Practitioner’s Aboriginal Literacy Resource

A program for a holistic ecology of aboriginal literacy

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Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development

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Developed in partnership with the Ministry of
Advanced Education and Labour Market Development

Introduction

Practitioner's Aboriginal Literacy Resource has been adapted (edited in the form of a practitioner's resource) from its original document *Indigenizing Framework for Aboriginal Literacy – An Integrated Program for a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy*. This framework document was created by Eric Ostrowidzki and Marla M. Pryce. Eric holds a PhD in English Literature from McGill and is an English Instructor at Nicola Valley Institute of Technology. He has been working in the field of Native Education for the past 15 years. Marla has a Masters of Education degree from Simon Fraser University and is Coordinator for Adult Literacy at Nicola Valley Institute of Technology. This *Practitioner's Resource* has been adapted from its original and developed by Kristian Urstad. Kristian has a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Oslo and currently teaches Philosophy at Nicola Valley Institute of Technology and at the University of the Fraser Valley. Both the original *Framework* document and the *Practitioner's Resource* can be found on NVIT's website, under *Literacy at NVIT*.

Content

Practitioner's Aboriginal Literacy Resource will hopefully challenge practitioners to think about the pedagogy of Aboriginal literacy in different ways. It is not only designed to encourage new insight and understanding but to stimulate critical reflection that leads to steady improvement in practice.

This *Practitioner's Resource* is organized into three chapters. **Chapter 1** is intended to give the reader a brief overview of the literacy and educational strategies and learning outcomes. It is also meant to introduce and carefully define key terms and concepts that will be used throughout the package. **Chapter 2** offers up a collection of eight indigenization strategies for teaching literacy to Aboriginal learners. Along with every teaching or language instruction approach or strategy, the practitioner will be helped along by illustrative examples and real-life cases. **Chapter 3** goes beyond singular teaching approaches and stresses the importance of indigenizing the *whole* educational process. Literacy practitioners should be

prepared to develop an *Integrated Program of a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy*. 'Ecology' here refers to a whole way of life, a complete environment comprised of a variety of elements that coexist in an interdependent web of relations. Here the Medicine Wheel, principal Indigenous values and virtues, a set of curricular streams grounded in the notion of Aboriginal community and the revitalization of Aboriginal languages are all used to establish this holistic educational model. It is only when we have created such an integrated program that we hope we will have *successfully* indigenized literacy. A **bibliography** for the entire package and a list of **Further Readings** appear at the end, succeeded by a **glossary** of important terms, concepts and models.

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Chapter 1

The following indigenization strategies are intended to serve as a "Practitioners' Resource" for literacy educators and community members interested in cultivating an integrated and holistic approach to literacy learning. According to the "Primary Research Report," one of the challenges that prevent practitioners from implementing indigenization strategies is a lack "of knowledge in mainstream educators" about the benefits of approaching literacy from an aboriginal perspective – a historically, culturally, and cognitively familiar perspective for understanding the world. To fulfill this need, the following resource proposes a series of indigenization strategies to create "An Integrated Program for a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy" to provide guidance with a rich resource of values, pedagogical strategies or techniques, and learning examples.

Definition of Indigenization

The most culturally appropriate means to innovate language instruction for Aboriginal learners is to *indigenize literacy*. But what exactly does the word "indigenization" mean within an educational context?

Two commonly accepted definitions are:

- To incorporate Indigenous curriculum, values, and perspectives within academic programs;
- To adopt teaching styles that are most suited to the learning styles and academic needs of Aboriginal students.

Definition of Literacy

Any effort at developing an Indigenization Framework for Aboriginal Literacy must be guided by a definition of *literacy*. This definition must identify the literacy needs and educational objectives of the community and individual learners. Critical to developing a series of literacy indigenization strategies for this project was the participation of various Aboriginal communities within British Columbia who collaborated to define literacy according to their own priorities:

> Aboriginal adult literacy is the transmission of cultures, orality, symbolic systems and communicating from within our own diverse nations. It is a tool that provides equal opportunities for each individual within our communities to become multi-literate/multi-lingual and to have a choice to participate in western society, while revitalizing and preserving our cultures, languages and governance systems. Most importantly, Aboriginal adult literacy legitimizes and empowers Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing.[1]

Learning Outcomes

Guided by our Aboriginal literacy *definition*, we might adopt these learning *outcomes* for our literacy programs:

- ✓ To revive and maintain Aboriginal languages and the Oral Tradition respective to Aboriginal communities;
- ✓ To accommodate the multiple needs of culturally diverse Aboriginal learners and communities;
- ✓ To build upon the existing literacy strengths and ways of knowing of Aboriginal learners;
- ✓ To develop a curriculum sensitive to the complex and evolving literacy needs of Aboriginal learners from pre-school through Post-Secondary education and beyond;
- ✓ To create a bridge from Aboriginal forms of literacy to Western Standard English and Academic Writing and Reading as articulated by Provincial literacy outcomes.

An Integrated Program of a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy

According to our definition, literacy is a way of *being and knowing and acting in the world* rather than the acquisition of a simple set of mechanical skills. As a consequence of the personal, social, and economic importance of literacy, a *comprehensive* set of indigenization strategies must be developed to form an Integrated Program of a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy. To establish the foundation of this Integrated Program, literacy practitioners must adopt these four major strategies *to indigenize the educational process as a whole*:

Four strategies to indigenize the educational

1. The holistic re-conceptualization of the Aboriginal learner based upon the holistic philosophy of the Medicine Wheel, which addresses the learner as a whole person by attending to her body, mind, heart and spirit.
2. The incorporation of Aboriginal values and principles to pervade all aspects of the educational process, e.g., Integrity, Humility, Sharing, Humour, Reciprocity, Strength, Wisdom, Non-Interference, Respect, etc.
3. The creation of Indigenous curriculum relevant to the needs of the community and Aboriginal learners, e.g, the Elders' wisdom, Respecting the Environment, Spiritual Practices, Giving Back/Reciprocity, etc.
4. The revitalization of Aboriginal languages must also form the core of Aboriginal literacy programs, since Aboriginal languages are essential to understanding Indigenous knowledge, values, beliefs and truths.

