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# Indigenization Framework for Aboriginal Literacy

*An Integrated Program for a Holistic  
Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy*

Eric Ostrowidzki, Ph.D. Author

Marla M. Pryce, M.Ed Author

Kristian Urstad, Ph.D. Editor

Nicola Valley Institute of Technology

Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development

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**Nicola Valley Institute of Technology**

4155 Belshaw Street, Merritt, BC V1K 1R1

200 – 4355 Mathissi Place, Burnaby, BC V5G 4S8

[www.nvit.ca](http://www.nvit.ca)

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## INTRODUCTION

Many challenges have been identified in Aboriginal Education in respect to literacy. The Aboriginal population in British Columbia is relatively young, with at least half under the age of 25. Aboriginal people will therefore soon account for a growing proportion of citizens entering post-secondary education and the workforce. Significant changes have reshaped the demographics of the Aboriginal school population since 1988. During the last decade alone (1996/97 to 2005/06), the number of Aboriginal students in British Columbia's public schools rose by 50% from 38,084 to 57,227 – this at a time when school enrolment is declining. Aboriginal students now make up 10% or more of school populations in many school districts. At the same time, despite the introduction of a series of initiatives to encourage and support their educational achievement, school completion rates for Aboriginal students remain below 50% (compared with 79% for the general student population). These figures are cause for concern. We highlight them here because of the link between school completion rates and literacy rates.

More importantly, however, is the fact that education and literacy directly affect the quality of life of individuals and the society in which they live. Many challenges were identified during the research phase of this project that would respectfully contribute to improving the quality of life for Aboriginal peoples. This is not an inclusive list of concerns, but the chosen few that were echoed throughout many communities:

- (1) The introduction of literacy into oral societies and the changes that take place within that society have always been a concern and provided many challenges in literacy education.
- (2) Maintaining cultural identity within a group/nation in the classroom is essential to the learners' success. Each of us maintains an image of the behaviours, beliefs, values and norms (culture) within a nation/ community...within this group each individual needs to maintain their own identify. The challenge remains, "How do we do this in a respectful way?"
- (3) Literacy provides a powerful means for individuals to participate in society, relevant curriculum holds implications for how culture and knowledge is transferred, reproduced and

transformed. Each culture differs in what they consider to be their “texts”. In a text called, “Aboriginal Education: Fulfilling the Promise (2000) there were concerns raised in regards to relevant curriculum for Aboriginal adult literacy and within our initiative – Aboriginal Adult Literacy Indigenization Strategy – the concerns remain the same. There is a mismatch between the definition and significance of literacy as they are represented in a person’s cultural identity and in the learning situation. The individual is faced with making a choice that has implications for their acquisition of reading and writing skills, as well as for their relationship to particular texts and the symbols they contain. This begs the question, “What significance do particular texts have for the individual’s cultural identity?”

(4) Many remote communities still have problems accessing ABE programs as they are remote and are reluctant to leave their communities or the community cannot fund them to leave. Other problems related to that are problems hiring and retaining instructors to live in the remote communities. Technology is a wonderful tool if a person had access to it. Canada's telecom and broadband-service companies should be providing better connectivity to First Nations reserves, particularly those in remote areas. The CCL study found only 13 per cent of First Nations communities and 41 per cent of remote communities had broadband access while more than 60 per cent of urban communities and small towns had access to DSL, cable or wireless broadband services. Under a deal with the B.C. government and local service providers, Telus spent \$117 million on broadband network upgrades that will link 119 of 151 unconnected communities. B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell's Liberals also provided a \$630,000 grant to the B.C. Community Connectivity Co-operative and the First Nations Technology Council (FNTC) to help communities conquer the so-called "last mile" connection to homes and businesses.

(5) Finally, I leave this for last as this should be highlighted as a series of questions. How do we measure non-academic outcomes? How do we measure ways of knowing? How do we measure success? This is an area that needs further investigation and was not part of the deliverables in this initiative.

