

## **Aboriginal Literacy and Education: A Wholistic Perspective that Embraces Intergenerational Knowledge**

Tania Córdoba, MA (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto)

*As an Aboriginal person I am constituted by my individual self and by my ancestors and future generations, who will originate in and have returned to the land. My relationship to the grass, to the trees, to the insects, to the birds, and even to the hunter animals derives from the fact that my ancestors are now part of the ground. Because the life surrounding me is part of me through my ancestors, I must consider and care for all of its constituents (Wilson 2001).*

### **Introduction**

The history of colonialism in Canada has caused a severe disruption in the transmission of traditional knowledge within Aboriginal nations. The effects of war, migration, residential school, forced adoption, loss of language, culture and tradition and the imposition of a foreign way of life, all continue to affect our Peoples. This colonialism and trauma experienced in past generations continues to influence every aspect of our lives and all of our people, from babies, to children, youth, parents and grandparents. The traditional roles and responsibilities of the individual and the family have been ruptured; the functions of our Elders and our relationship as a Peoples to the land and to creation has been uprooted as a result of the destruction of our way of life. Formal mainstream education continues to teach Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike from a fragmented and dominant eurowestern perspective that is incongruent with our traditional knowledges. Aboriginal approaches to literacy and life-long learning offer a unique and distinct approach to education that needs to be recognized. Without this acknowledgement Aboriginal Peoples continue to be considered as second-rate citizens in a two-tiered system that couches our worldviews in stereotypical terms.

This paper is based on a collaborative, empirical research project that seeks to develop and broaden the field of Aboriginal education, while insisting on the necessary inclusion and acknowledgement of Aboriginal Adult literacy as a distinct philosophy for learning. The research team for this study organized three Learning Circles with Aboriginal literacy practitioners including Elders and Teachers, Artist-Educators and those who teach literacy skills using different approaches from across Canada. In facilitating these Circles, we adhered to Aboriginal protocol and methodology; the Circles were conducted in a manner similar to a Sharing Circle. As Aboriginal people engaged in academic research, the research team sought to challenge the boundaries of formal academic research and re-validate traditional Aboriginal research methodologies throughout the research process. We opened in a traditional manner with smudge, an Opening prayer, hand-drumming and singing. Each person had the opportunity to speak and to be listened to without interruption, and upon closing gifts were offered to each participant and we shared food. The Learning Circles were conducted in the Spring and Fall of 2003. We had 12 participants in Toronto, Ontario, 6 participants in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories and 8 participants in Edmonton, Alberta; as much as possible, we tried to include people from outside of these major cities. We asked participants to explore and articulate their practice of literacy and to share their experiences in literacy with and for Aboriginal people. The findings that we have collected to-date provide an introductory glimpse of current thoughts, difficulties and aspirations

of Aboriginal literacy practitioners which emphasize the importance of embracing a wholistic approach to education for Aboriginal people, while encouraging dialogue and research. This paper will focus on the fundamental importance of approaching Aboriginal education from a wholistic perspective as articulated by the Aboriginal literacy practitioners who participated in the Learning Circles. As a result of request for anonymity, in this paper I will refer to the participants by letters A, B, C, etc. along with the location of the Learning Circle.

Literacy as viewed from an Aboriginal epistemology must be seen from a wholistic perspective. In exploring and articulating their own definitions, practitioners emphasized the over-arching influence that literacy has on learner's 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). Participant A in Edmonton does some work in correctional institutions and she explains, "I suspect the reason why they are in difficulty is because of illiteracy, because it also effects your emotion, your intellect, being able to function and all of that."

Embracing literacy from a wholistic perspective requires that we understand education as a life-long process that reaffirms Aboriginal identities, cultures and epistemologies. Intergenerational transmission of knowledge is fundamental to this process. From our Aboriginal Elders we learn our histories, languages, traditions, cultures, arts, medicines, sciences, and how to survive; their stories and experiences teach us who we are, where we come from and guide us in visioning for the future. Our Elders, our families and our communities remind us that Indigenous knowledge is informed by a balance between body, mind, heart and spirit. Thus, literacy and learning for Aboriginal people is much more than reading, writing and arithmetic; it involves 'embodied learning' and 'performed knowledge.' This knowledge seeks to nurture relationships between the individual, the family, the community, the nation, and all of Creation. This paper will highlight some of the sources of learning for Aboriginal people, thereby revealing the importance of intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Our Elders have rich life experiences, many still speak their Aboriginal languages and remember stories and legends, traditions and life on the land; they preserve a rich history, while living and embodying Aboriginal knowledge.