Eight Strategies for Indigenizing the Teaching of Literacy

Besides indigenizing the educational process to establish the proper foundation for a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy, eight specific strategies have been identified for the *teaching of literacy* to Aboriginal learners. Although these eight strategies might be employed by instructors as individual approaches for teaching literacy, these strategies should be used as an integrated program over the long-term to optimize the success of Aboriginal students at the secondary and post-secondary level.

The following are the eight strategies for indigenizing the teaching of literacy:

Eight strategies for indigenizing the teaching of literacy

1. The Principle of "Thinking the Highest Thought"
2. Story-Telling as a Model for Aboriginal Literacy—Narrative Discourse
3. Teaching Standard English as an Additional Dialect
   i. The Dialect Awareness Approach
   ii. Contrastive Analysis
   iii. Communicative Content-based and Task-based language Approach
4. Reading and Writing—A Constructivist Approach
5. A Learner-Directed Approach for Aboriginal Students
6. Collaborative Learning and Aboriginal Literacy
7. A Critical Pedagogy of Place, Social Action, and Aboriginal Literacy
8. Aboriginal Literacy and the Mass Media

Although these eight strategies might be used as *singular* individual approaches, they should be used as an *integrated* program to optimize the success of Aboriginal students at the secondary and post-secondary level.

This resource will first review the eight strategies along with their culturally relevant assignments and learning examples. This resource will then elaborate upon the concept of An Integrated Program of Aboriginal Literacy as well as examine the place of these teaching-literacy strategies within it.

Chapter 2

First Strategy of Indigenization: The Principle of "Thinking the Highest Thought"

To think the highest thought should be the *guiding* principle of an Aboriginal literacy program. To think the highest thought is to imagine the *good* or *ethical* life for Aboriginal communities. When Aboriginal learners write, they must learn to always think the highest thought to perpetuate the good life *for themselves*, *for their communities*, *and for nature*.

Techniques and Learning Examples

Students might write an essay—on the topic of "giving back"—about how they might best serve their communities or Nature. They could, for instance, be asked to write about traditional Indigenous ecological knowledge.

By having their writing guided by such a principle, students will hopefully begin the process of living the good life; they may transform their own attitudes that may influence others in belief and action to *extend* beyond the four walls of the classroom.

Second Strategy of Indigenization: An Aboriginal Model of Literacy based upon Storytelling--Narratives

The tradition of oral story-telling is the most *commonly recognized* form of an Aboriginal way of knowing or understanding the world. Reduced to their basic structural form, stories are essentially *narratives*, that is, they tell a series of inter-related events or ideas in some kind of relevant sequential form.

Because narrative is regarded as the very foundation stone for Aboriginal literacy, it seems likely that narrative order constitutes the common element among the different types of Indigenous literacy (songs, prayers, origin stories, trickster tales, contemporary stories, *etc*.).

As a universal discourse, narrative also forms a *bridge* between Aboriginal literacy and Western literacy. The widespread relevance of narrative is what Keeshig Tobias (2003) might have had in mind when she adopted Jeanette Armstrong's concept of a "Story-Telling Circle." Within this circle, there are four divisions of literacy based upon narrative discourse. Each division deals with the cultural needs of Aboriginal communities *but also with their needs for communicating within Western society*. These divisions of literacy are:

1. Storytelling (may be *realized as* poetry, short fiction or novels)
2. Oral History (may be *realized as* biography or history of a nation)
3. Oratory (may be *realized as* editorials or dissertations)
4. Reportage (may be *realized as* manuals or cookbooks)

Techniques and Learning Examples

To use story-telling/narratives as a basis for teaching academic writing, practitioners might use the following pedagogical process:

- ✓ Scholarly narratives
- ✓ Contrastive rhetoric

To write *scholarly narratives*, students may use their own *personal* experiences, read texts, and engage in oral interviews to learn as much as they can upon a subject. Then they must write *informed stories* about the subject *without* being inhibited by the conventions of standard academic essays, for example, providing direct quotations (although some degree of thematic relevance and organizational coherence should still apply).

After Aboriginal learners have completed their scholarly narratives, literacy practitioners should make use of the pedagogy of *contrastive rhetoric*. This pedagogy requires instructors to facilitate discussions with students to examine the *similarities* and *differences* between their scholarly narratives and academic story-telling or to an essay that uses a more conventional approach to academic writing. Guided questions from the instructor may pertain to both the *structure* and *purposes* of these two types of narrative writing.

In respect to the *structures* of the stories, instructors might ask questions about the organization of the narratives, the development and length of paragraphs, the structure and length of sentences, the style of language, and the kind of evidence used to substantiate claims. In respect to the *purposes* of these two types of story-telling, instructors might ask such questions: Do these stories intend to entertain? Do they intend to teach a moral lesson? Do they intend to elaborate upon a concept? Do they intend to compare different ideas with one another? Do they intend to explain a subject or argue a point? Or do these two forms of story-telling intend to accomplish a variety of these purposes? If any, what mode of story-telling accomplishes its purpose(s) more successfully? For what reasons?

The goal here is that when Aboriginal learners write narrative scholarship and then use contrastive rhetoric to analyze and compare their own stories with academic story-telling, they will draw on their existing narrative skills to make the *transition* from writing primarily autobiographical stories to writing academic stories that are perhaps more restrictive in the formal requirements.

One possible assignment would be to ask students to write a scholarly narrative on the topic of "The Reciprocal and Symbiotic Relationship between Aboriginal People and Nature." Then the instructor would ask them guided questions to compare their story-telling with more academically formal types of narratives.