This framework is composed of five chapters. Chapter 1 is intended to give the reader a brief overview of the literacy and pedagogical challenges facing Aboriginal learners along with an important list of learning outcomes for Aboriginal literacy programs. It is also meant to introduce and carefully define key terms and concepts that will be used throughout the document. Chapter 2 explores and attempts to set out a holistic model of Aboriginal education. 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. Chapter 3 offers up a comprehensive collection of indigenization strategies for teaching literacy to Aboriginal learners. Along with every teaching model or strategy, the reader will be helped along by illustrative examples and real-life cases. Chapter 4 goes beyond singular teaching approaches and stresses the necessity of indigenizing the *whole* educational process. Literacy practitioners must 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. It is only when we have created such an integrated program that we have *successfully* indigenized literacy. Because the Holistic Ecology for Aboriginal Literacy is designed primarily with adult learners in mind, Chapter 5 begins by proposing some literacy teaching strategies for Aboriginal *children*. This chapter concludes with a discussion about how to establish a culturally respectful relationship between instructors and students followed by a brief examination of certain success indicators within the context of improving the literacy rates of adult Aboriginal people. A bibliography for the entire document appears at the end, along with a glossary.

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## Chapter 1 – Definitions and Overview

### INTRODUCTION - THE CHALLENGE

One challenge facing education within Western democratic societies consists in the pedagogical difficulties in being able to reach diverse ethnic and cultural groups. Unless educational institutions are able to reach these groups in a manner that stimulates learning and encourages academic success, the institutions have failed to fulfill their mandates to provide a premium education for all students regardless of their backgrounds.

This educational challenge of reaching diverse ethnic and cultural groups is essential if social justice is to be extended to everyone. However, critics have observed that post-secondary educational institutions will often privilege the world-views, beliefs, values, curriculum, and teaching styles that are dedicated to achieving the cultural, social, political and economic priorities of mainstream society. If an educational system grants a pedagogical tradition greater academic and cultural legitimacy over another tradition, this system produces socio-economic inequities. When one tradition is institutionalized to the exclusion of others, students habituated to learning within such a culturally and socially conditioned context are bound to experience greater success than those students who have entered this system as new-comers or outsiders. By possessing the cultural background and knowledge, the learning styles, and the critical thinking and writing skills promoted by mainstream institutions, such students are positioned to reap social advantages and economic rewards for which their probable academic success has made them eligible.

For those students who come from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, they may not be familiar with the prior essential knowledge and skills that might have ensured their academic success. Consequently, the door to the social and economic benefits that might be derived from participating in mainstream society becomes closed. Unless the educational process is somehow transformed in culturally sensitive ways that will favour their pedagogical traditions—ways of knowing and understanding the world—students from different ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds are more likely to struggle with their academic studies. In other words, if post-

secondary institutions within Western Democratic societies are to provide the knowledge and skills for all peoples of diverse backgrounds to economically prosper and socially thrive, institutions *must be willing to make education accessible*.

## DEFINING INDIGENIZATION

It is with the goal of increasing the literacy skills of Aboriginal learners and providing a tool for literacy practitioners that this “Indigenization Framework for Aboriginal Literacy” has been developed. Before outlining the broad objectives and specific literacy strategies of this document, it is necessary to define what is meant by the pedagogical *process of indigenization*. Perhaps the more familiar term that captures what is involved in the process of indigenization is “cultural relevance.” According to one commonly accepted definition, *to indigenize* means to produce teaching materials that are culturally relevant to Aboriginal learners. It also means to translate existing mainstream curriculum into terms more meaningful for Aboriginal learners. Therefore, indigenization is a process that produces curriculum relevant to Indigenous people. While not using the term indigenization, BC’s “Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education Strategy and Action Plan” proposes the necessity for indigenization by asserting educational programs must meet Aboriginal cultural and learning needs.