### **Aboriginal sources of learning, teaching and knowing**

Learning is a life-long process and as Aboriginal people we have many methods of teaching and educating all members of our communities. 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. In contemporary times television, video games and the computer often replace human interaction, resulting in the loss of intergenerational learning. In some cases there is a rupture between the generations due to language barriers. Formal eurocentric colonial systems of education have resulted in the loss of respect for Aboriginal traditions and languages, and the loss of respect for our Elders both from within our communities and from outside. At the same time, our Elders 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. One Elder

participant explains “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,” (Participant A, Yellowknife). When we recognize these experiences as strengths, we value Aboriginal competencies and acknowledge our distinct identities and histories as Aboriginal people. Sources of learning for Aboriginal people provide a rich alternative grounded in tradition and worldview. I will now describe some sources of learning for Aboriginal people as shared by the Aboriginal literacy practitioners in the Learning Circles including: storytelling, performed knowledge, observation, dreams and ceremony. All of these sources overlap and interweave, however for the purpose of this paper I will attempt to separate a few examples into broader categories.

Storytelling is a fundamental way of educating and transmitting knowledge to all people in our communities. Bussidor emphasizes this way of seeing the world, “Every story is a tool we can use if we want to. That is what our elders say” (1997: 8). Therefore, if we are to understand Aboriginal literacy we must listen to Aboriginal people as they share their stories about what Aboriginal literacy means to them. Participant A in Edmonton explains:

That’s how we do the teachings through storytelling and legends, and that was our way our kids learned; that was teaching. The right way and the wrong way you could learn though 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.

Participant D in Toronto emphasizes this point by referring to a traditional story among his Onkwehonwe people; “So literacy is communication and it is story. I will tell this...tell you this story and the story is about Peacemaker...When the People forgot the way of peace between one another, they became violent and uncooperative, they fought amongst each other. And they did all kinds of abuse to each other, because they weren’t communicating in the proper way, they forgot their roles and responsibilities.” Through storytelling we learn how to see and interpret the world; we learn about our past, share stories of the present and vision together for the future.

Performed knowledge and embodied knowledge are other important sources for Aboriginal Peoples, that teach responsibilities and relationships among family, community and creation. For example, Participant B in Yellowknife explains 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. Participant A in Edmonton describes a similar experience growing up in a different environment on the prairies: “We knew exactly what to expect from our environment...and we understood our traditions, and our values and our culture. We even knew what month strawberries were out and chokecherries. So that was our education and it was primarily done in the whole group.” Dancing, singing and the creation and expression of culture through art, as well as adherence to cultural protocol are all expressions of Aboriginal knowledge. “I know some families that are all together; they bead together, they bead all their outfits, they go to their powwows together and they speak their language fluently. Now I call that cultural literacy” (Participant A, Toronto). The method of starting and facilitating the Learning Circles that I described above, opening with tobacco, smudge, prayer and a song are important expressions of knowledge. By following specific protocol we recognize all participants in body,

mind, heart and spirit and acknowledge the interconnectedness of all of creation; in this way we remember and live the traditions and knowledges of our ancestors.

Another traditional way of learning is through observation. Participant B in Yellowknife explains that the Inuksuit are a central aspect in Inuit life. They are stone placements that have been made for thousands of years in specific locations by northern communities to guide the people on the land. They are misappropriated by mainstream Canadian society; “As our people said, the Inuksuk has absorbed the peoples’ spirit, fears, joy and anger...It becomes part of the earth and the rocks and so the people of many generations are part of that, the spirit of the rock, so that spot or that place is sacred.” The tradition of making Inuksuit to mark the land demonstrate a unique method of learning to “read the land” and to read the surrounding environment.