Third Strategy of Indigenization: Teaching Standard English as an Additional Dialect

One of the major obstacles that Aboriginal students face when they enter a post-secondary classroom is the sense that their own Native language and the English which they speak in everyday settings within their communities (Aboriginal English) is somehow *inferior* to Standard English, which is the language of instruction and scholarship within the University-system in North America.

To overcome this misconception about the cultural superiority of SE, educators must try to convey the message to Indigenous students that Aboriginal English is a *legitimate* language in its own right. That is, Aboriginal English is not simply SE spoken and written *incorrectly*. On the contrary, Aboriginal English is a *grammatically coherent and grammatically consistent* system that constitutes a *legitimate variation of English*. If the instructor demonstrates the value of Aboriginal English as a legitimate dialect, Indigenous students are more likely to *succeed* in the acquisition of SE.

The Dialectic Awareness Approach

The instructor may employ the "Dialect Awareness Approach" to instil within students this awareness. Raising the dialect awareness of Aboriginal students might be achieved by the instructor *comparing* Aboriginal English with SE to distinguish the general characteristics that mark Aboriginal English and SE as *different* from one another. By becoming aware that Aboriginal English is a structurally different dialect rather than inferior to SE, Aboriginal learners can begin to esteem the strength, originality, and beauty of Aboriginal English.

Techniques and Learning Examples

One assignment fostering the development of a dialectic awareness of the differences between Aboriginal English and SE within Aboriginal students might consist of encouraging students to translate the oral poetry of Harry Robinson into SE. Having completed this assignment, students might then discuss the various types of differences that differentiate the two dialects from one another, observing the relative strengths of Aboriginal English and SE.

Note the differences between the first passage in the original oral version of Harry Robinson's "An Okanagan Indian Becomes a Captive Circus Showpiece in England" and the translation of this passage into SE:

Original Aboriginal English Version

This is about George Jim.

He belongs to the Ashnola Band those days.

I had it written down, 1886.

No, I mean 1887.

That's one year I'm out there.

That's supposed to be in the 1880s.

That time, 1886,

the people, Indians from Penticton,

all the Okanagan Indians,

they were sent from Similkameen.

They all move to Oroville (is now) in the month of August,

about the last week in the month of August.

And they all get together in Oroville.

And that's when the salmon come up.

Comes up, you know, from way down.

They come up on the Colombia River

and they come up on the Okanagan.

And some of them go up, they split up there.

Some of them go up the Columbia River.

They have a good place for catching them there in Oroville.

Kind of shallow.

Only a small river.

Standard English Translation of Oral Version

This story is about George Jim, who belonged to the Ashnola band back in the early days. This story had been written between the years 1886 – 1887, which was the approximate time the author had been visiting the area.

During the year 1886 in the last month of August, the Penticton and the Okanagan Aboriginal people were sent from Similkameen to Oroville where they all gathered together.

At this time, some of the salmon swam up the Columbia River and others swam up the Okanagan River, where the salmon diverged in different directions. In Oroville, the people had a good place for catching the salmon because the river was small and shallow.

In this assignment, students might become aware of several things. For example:

- Robinson's story-telling gift for repeating key phrases, using the conjunction "and," and varying his sentence-length to create the rhythmical flow of oral speech.
- The SE translation is stripped of the dynamic performative oral dimension and is mainly concerned with conveying information in chronologically ordered sentences that display concision and coherence—qualities in writing that are appropriate for certain contexts but not others.
- Robinson's original version contains personal references by using the pronoun "I," while the SE translation has edited out all personal pronoun references following the norm in academic prose, which attempts to obtain impersonal neutrality on the subject.

Contrastive Analysis

The contrastive approach is quite similar to the dialectic awareness approach because both approaches promote awareness of "structural differences" between Aboriginal English and SE. However, a contrastive analysis might focus more upon the *specific grammatical differences* rather than the general characteristic features that differentiate the two dialects from each other.

This is an important approach because it has been found that the grammatical analysis of structures in second language learning is *not* very successful in promoting communicative competence. On the other hand, in contrast to teaching the grammatical structure of SE in isolation such as in grammar drills, the contrastive analysis that draws Indigenous learners' attention to the specific structural and grammatical differences between dialect and SE has been found to be *effective* in teaching English as a second dialect.

Techniques and Learning Examples

One learning activity in which to use the contrastive analysis approach is to request students write autobiographies in Aboriginal English and then translate their personal stories into SE. After writing about their life-experiences and/or their communities, Aboriginal learners will next analyze the grammatical differences between their stories written in Aboriginal English and the same story re-written in SE. In the second version, such things as overall story organization, paragraph structure, verb-tense, subject-verb agreement, and punctuation might be focussed upon.

Communicative Content-based and Task-based Language Approach

In the "communicative content-based and task-based approach," the focus is having Aboriginal students produce writing that has a *real-life goal,* using reading materials from real life as models. The reason why a task-based approach is suited to Aboriginal learners is because the approach builds upon an Aboriginal world-view and preferred learning style. Since Aboriginal students are often *context-dependent* learners who learn by the practice of *doing*, they may draw upon this strength by writing to achieve a specific task within an academic environment. To learn to write academically, students will write in SE within a *practical context*.

Techniques and Learning Examples

One idea would be to get students to collaborate to write a funding proposal to launch a special community project, such as the establishment of a day-care centre.

Another assignment would be to have students collaboratively write in Standard English a school or community newspaper. To choose content-based materials as models for writing, students might study the organizational structure and the style of diction of newspaper articles in Aboriginal newspapers such as *Raven's Eye* and *Kahtou*.

Fourth Strategy of Indigenization: Reading and Writing—a Constructivist Approach

When Aboriginal learners read a text, they are faced with the prospect of *interpreting* the text. Within many postsecondary English classrooms, instructors often expect from students one or two types of interpretation, namely, to provide a literal interpretation of the words and sentences and paragraphs of the text, and/or to explain solely what the author intended to say by the text.