*One of the most prominent challenges influencing the participation and completion rates of Aboriginal learners in post-secondary education is the number and quality of programs and services available to these learners that meet their cultural and learning needs. (6)*

One baseline definition then for indigenization is to make curriculum more culturally relevant for Aboriginal learners to increase their participation and completion rates in the post-secondary system. Although this definition provides us with an *all-important starting point*, it may overlook the full richness of the term. To expand upon the concept of indigenization, the University College of the Fraser Valley defines the term in the working draft document of their “Indigenizing Our Academy”:

*“indigenizing the academy means to make the academy both responsive and responsible to the Indigenous peoples’ goals of self-determination and well-being.”*

In addition to producing culturally relevant curriculum (the course content), indigenization includes the incorporation of local Indigenous values and principles. Besides the purpose of increasing the participation and graduation rates of Aboriginal students, indigenization also enables Aboriginal people to achieve the goals of *social health and self-determination*.

Based upon these initial definitions of indigenization, an indigenized education consists of an Aboriginal culture of education that accommodates Aboriginal curricular needs, values and

beliefs, and the various ways of thriving in the world. To create an indigenized culture of education, practitioners must establish a historically, culturally, and cognitively familiar perspective for understanding the world—one that will enable Aboriginal learners to learn with greater success. Yet what strategies of indigenization must be used to enable Aboriginal learners to achieve greater success *in attaining higher degrees of literacy at the post-secondary level?*

In the “Proposal and Implementation Plan for the BC Aboriginal Family Literacy Initiative for 2008,” the authors propose one strategy for the indigenization of teaching literacy. This strategy appears in their recommendation that *Aboriginal pedagogical styles* (traditional teaching styles) should be introduced into mainstream literacy programs:

*Mainstream literacy programs are not based on Aboriginal content or pedagogy. Lately, there has been increased interest in including Aboriginal content in both the formal and non-formal education sectors in Canada. Thus, the number of literacy resources and books with Aboriginal content is increasing. However, research in the field of educational multiculturalism has shown that it is not enough to integrate Aboriginal content into courses. Pedagogy, meaning the style and mode of teaching, needs to change as well. This is especially pertinent in light of the negative experiences that Aboriginal people in Canada have historically had with the formal school system. (Emphasis added, 14)*

Not only does the indigenizing of literacy programs entail including culturally relevant curriculum, but it must incorporate Aboriginal teaching styles to accommodate the learning styles of learners. To develop literacy pedagogies amenable to Aboriginal learners however, we must first come to a better understanding of what literacy means. This is difficult because there is no universally accepted definition of literacy.

## DEFINING LITERACY

One example of a promising definition of literacy has been advanced by the “Movement for Canadian Literacy” that has adopted the general definition proposed by the United Nations Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization:

*Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy 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. (UNESCO, <http://www.literacy.ca/?q=literacy/literacyinformation>)*

According to UNESCO, literacy has a practical function that includes a range of skills from understanding printed materials to being able to use these written materials and create other texts for the purposes of communication. The goal of learning literacy skills is to enable the

individual to achieve personal goals as well as to participate in the wider society. It is instructive to note that literacy is not restricted to reading and writing but includes a host of related skills:

- ⊕ Reading Text
- ⊕ Document Use
- ⊕ Numeracy
- ⊕ Writing
- ⊕ Oral Communication
- ⊕ Working with Others
- ⊕ Computer Use
- ⊕ Continuous Learning
- ⊕ Thinking Skills:
  - Problem solving
  - Decision making
  - Critical thinking
  - Job task planning and organizing
  - Significant use of memory
  - Finding information

Beyond the fundamental tasks of reading and writing, the broad category of *thinking skills* are also necessary for preparing individuals to become competently literate to contribute to their communities and to participate in society.