Dreams and ceremony also traditionally provide a source of learning. Participant A in Yellowknife explains, “It’s your dreams sometimes that come to expand your learning.” As human beings we come to know our responsibilities through ceremonies and through visions. As Aboriginal Peoples we are traditionally keepers of the land; and as individuals we also have responsibilities which we sometimes come to know through our “Indian names.” Participant A in Toronto explains, “I always try to live up to my name...We have to try and fulfill that promise.” As Aboriginal nations we also learn that we have responsibilities as nations that are fundamental to Aboriginal identity. Participant A in Edmonton explains, “If we had literacy skills to be the keepers that traditionally we were, First Nations people wouldn’t have allowed that to happen.” This comment highlights the unique outlook that Aboriginal Peoples have in regards to literacy skills, and the connections or lack thereof between valued competencies in mainstream society and traditional epistemology. These alternate ways of learning, living and being continue to be undervalued in mainstream education. When we use traditional methods of teaching and learning by and for Aboriginal people, literacy nurtures a positive identity, and connects us to the land, to our families, to our communities, to our languages and to our ancestors (Participant A, Yellowknife).

### **Reclaiming traditional knowledge: The role of our Elders**

Through the sources of learning and knowing that I have mentioned above, we come to develop a specific way of seeing, being and living in the world as Aboriginal Peoples that re-enforces intergenerational connections. Elders connect us and teach us our histories; they share the language and they show us our responsibilities. Participant E in Edmonton explains, “When I was growing up one of the most important people that gave me knowledge was my Kookum - my Nookum [my Grandmother]. She was a person that taught the philosophy of life through culture, and I learned the meaning of good and bad through...legends.” Through both formal and informal education we learn our identities and our place in the world, in the universe and in creation.

Our identities, values and epistemologies are all learned and shaped in cultural context and when the teachings of one generation are disrupted, the whole community feels the repercussions and there is a disjunction in the traditional intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Participant F in Edmonton explains that we can still feel the impact of attempted assimilation of our parents and grandparents generations: “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. So they don't have the skills to sit and spend time with their children." The imposition of eurowestern models of education has effected what we learn and how we learn; Participant B in Toronto explains, "I got sent off to residential school...I had some very strict teachers who taught me to focus on the written word and I am proficient at it, but in doing that I lost many things." Aboriginal cultural literacy nurtures positive cultural identity, pride and self-esteem; it demands a return to intergenerational learning and education; it empowers Aboriginal Peoples towards self-determination while demonstrating the knowledge and strength of Aboriginal approaches to education.

## **Conclusion**

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). "According to English you're kind of dumb, according to what they understand...We are not stupid...but we have different priorities." (Participant C, Toronto). When we develop our own methods of measuring literacy as Aboriginal people, we reframe, re-story and revalidate learning and education within our own cultures and epistemology. As we become empowered to fulfill our responsibilities as we see them, we strengthen our sense of self in relation to the rest of creation; Participant A in Yellowknife explains, "There is something very fundamental about Aboriginal people in that we need to be connected to our identity or our parent's identity or our grandparent's identity. We need that just like we need to breathe...and the land connects us, our families connect us, our languages connect us. Without that...we will never truly know who we are in this society." The acknowledgement of our unique perspective as Aboriginal people on learning and knowing must be respected as a fundamental aspect of self-determination.

Aboriginal literacy and education employs a wholistic approach that embraces learning for life through body, mind, heart and spirit. Acknowledging and owning this literacy as a valid, valued and valuable alternate perspective affirms and strengthens the contributions of Aboriginal people to their own literacy and to broader Canadian society. The methodology used for the Learning Circles on Aboriginal literacy sought to approach the research process in ways that reflect the principles of Aboriginal protocols and philosophy for learning. The discussions with Aboriginal literacy practitioners and this paper reflect the reclamation and relocation of Aboriginal space, place and time throughout the present 'knowledge economy,' both in institutions of higher learning and in the popular education context, while demonstrating the knowledge and strength of Aboriginal approaches to education. These findings are in correlation with a previous study of Aboriginal literacy at a provincial level in Ontario, and they encourage us to further analyze and discuss the fundamental importance of recognizing Aboriginal epistemology as a distinct philosophy for learning.

## References

Antone, E., Gamlin, P. & Provost-Turchetti, L. (2003) *Literacy and Learning: Acknowledging Aboriginal Holistic Approaches to Learning in Relation to 'Best Practices' Literacy Training Programs, Final Report*. Toronto: Literacy and Learning.

Bussidor, I. & Bilgen-Reinart, U. (1997) *Night Spirits: The Story of the Relocations of the Sayisi Dene*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.

Wilson, S. (2001) Editorial: Self-as-Relationship in Indigenous Research *Canadian Journal of Native Education*. 25(2), 91-92.