Both highly restricted forms of interpretation deny the experiences of the learner in interpreting the text. When instructors subtract learners from the process of interpretation, they deny the life experiences of learners. Without this important experiential context, learners possess no personal framework from which to understand the texts that they are reading.

In order to indigenize the reading and writing process for Aboriginal learners, the *constructivist model* of interpretation is proposed. The constructivist model focuses more on *creating meaning* rather than on the analytical process of exclusively interpreting the literal or author's meaning. During the *creative process of constructing meaning from the text*, learners relate the text to the context of their lives, whereby their prior knowledge and experiences come into play. In other words, learners are as much creators as they are interpreters of texts.

According to Dr. Marie Battiste (2002), the constructivist approach to reading and writing about texts has important ***benefits* for learners**.

- ✓ The constructivist approach enables Aboriginal learners to become aware of the fact that the act of interpreting texts is much more than comprehending the literal meaning of the words on the page. On the contrary, when learners read, *they actively and creatively construct the meanings from the texts*, which is a process of reading that is informed by their own social contexts embedded within their communities.
- ✓ It enables learners to come to the realization that the experiences in the stories of their own lives *count* in the interpretative process;

therefore, Aboriginal learners will experience a greater sense of *autonomy* and *self-validation*.

- ✓ It enables Aboriginal learners to experience an awakening sense of empowerment because they realize that their own interpretations are as legitimate as any other cultural authority's understandings; therefore, they experience a greater motivation to *do* something with print, which allows them to explore other functions and purposes of literacy.

- ✓ It enables Aboriginal learners to learn and strengthen—via their reading and writing—their *critical thinking* and action-based skills. Not only are these skills essential for solving their own problems, but such critical skills are essential for solving the problems that might be facing their communities.

Techniques and Learning Examples

To use the constructivist approach, instructors might assign a reader-role to students: they will be *meaning-makers* rather than *text-analysts*. Within conventional literary interpretation, "textual analysts" focus exclusively on the object of study—the meaning of the words on the page. Such an exclusive focus on the text asks "what does the author intend to say?" rather than "what do I as a reader think and feel about the text?". In other words, textual analysts strictly interpret the author's meaning, while meaning-makers frame their responses according to the contexts of their own lives. Textual analysts strive for an *impersonal understanding* of the text, whereas meaning-makers give a *personal response to the text*.

If, for example, both a textual-analyst and meaning-maker are asked to write a response to the same film about the life of young people in the ghetto of an inner city, a textual analyst might attempt to analyze the socio-economic conditions of this poverty based on the dialogue and characters and scenery in the film, while a meaning-maker might understand the reality of such poverty through his/her own life or the lives of his/her friends. Both textual analysts and meaning-makers come to an

understanding what the text means, but they approach it from different angles.

Instructors should also try to establish a learning context for students: working in groups, students might co-construct a response to, for example, the film *Freedom Writers* or *Smoke Signals*. The constructivist approach might also range from student journal responses to written texts, to the production of a “radio broadcast on a local radio” station, to making a “documentary/ CD Rom”.

Fifth Strategy of Indigenization: A Learner-Directed Approach for Aboriginal Students

In a learner-directed approach, learners must make decisions about *what* it is they want to learn, *when* and *how* it is to be learned, and how their work should be *evaluated*.

To attempt self-directed learning:

- ✓ Students must *identify learning objectives* in terms of concrete skills and knowledge that they must acquire;
- ✓ They must *identity learning resources* in terms of possible readings, speakers, writing assignments;
- ✓ They must carry out each of the learning stages in their plan in a *sequential* fashion; and
- ✓ They must *complete* all assignments to prove that they have obtained the knowledge and skills.

It is important to note that within this learning context educators are no longer the sole authorities and dispensers of knowledge at the front of the classroom; rather they become facilitators and resource people to support Aboriginal learners in their educational projects. *The goal of the instructor is to serve as a guide to enable learners to assume control over their learning as autonomous researchers and writers.*

A learner-directed approach is suited to Aboriginal learners because many students (particularly adult learners) have the potential to be highly independent learners who learn through direct experience within the context of their lives. Hence Aboriginal learners might benefit from undertaking independent projects based upon their real-life situations.

Techniques and Learning Examples

One example of a self-directed learner approach in which Aboriginal students assume autonomy over their own learning is recounted by Judith C. Thompson (2003):

> I have developed a unit plan based on the traditional plant knowledge of North Coast Aboriginal Peoples. All of the lessons rely on the knowledge and wisdom of the Elders and community members and the involvement of students, which is very important to me. The unit plan is made up of six lessons. The first three lessons are based on the development of a plant booklet. Students research traditional uses of plants from both primary sources, such as Elders and community members, and secondary sources, such as books, the internet, and other media. They go on a school field trip, hopefully accompanied by Elders, and observe and photograph plants in their natural habitat. They then collect plant samples, identify them, press and mount them. Once this is done, students bring all of the knowledge that they have learned, all of the images and plant samples that they have accumulated, and create a plant booklet. […] One of the important outcomes of the lessons is to get the students to become the researchers; researchers who explore their own lives so that they can connect their own lived experience with that of their community members. (63-64)

Here not only are students responsible for *creating* and *fashioning* a plant booklet but they themselves have become the *active researchers* of the project (thereby assuming control over their learning as autonomous writers and researchers). These are important objectives of becoming a self-directed learner.

Sixth Strategy of Indigenization: Collaborative Learning and Aboriginal Literacy

Typically, literacy education has emphasized the *individual* learner rather than *groups* of learners. Since literacy *evaluation* tends to concentrate on assessing the writing skills of individual learners, instruction and assignments are focused on the individual within most contexts of the education system.