The UNESCO definition of literacy adopted by the “Movement for Canadian Literacy” includes a whole spectrum of skills that are necessary to cope in a print-dominated global society. However, the definition—due to its level of generalization—does not mention anything about the literacy needs of a specific Aboriginal community that are historically shaped by the cultural context of that community. If the definition of literacy is to have any pedagogical, cultural, social, political, and economic value for a particular Aboriginal community, then the community must be involved in the process of defining what literacy means for them. How else will the community derive the benefits that they hope to achieve from literacy training?

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.<sup>1</sup>*

Thus Aboriginal literacy possesses the following objectives:

- ⊕ To transmit culture;
- ⊕ To communicate within our 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 community-member with the opportunity to become multi-literate and multi-lingual to participate in mainstream society.

If literacy training is going to fulfill the diverse needs of Aboriginal people which are articulated by these objectives, then the indigenization strategies employed must be equally diverse and, moreover, have a solid basis in proven pedagogies that work for Aboriginal adult learners and communities to help them achieve each one of their goals.

## THE PURPOSES OF “INDIGENIZATION FRAMEWORK FOR ABORIGINAL LITERACY”

There are a number of purposes that have motivated the writing of this framework that proposes a comprehensive set of indigenization strategies for teaching literacy to Aboriginal learners. First and foremost, the historical and contemporary needs of Aboriginal communities are pre-eminent among these purposes; therefore, the indigenization framework has been developed to provide the pedagogical literacy support for Aboriginal peoples to ensure the revitalization, transmission, and robust health of traditional Aboriginal societies in their full cultural complexity and political-economic ventures. Secondly, there is the need to develop a culturally appropriate model of indigenization strategies to teach literacy to Aboriginal learners at the post-secondary level. By developing such a model, it is anticipated that the success rate of Aboriginal learners will

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<sup>1</sup> This definition of Aboriginal Literacy reflects the input of various groups of Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia. While the first version of the definition originated within a meeting among the participating members of IAHLA (Indigenous Adult and Higher Learning Association), subsequent versions were the product of the feedback from a number of Aboriginal focus groups, literacy practitioners, and Dr. Gerry William at NIVT. Therefore, the final definition of Aboriginal literacy represents a collaborative and inclusive effort among Aboriginal people seeking to address the multiple literacy needs of Aboriginal communities and learners.

improve. Third, and related to the second purpose, these indigenization strategies must be responsive to the needs and characteristically negative experiences of students within the public school-system. For example, such strategies must address concerns that might range from students feeling that “our instructor did not deliver the course in a respectful way” to there not being sufficient “engagement” and “interaction” between the students present in the classroom (“Primary Research Report”). In addition to these other purposes that direct the focus of this framework, the indigenization strategies are intended to serve as a “Practitioner’s Guide” for literacy educators. Observed by the “Primary Research Report,” one of the barriers that prevent practitioners from implementing indigenization strategies is a lack “of knowledge in mainstream educators” about the “benefits from approaching literacy from [an] aboriginal epistemological perspective.” To fulfill this need, the framework 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, and assignments.

## OVERVIEW OF THE FRAMEWORK

Since this framework recognizes that literacy education must be comprehensive over the long term in its pedagogical approaches to be effective for Aboriginal learners, it recommends that “An Integrated Program of a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy” be established throughout the secondary and post-secondary educational system. This holistic ecology is composed of a series of indigenization strategies to create a literacy environment to support the multiple literacy needs of Aboriginal learners. To create this ecology, *the whole educational process must be indigenized and not just the teaching of literacy*. Hence to indigenize the educational process, a holistic approach to education must be adopted by using the symbol of Medicine Wheel that is a spiritual and practical teaching model within Aboriginal pedagogy. Indigenizing the educational process must also be accomplished by teaching Indigenous values and curriculum relevant to the plural needs and goals of Aboriginal communities. It is also imperative to revitalize and teach Aboriginal languages to indigenize the educational process.

