy skills using different approaches. The Learning Circles were conducted in the spring and fall of 2004. The first group of 12 participants from across Canada met in Toronto, Ontario. The second group met in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories with 6 participants coming in from the surrounding area. The third group met in Edmonton, Alberta with 8 participants from Edmonton and the surrounding area. The Circles were similar to the learning circle used by

Nabigon et al. (1998): a process that enables information sharing and connections, and seeks balance and harmony. We asked participants to explore and articulate their practice of literacy and to share their experiences in literacy with and for Aboriginal people.

Oracy was the traditional form of communication for Aboriginal people on Turtle Island (North America). Cultural knowledge was passed from one generation to the next generation through storytelling, ceremony, songs and teachings, as well as rituals and sharing (Absolon and Willet, p 8). Keeping these traditional forms in mind, we opened the circle in a traditional manner, offering each participant a tobacco tie. In many Aboriginal communities tobacco is a sacred medicine that connects us to the Creator and is given when we are asking someone for their help. We conducted a traditional smudge ceremony to bring focus to the group. An Opening Thanksgiving Address was given to reinforce and strengthen our relationship to each other and to all of Creation. The Thanksgiving is also a way to bring a 'good mind' to the circle. A welcoming song was performed on the hand drum to give greeting to each of the participants.

Following the opening protocols, members of the circle were given the opportunity to introduce themselves, to share their experiences in the field of Aboriginal Literacy and to talk about what Aboriginal Literacy meant to them. Using the circle format enabled all of the participants to talk and be listened to without interruption. The process took a couple of rounds to make sure that everyone had the opportunity to say what they wanted to. At the closing of the Circle a traditional giveaway was conducted so that each person was honoured with a gift for his or her participation. In keeping with Aboriginal protocol a feast was prepared and shared with each participant.

As Aboriginal people engaged in academic research, the research team sought to challenge the boundaries of formal academic research and validate traditional Aboriginal research methodologies. The findings we have collected to date provide an introductory glimpse of current thoughts, difficulties and aspirations of Aboriginal literacy practitioners. They emphasize the importance of embracing a wholistic

approach to literacy for Aboriginal people, while encouraging continuing dialogue and research.

Re-storying and restoring

This section will focus on re-storying and restoring Aboriginal cultural literacy as articulated by the Aboriginal literacy practitioners who took part in the Learning Circles. To respect requests for anonymity, the speakers will be referred to as Participant A, B, C, etc., along with the location of the Learning Circle.

The history of colonialism has caused a disruption in the transmission of Aboriginal knowledge within our communities (Kirkness; Dickason; Stiffarm; Antone; RCAP; Battiste). The effects of residential schools, the adoption out of our communities, the loss of language, culture and tradition—all continue to have long-lasting consequences on our Aboriginal communities. Participant F in Edmonton described the effects of colonialism: “I think it all stems back to the parents and the families that were taken away, and you are dealing now with a generation of people that don’t know how to parent.” Participant G (Edmonton) pointed out that historically Aboriginal literacy learning and philosophies for life were preserved and passed along through oral tradition, kept in the memories of the Elders of each community. Absolon and Willet (2004) also state,

Each nation retained, recorded and recounted its own cultural histories. These histories reflect in the names of places, people and elements of creation, a spirit that is alive in the land. The names are imbued with meaning, teachings and spirit. These histories were then relevant and meaningful to the lives, culture and survival of each Indigenous nation. They were then and remain today etched in the memories of their people and the land (p8).

In today’s society television, video games and the computer often replace human interaction, resulting in the loss of intergenerational learning. Formal Eurocentric colonial systems of education have resulted in the loss of respect for Aboriginal traditions and languages (Stiffarm; Kirkness), and the loss of respect for our Elders. At the same time, Elders in our communities are trying to rediscover their roles within our communities. They have had different and varied experiences in our contemporary context due to the historical disruption in our ways of learning.

Participant A, an Elder from the circle in Yellowknife, gave an example: “I feel very unprepared to be an Elder. I don’t think I’ve had that kind of experience that Elders have, I’ve not had that experience of living off of the land...I have not spoken my language in a very long time”. When we recognize traditional cultural experiences as strengths, we value Aboriginal competencies and acknowledge our distinct identities and histories as Aboriginal people.