In contrast to literacy education that focuses on individuals, the indigenization strategy of collaborative learning provides a warm and supportive learning environment that emphasizes *cooperation* and *dialogue* among peers rather than competitive individualism.

In order to create a collaborative literacy environment, four basic pedagogical conditions must be established. The educator needs to:

- ✓ Develop a sense of personal safety for learners;
- ✓ Encourage a sense of mutual respect between them;
- ✓ Increase the motivation for learners to write; and,
- ✓ Form learners into small groups that share similar goals.

Just as in a learner-directed approach to literacy, instructors act in a *facilitative* role as resource people in a collaborative learning approach. They practice the ethic of *non-interference*. This ethic necessitates an attitude of respect for the *autonomy* of Aboriginal learners and their abilities and willingness to think, interpret, and creatively problem-solve in the course of their writing activities.

Techniques and Learning Examples

One possible assignment for collaborative learners is to request that they research and write a paper on the history of a particular group of Aboriginal people. Each participating member of the group may cover a different subject area. Such a group essay might consist of such sections as:

governance structures and decision-making processes; spiritual practices; medicine and healing practices; hunting and gathering practices; cultural activities; traditional forms of education; housing and clothing, *etc*.

Another example is reported by Hauer and Taylor in their "Collaborative learning in an Aboriginal Adult Literacy Centre". Working to create the appropriate collaborative learning environment,

> Andrea, an instructor, had organized a group that comprised four men who were working towards improving their English writing skills. Andrea described how the group worked together, "We created poetry and pieces of work that reflected something in (their) lives. They would post their work on an on-line environment from the Thursday Night Thinkers". She added "Learners' groups with similar interests and skill levels continued to meet for a while but eventually dissolved as the circumstances and the group members changed". (173)

Seventh Strategy of Indigenization: A Critical Pedagogy of Place, Social Action, and Aboriginal Literacy

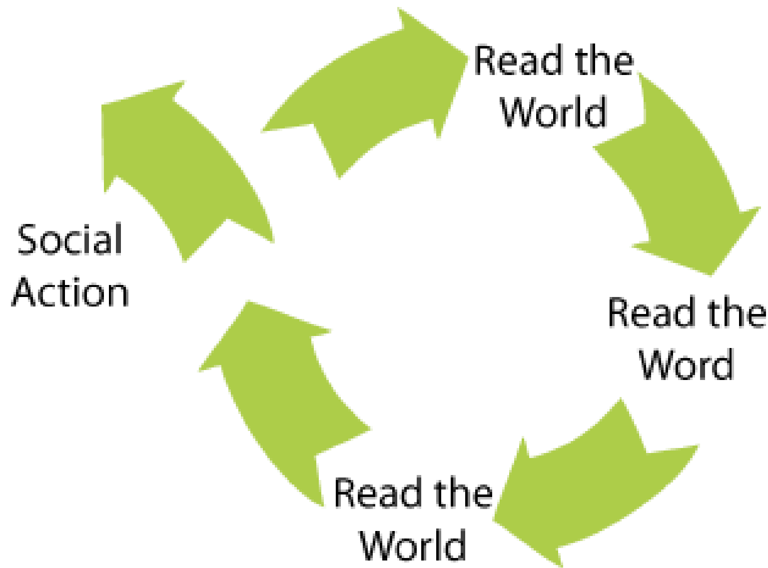
Developed by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, a critical pedagogy is a liberation pedagogy used to empower colonized people to transform the oppressive conditions of their lives through literacy practices and social action. Critical pedagogy is also called *Participatory Action Research*.

Based on the assumption that learners might not be intellectually *aware* of the historical circumstances of their colonial oppression, a critical pedagogy consists of various components.

Raising the consciousness or critical awareness within learners is one part of this pedagogy. This enables learners to become aware of the social oppression and/or damaged ecology and empowers them with a sense that they can challenge and change the real conditions of their oppression.

To raise the critical consciousness of learners, educators must engage them in a *dialogue* which will enable students to gain the critical literacy tools to read the world for signs of environmental degradation or social oppression. *Reading the world* is a form of understanding the world that moves beyond print culture. That is, the educator—through dialogue—imparts students with the critical literacy tools to read the world in which they understand the "images of their own concrete, situated experiences with the world." Within the context of a critical pedagogy of place, reading the world would consist of understanding the signs of ecological degradation or social oppression. It is important to add that rather than teaching curriculum within the conventional environment of the classroom to a group of passive learners, this pedagogy demands that *educators accompany learners into the natural environment* and foster within them a connection to Nature.

While reading the physical signs of ecological degradation in the world counts as one type of reading, reading print-based texts counts as another kind of reading. The more learners understand when they read the world, the more they are motivated to understand by reading print-based texts, which could give them further insights into the multiple causes of the destruction of the environment. Thus there is a *cyclical* process of understanding: learners first begin to read the world, which spurs them on to read the word; then through reading the word, learners increase their capacity to go back to read the world; all of which results in becoming better equipped to pursue social action.



Based upon this discussion of a critical pedagogy of place, one might conclude that one of the goals of literacy educators is to engage Aboriginal students in dialogue so that the latter are able to become critically aware of the oppressive and destructive conditions of environmental colonization. As an outcome of this dialogue, Aboriginal learners must be able to *read the world* and identify the causes of the disruption of and injury to the local ecology. Additionally, students must be able to perform *research*—by interviewing Elders who are a source of traditional ecological wisdom and by investigating ecological studies in print—to develop an informed understanding. During the process of a critical pedagogy of place, Aboriginal learners must also be able to *write critically* about their observations and possibly *propose social action* that will enable them to heal and conserve their environments as well as transform those practices that are responsible for threatening the sustainable bio-diversity of the environment.