To begin to establish “An Integrated Program of a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy,” literacy practitioners (wherever possible) must adopt these four major strategies *to indigenize the educational process as a whole*:

- ⊕ The holistic re-conceptualization of the Aboriginal learner;
- ⊕ The incorporation of Aboriginal values and principles to spread through all aspects of the educational process;
- ⊕ The creation of Indigenous curriculum relevant to the needs of the community and Aboriginal learners; and,

- ✦ The revitalization of Aboriginal languages.

In addition to four strategies for indigenizing the educational process, a program of eight other strategies is proposed *to indigenize the teaching of literacy*. These strategies are listed according to the order in which they are developed:

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
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.

Given the fact that the educational and business establishments have come to recognize that learning literacy may likely become a life-long endeavor, this framework also proposes *literacy teaching strategies for Aboriginal children*. Conceived as another form of “life-long learning,” literacy education must seek to develop the skills and knowledge of Aboriginal learners from infancy to adulthood, from early family literacy programs to workplace training programs.

### BLOOM'S TAXONOMY OF LEARNING DOMAINS

*"First Nations Education is a process whereby individuals gain knowledge, advance innovative ideas and validate their existing knowledge. I believe it is through this educational journey that an individual can explore new pathways, examine new ideas and areas of knowledge, and personally grow. Today, Aboriginal education is undergoing a paradigm shift: a shift to reclaim*

One of the most well-known and earlier models of teaching pedagogy developed was "Bloom's Taxonomy." This model consists of three Learning Domains, the cognitive, the affective, and the psychomotor. While the cognitive domain is related to the *intellectual* and the affective domain is related to the *emotional*, the psychomotor domain is related to the *physical*. As a model for teaching, this "taxonomy of learning behaviours can be thought of as 'the goals of the training process'" (1). Part of the value of Bloom's taxonomy is that it enables the educator to identify and assist in the development of the sets of skills and attitudes that constitute the three Learning Domains summarized by the breakdown:

**Cognitive** (mental skills) ≈ knowledge ≈ comprehension ≈ application ≈ analysis ≈ synthesis ≈ evaluation

**Affective** (emotional responses and attitudes) ≈ receiving phenomena ≈ responding to phenomena ≈ valuing ≈ organization ≈ internalizing values

**Psychomotor** (manual or physical skills) ≈ perception ≈ set ≈ guided response ≈ mechanism ≈ complex overt responses ≈ adaptation ≈ origination

Despite the widespread acceptance of Bloom's pedagogical model among educators, the model is not wholly consistent with Aboriginal ways of learning and knowing. When Verna Billy-Minnabarriet speaks of a paradigm shift of pedagogical models, she is suggesting that Aboriginal educators have noted the short-comings in Bloom's Taxonomy and other conventional approaches to education, namely that they do not focus on the *spiritual dimension of the learner*. While Bloom's model may rightfully include the emotional, physical and intellectual aspects of the self, it is only a partial model. Since the spiritual dimension informs the very essence of many Aboriginal knowledge systems, it is necessary to use a *holistic model of education* that also includes Native spirituality. This move marks a beginning to "reclaim indigenous pedagogies."