All of the Aboriginal practitioners spoke about the importance of finding viable and culturally appropriate approaches to literacy. Participant B in Yellowknife explained, “It is sad when the very characteristics of our race that we have been brought up with, are not respected in an educational setting.” In Edmonton, Participant E asserted, “We are still not having [Aboriginal] people succeed in the mainstream education system; that’s still not happening, the numbers have not changed, so something is not right.” Literacy and language reflect world view and as such, narrowly defined notions of literacy elevate certain competencies while

undervaluing others, resulting in feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem for the learner (Participant D, Edmonton). When Aboriginal people develop our own methods of measuring literacy, we reframe, re-story and revalidate learning and education within our own cultures and epistemology. Speaking about environmental damage and the responsibilities that we have, and that are fundamental to Aboriginal identity, Participant A in Edmonton explained, “If we had literacy skills to be the keepers that traditionally we were, First Nations people wouldn’t have allowed any of that to happen.” This comment highlights the unique outlook that Aboriginal Peoples have in regards to literacy skills, and the disconnections between what competencies are valued in mainstream society and traditional epistemology. All Aboriginal participants in the Learning Circles insisted that Aboriginal languages, culture and tradition need to be forefront in literacy learning for Aboriginal people.

In exploring and articulating their own definitions, practitioners emphasized the overarching influence that literacy has on learners’ lives: “Literacy is who we are,” (Participant E, Yellowknife); “Literacy is life,” (Participant A, Yellowknife); “To me, literacy means everything. Everything is literacy. You learn from everything. Literacy is learning,” (Participant C, Edmonton). “Emotional, physical, psychological and spiritual well-being all influence and are influenced by literacy learning” (Participant E, Yellowknife).

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Participant A in Edmonton does some work in correctional institutions and she explained, "I suspect the reason why they are in difficulty is because of illiteracy, because it also affects your emotion, your intellect, being able to function and all of that."

Learning is a lifelong process and as Aboriginal people we have many sources of knowledge as well as many ways of teaching and learning. Storytelling is one methodology; therefore, if we are to understand Aboriginal literacy we must listen to Aboriginal Peoples as they share their stories about what Aboriginal literacy means to them. Participant A in Edmonton explained,

That's how we do the teachings—through storytelling and legends, and that was the way our kids learned; that was teaching. The right way and the wrong way you could learn through the legends for thousands of years; you didn't have to have degrees or anything. So we learned a whole lot about life through storytelling and legends and it's important that we still continue that process because, more so now, kids are having tremendous difficulties in school.

Another traditional way of learning is through observation and performed knowledge; expectations of each community member were clearly laid out. Participant B in Yellowknife explained that when her family went hunting for seal or caribou different family members had different roles. The roles that members assumed did not require a great amount of discussion or planning, but everyone had a specific task or contribution to fulfill. Dreams also traditionally provide a source of knowledge. Participant A in Yellowknife explained, "It's your dreams sometimes that come to expand your learning." These alternative ways of learning, living and being continue to be undervalued in mainstream adult education. When we use traditional methods of teaching and learning by and for Aboriginal people, literacy can nurture a positive identity, and can provide us with connections to the land, our families, our communities, our languages and our ancestors. Participant A (Yellowknife) contended that "[Aboriginal literacy] empowers people," and Participant D (Edmonton) declared it "gives them a quality of life."

Re-storying Aboriginal adult literacy encourages a wholistic approach to literacy and learning and embraces learning for life through body, mind, heart and spirit. These findings correlate with the previous study of Aboriginal literacy in Ontario (Antone et al.), and have encouraged us to further analyze and

discuss Aboriginal adult literacy as a distinct philosophy for learning.

Conclusion

Using a wholistic approach to re-storying Aboriginal adult literacy suggests viable and culturally-appropriate approaches to reclaiming and relocating Aboriginal space, place and time throughout the present 'knowledge economy,' both in institutions of higher learning and in popular education. This research project empowers Aboriginal Peoples to recover and reclaim their distinct cultural identities while demonstrating to other Canadians the knowledge and strength of Aboriginal approaches to adult education.

All my relations. ■

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