Techniques and Learning Examples

It is possible to see the makings of a critical pedagogy of place in the teachings of Secwepemc Elder Mary Thomas:

> Now, a few years back in the 70s, I was working with Jim [Bruce] at the resource centre for the school. I came up from Kelowna to work with him. We took grade 11 students, we went up the [Salmon River] with rubber dinghies, and we gave them each a notepad and some little jars. And we told them to come down that Salmon River and document everything they see in the river that should not be in there . . . like rusty wires, old car parts; people would dump garbage down the riverbank, and we told them to document how many places they saw these things, and we asked them to document the erosion caused by cattle or animals near the [water] intakes. We told them if you see an intake and it has no number on it it's illegal, they're not licensed to take it; count how many have it and how many don't. Every so [often] they'd have to take a sample of the water. It was part of their study at the high school. And the study that came out of that was . . . I was just shocked. The garbage that people were throwing in the water. The [water] intakes . . . the farmers were taking water illegally. Some had a number, but the biggest majority didn't even have a number. And the water quality already was so polluted in those little jars. So I've been involved with the water for many, many years. (2-3, Blackstock)

Modeling a critical pedagogy of place, Mary Thomas, along with Jim Bruce, taught 11th grade students *how to read and write the world* by taking notes on how the ecology of the Salmon River had been disrupted and injured by dumped garbage, drinking cattle, and illegal water intakes. After the students took notes about the polluted condition of the river and bottled suspect water samples, they had to write up their conclusions in a report. When the report came out, Elder Mary Thomas responded: "And the study that came out of that was . . . I was just shocked." Their report led to *far-sweeping social action* because it motivated Mary Thomas to become involved in saving the Salmon River from further degradation, particularly in her helping to found the Salmon River Roundtable

Eighth Strategy of Indigenization: Aboriginal Literacy and the Mass Media

The use of the mass media is another indigenization strategy for teaching literacy. The mass media is a means for both the teaching of *written literacy* and for promoting the attainment of *other* types of literacy which Aboriginal learners will doubtlessly require now and in the future. It is important to remember that the demand for *other types of literacy* is supported by the definition of Aboriginal literacy articulated in this resource document. To recall part of the definition, literacy,

> "is a tool that provides equal opportunities for each individual within our communities to become *multi literate*/multi lingual and have a choice to *participate* in western society." (emphasis added)

In a world of proliferating technologies, what it means to become multi-literate proportionately increases. Correspondingly, the necessity of acquiring new forms of technological literacy increases if one intends to *participate* in mainstream society. For example, it is virtually unthinkable today for many students to receive an education without becoming "computer literate." Yet, to become multi-literate *extends* to a wide scope of *other forms* of literacy within the communications network of the mass media. Along with the computer that is capable of supporting numerous types of literacy—e.g., on-line newspapers, personal and political blogs, electronic academic journals, college-university web-sites, commercial advertisements—there are *other forms of media literacy* that have a special relevance for pedagogical purposes, e.g., *radio* and *video* literacy and the different incarnations of the print media.

Although literacy in the mass media serves diverse pedagogical purposes (e.g., a degree in television journalism), mass media literacy is also valuable in furthering the goals of Aboriginal *self-determination*. By assuming control over the media, Indigenous communities possess the power to tell their stories outside of the mainstream stereotypical representations of Aboriginal people that negatively impact public perception and often government

policy. If Indigenous communities include a specialized knowledge in the mass media within literacy education, Aboriginal learners will be able to gain the means to express community concerns.

Mass media literacy also serves other goals for Aboriginal peoples such as owning radio stations to relate news that is important for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities or compiling a digital audio-video archive on Elders who might tell stories in Aboriginal languages or communicate important Indigenous Knowledge.

Techniques and Learning Examples

There are many ways to foster media literacy among Aboriginal youth. In the Traditional Pathways to Health (TPTH) project, which was "a participatory research project intended to address issues of health and wellness among Aboriginal youth," researchers collaborated with Aboriginal students to produce a series of health-related *videos*:

Students, as co-researchers, chose a health topic or issue that interested them. They then planned, researched, and developed a video with their message that they presented to their community to share what they had learned. Now in its fourth year, over 30 student videos have been produced, covering a variety of health related issues including smoking, drug use and addictions, drinking and driving, suicide, diabetes, the protective effects of culture, cultural dancing, language, healthy lifestyles, participation in sports, racism and discrimination, healing circles, traditional foods and medicines, cultural understandings, and relationships. (268, Riecken et al.)

Here, along with the various research skills that they acquired to produce such videos, students learned *technological skills*. Furthermore, the Aboriginal students did not simply report on health issues that are of specific concern, but they also focused on the *beneficial aspects of Indigenous culture that promote health and wellness*. So Aboriginal learners were able to broaden their literacy skills as well as contribute in a powerful way to themselves and their communities.

Chapter 3

An Integrated Program of a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy

While each of the eight strategies of indigenization will prove powerful pedagogies as singular approaches, not one single strategy for Indigenizing literacy will achieve the personal, academic, and professional success that will be hoped for Aboriginal learners. This is because, as mentioned earlier, Aboriginal literacy cannot be defined solely as a set of skills or tools to acquire. Instead, Aboriginal literacy constitutes a complex worldview for *thinking, knowing, acting and changing the world*. In short, Aboriginal literacy is a way of *being in the world*.

Therefore, pedagogical strategies for indigenizing literacy designed to incorporate Aboriginal ways of knowing while teaching Standard English and academic prose in a student-friendly manner must be *comprehensive*. If Aboriginal learners are going to retain traditional knowledge while gaining the competency in writing in Standard English within a variety of academic and professional settings, then literacy practitioners must be prepared to create *An Integrated Program of a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy*.

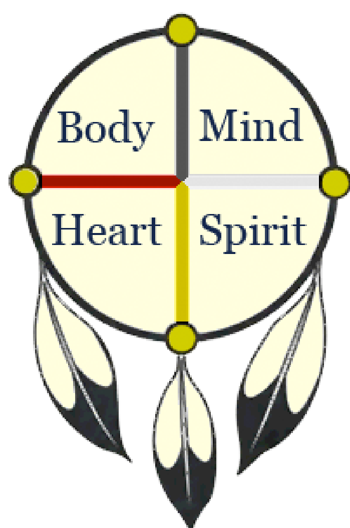
When we use the metaphor "ecology" to describe Aboriginal literacy programs, the metaphor "ecology of literacy" stresses the necessity of a complete literacy eco-system to create the optimal growing conditions within which the learner might study, speak, read, and write. By immersing Aboriginal learners within ecologies of literacy that address their array of literacy needs, we have transformed Aboriginal literacy into a whole way of life that combines study, practice, and community action in a far-sweeping effective manner.

Indigenizing the educational process provides the *bedrock foundation* for indigenizing literacy to create a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy. As mentioned at the outset, to lay this foundation for the Holistic Ecology

of Aboriginal Literacy, educators need to adopt four major strategies: they need to re-conceptualize the Aboriginal student based upon the teachings of the Medicine Wheel, integrate Aboriginal values into the curriculum and use these values to guide classroom-interactions, develop relevant curriculum based on Aboriginal knowledge, and ensure that Aboriginal language instruction is made available for Indigenous students.

Let us now turn to a description of these four major strategies which are intended to indigenize the educational process *as a whole*.

The Holistic Re-conceptualization of the Aboriginal Learner based upon the Holistic Philosophy of the Medicine Wheel



As one of the conditions for creating this holistic ecology, we need to reconceptualise what constitutes the Aboriginal learner according to the wisdom of the *Medicine Wheel*. Mainstream literacy programs tend to *focus primarily on educating the mind of the learner*, in which literacy often amounts to no more than acquiring a grammatical competency, the ability to analyze concepts and ideas in texts, and the knowledge of how to apply inductive and deductive reasoning in arguments.

On the other hand, the Medicine Wheel addresses the learner *as a whole person* by attending to the learner's body, mind, heart, and spirit. By educating the whole person rather than a part, an educational program ensures that the learner achieves a healthy balance and harmony with the self and community. Therefore, the Medicine Wheel as symbol constitutes an important part of indigenizing the educational process.

Since we have concluded that Aboriginal learners perform optimally within an experience-based education, the experiences of the body, the emotions and spirit are valuable resources in student writing.

In practical terms, the life-experiences of the body are translated into a powerful source of creative inspiration, such as when, for example, Aboriginal learners embark on traditional canoe trips or attend sweat lodge ceremonies or perform sacred dances at Pow-wows.

The Incorporation of Aboriginal Values and Principles

To guide the process of indigenizing education and the Aboriginal model of literacy, we have borrowed some of the *gifts* from the Anishinaabe teachings of the Seven Grandfathers: Wisdom, Humility, and Respect. Understanding that these values have served as living touchstones for Aboriginal cultures, we have adopted several other Indigenous values—Humour, Sharing, Integrity, Strength, non-Interference, and Reciprocity.

Such Aboriginal values can be incorporated into a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy in several ways.

- ✓ Aboriginal values must structure the social relationships within an Aboriginal literacy program, *particularly the relationships between the instructor and Aboriginal learners*. Hence the values of humility, respect, sharing, honesty, and truth must guide the interactions between the instructor and students within classrooms.

- ✓ Aboriginal values must also be incorporated into a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy by including them in the *learning objectives of the curriculum.* Not only are the more obvious learning objectives of “knowledge and skills” considered part of the curriculum, but, so, too, are appropriate *attitudes*. For example, in a course on traditional Aboriginal ecological teachings, the value of *respect for Nature* would be of paramount concern. Mary Louie, who is an elder from the Syilx Nation, explains the necessity of having a respect for the Spirit of Water:

  > If you don’t make offerings [to the water], sometimes it can take you. It wants to be respected. It gets upset so it will take you. Every time I use it, I talk to it and ask it to watch out for people because they don’t know, because they don’t have that teaching, you see?

> They don't have that training anymore. They're bottom-up backwards. They just go there and raise Cain with it. But the water, it's a gift of life. It bothers me because our water is . . . disappearing because it's not being respected. People won't offer gifts to the water anymore, you know; they don't take food to it, or tobacco . . . or even coins . . . Because the water, they have feelings too, huh? They are always there to provide for you; what do you give back . . . ? It gets upset too, it gets hurt just like the animals. There are no ceremonies now for them either. Nobody goes for cleansing anymore or talks to them and say "well my family's hungry, I want to feed them." They don't make any offerings to them. (6, Blackstock)

- ✓ Aboriginal values may also contribute to cultivating an enriched ecology of literacy by having Aboriginal learners read *First Nations literature*. Within a value-enhanced literacy environment, Aboriginal learners might read, discuss, and write about Indigenous literature that *develops the topic of Aboriginal values*.

The Creation of Indigenous Curriculum

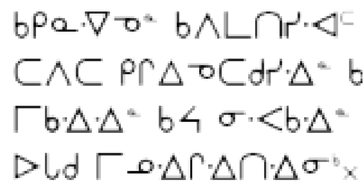
In creating a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy, attention must also be paid to the *curriculum content*. This is to propose that the curriculum that emerges from the perspective(s) of Aboriginal people must form a *core component* in Aboriginal literacy programs.

Reasons for having culturally relevant curriculum are various. For one thing, when courses are designed for and by Aboriginal communities, the curriculum directly responds to the socio-economic, political, and cultural *goals of these communities*. Whether these goals are concerned with job-training in the trades or instruction in Aboriginal languages or programs in Aboriginal health issues, culturally relevant curriculum is essential to the continued growth of Aboriginal communities.

Culturally relevant curriculum is critical to Aboriginal learner *success*, too. When Aboriginal students have some background familiarity with the concepts and issues that are taught, students typically experience a

greater sense of confidence, self-esteem, and motivation. It is generally understood that a confident and self-motivated learner will lead to the outcome of academic achievement. Within the domain of literacy, the chances for academic success of Aboriginal readers and writers are increased appreciably when they are reading and writing about culturally relevant topics. To quote an old adage, writers “should write what they know best.”

The Revitalization of Aboriginal Languages



Aboriginal languages are a living medium of thought and expression, they are the vital means by which Aboriginal people remain *connected to their attitudes, beliefs, and values*. Given the fact that Aboriginal languages have always been the means by which Indigenous people make sense of their worlds, Aboriginal languages must form *the core of Indigenous education.*

As the Assembly of First Nations suggest, there are cultural, social, and pedagogical reasons for this imperative (“The Canadian Linguistic Association Statement on Aboriginal Language Rights, May 2004”). If Aboriginal language instruction becomes one of the foundation stones of Indigenous education, the teaching of Aboriginal languages will inculcate a sense of pride “in the history and the culture of the community” and foster an empowering consciousness of cultural identity within learners. In terms of pedagogical benefits, Aboriginal language instruction will become an irreplaceable means to transmit and share the precious wealth of Indigenous knowledge.

Summary

To create a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy then, it is necessary to *establish the foundation* on the Medicine Wheel, Aboriginal Values, curriculum relevant to Indigenous communities, and the revitalization of Aboriginal languages. It is also necessary to *immerse* the eight strategies for indigenizing literacy for Aboriginal learners *within* this foundation, and to *work them together* as an overall writing program. That these strategies are worked together is an important part of the program. Consider, for instance, the strategy of Critical Pedagogy. For this strategy to achieve maximum effectiveness, learners must be able to *read and write to construct meaning in the narrative form of Standard English*, they must be able to become *self-directed learners* who are able to work *collaboratively*, and, of course, they must be able to *apply* their learning – research and writing – to *identify* areas in their community in need of change. By attaining and combining these skills learners will be better able to employ a critical pedagogy of place leading to positive social change.

It is only when we have created such an Integrated Program that we hope to have *successfully indigenized literacy*.

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Further Readings

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Glossary

Aboriginal English: a grammatically consistent dialect of equal social value and linguistic complexity as Standard English (though mainstream society has often denigrated Aboriginal English – what they pejoratively call 'Broken English' – as a nonstandard language that deviates from the linguistic norm).

Aboriginal Literacy: Aboriginal literacy possesses the following objectives: to transmit culture, to communicate within their own diverse nations, to revitalize and preserve our cultures, languages and governance systems, to legitimize and empower Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing, and to provide each member of the community with the opportunity to become multi-literate and multi-lingual to participate in mainstream society.

Anishinaabe Teachings of the Seven Grandfathers: Anishinaabe is a self-description often used by the Odawa, Ojibwe and Algonkin people. Among the Anishinaabe people, the Teachings of the Seven Grandfathers is a set of teachings on human conduct toward others. The teachings involves seven values or virtues: Wisdom, Love, Respect, Bravery, Honesty, Humility and Truth.

Consciousness Raising or Conscientization: a popular education and social concept developed by renowned Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire which focuses on achieving an in-depth understanding of the world, allowing for the perception and exposure of social and political contradictions. It also includes taking action against the oppressive elements in one's life that are illuminated by that understanding. (During the 1970's, Friere was teaching the poor and illiterate members of Brazilian society to read at a time when literacy was a requirement for the right to vote and dictators ruled many South American countries.)

Ecology: (from Greek *oikos* "house", *logia* "study of") the study of organisms and the environment; the study of the relationships between living organisms and their interactions with their natural or developed environment.

Holistic Ecology for Aboriginal Literacy: Aboriginal literacy cannot be defined solely as a set skills or tools to acquire. Instead, Aboriginal

literacy constitutes a complex worldview for thinking, knowing, acting and changing the world. In short, it is a way of being in the world. A Holistic Ecology for Aboriginal Literacy then punctuates the necessity of a complete literacy eco-system to create the optimal growing conditions within which the learner might study, speak, read and write. By immersing Aboriginal learners within ecologies of literacy that address their array of literacy needs, we have transformed Aboriginal literacy into a whole way of life that combines study, practice, and community action in a far-sweeping effective manner.

Literacy: the ability to use language to read and write (listen and speak is sometimes added). Literacy also involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society.

Medicine Wheel: Medicine Wheels, or sacred hoops as they were sometimes called, were originally constructed by laying stones in a particular pattern on the ground, usually following the basic pattern of having a center of stones, surrounded by an outer ring of stones with spokes, or lines of rocks radiating from the center. Integral to the teachings of the Medicine Wheel is the sacred concept –"the circle of life"– that perceives life as cyclical. It represents wholeness, interconnectedness, and harmony among all things. The Medicine Wheel has been adopted by Aboriginal educators as a pedagogical model, one that resonates within the individual learner and beyond to the community, the nation and the world.

Multi-Literate: In a world of proliferating technologies, what it means to become multi-literate proportionately increases. Someone who is multi-literate today is someone who has acquired new forms of technological literacy, including computer literacy (along with the numerous types of literacy which this is capable of supporting, e.g. electronic academic journals, on-line newspapers), radio and video literacy, and the different incarnations of print media literacy.

Non-Interference: an important Aboriginal ethic or value, one which promotes positive interpersonal relationships by discouraging coercion of any kind, be it physical, verbal, or psychological. It stems from a high degree

of respect for every individual's independence and regards interference or restriction of a person's personal freedom as undesirable behaviour.

Reading the World: Reading the world requires that students become adept at critically thinking to read their social and ecological environments (their 'texts') to identify the factors of those oppressive conditions that need to be transformed.

Standard English: the variety of English that is held by many to be 'correct' in the sense that it shows none of the regional or other variations that are considered by some to be ungrammatical, or non-standard English. Many economic, political and educational establishments generally regard other dialects of English as sub-standard and in need of correction.