## INDIGENIZING THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

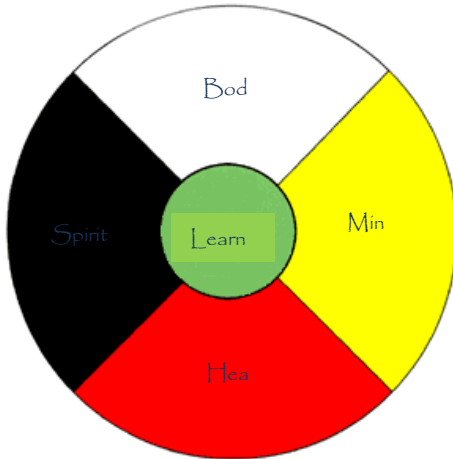
### Aboriginal Pedagogy as Holistic

To understand what is meant by a “holistic model of education,” it is necessary to define this often-repeated yet insufficiently understood Aboriginal perspective. Not necessarily limited to the teaching requirements of pedagogy, the concept of a holistic model of education springs from the fertile soil of Aboriginal world-views that perceive Nature in a continual state of flux suggestive of a holistic and cyclical view of the Natural world: “The idea of all things being in constant motion or flux leads to a holistic and cyclical view of the world” (2). Drawing upon the symbol of the flower, Leroy Little Bear compares wholeness to a flower with four petals which each represent a different quality: “When it opens, one discovers strength, sharing, honesty and kindness. Together these four petals create balance, harmony and beauty. Wholeness works in the same interconnected way” (3). If one connects the concept of a holistic education with the vision of wholeness symbolized by Little Bear’s flower, we see that Aboriginal education becomes transformed into an experience where “strength, sharing, honesty and kindness” become an integral part of the relationship between the student, teacher, curriculum, and community. In other words, the very wholeness intrinsic to a holistic education enables the quaternity of the (1) student, (2) teacher, (3) curriculum and (4) community to evolve into an educational environment characterized by “strength, sharing, honesty and kindness.” When a practical and sacred bond exists between the four elements of the quaternity, this safe and nurturing environment might enable the student to experience a sense of “balance, harmony, and beauty.” In summary, the wholeness of the flower symbolizes an interconnection between Nature, the bond of the quaternity, and the balance, harmony, and beauty flourishing within the student as an outcome of this *powerful holistic Indigenous pedagogy*.

### The Medicine Wheel as an Aboriginal Archetype of Educational Holism

One of the most spiritual yet practical approaches to Aboriginal education can be found in the teachings of the Medicine Wheel. Given its relevance to education, the Medicine Wheel has been adopted by Aboriginal educators as a pedagogical model. Explaining the relevance of the Medicine Wheel to Aboriginal knowledge, Little Bear writes: “The Medicine Wheel teachings of the northern plains [...] are limitless and form the basis of most Aboriginal belief systems” (3). Integral to these teachings of the Medicine Wheel is the sacred concept – “the circle of life” – that perceives life as cyclical (3). Representing the related terms wholeness, interconnectedness, and harmony, the symbol of the Medicine Wheel teaches that the “natural world was created in groups of four, all things are connected [,] and harmony and balance are preeminent in every Aboriginal culture. It is understood that people of the west coast did not create Medicine Wheels; however, the teachings speak to us at every level of human experience: [the] individual,

community, nation and the world” (3). Notwithstanding the geographic and cultural origin of the Medicine Wheel, the teachings resonate *within* the individual and *beyond* to the community, the nation, and the world.



Both symbolizing and modeling a holistic education, 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.

### Respect for Aboriginal Values in Education

For some time, pedagogical theorists and educational practitioners have understood that there is no such thing as a value-free education. Within any given program or course, the learning objectives, curriculum content, and modes of delivery are fraught with values. While these values may be implicit, they do exist and have a tangible effect upon the outcomes of the learning process. Therefore, education inevitably imparts values that affect the perspectives and behaviours of learners. For example, when a socially biased educational institution seeks to inculcate values that are antithetical to or unknown to the world-views of a specific ethnic or cultural group of learners, such an education decreases the chances of success for that group of learners.

Given the fact that many mainstream post-secondary institutions have been either slow or have neglected to accommodate the world-views and values of Aboriginal learners, such institutions have impeded the academic success of Aboriginal students. In “Best Practices in Increasing Aboriginal Postsecondary Enrolment Rates,” Malatest et al. have commented upon the cultural barrier confronted by Aboriginal learners at post-secondary institutions:

*Too often, very little of what most Aboriginal students bring in the way of cultural knowledge, traditions, and core values is recognized or respected in the postsecondary system. The reality of the “university world” is substantially different than the Aboriginal personal and community reality.*

*[...]Students must acquire and accept a new form of consciousness, an orientation which not only displaces, but often devalues the world views they bring with them. (18)*

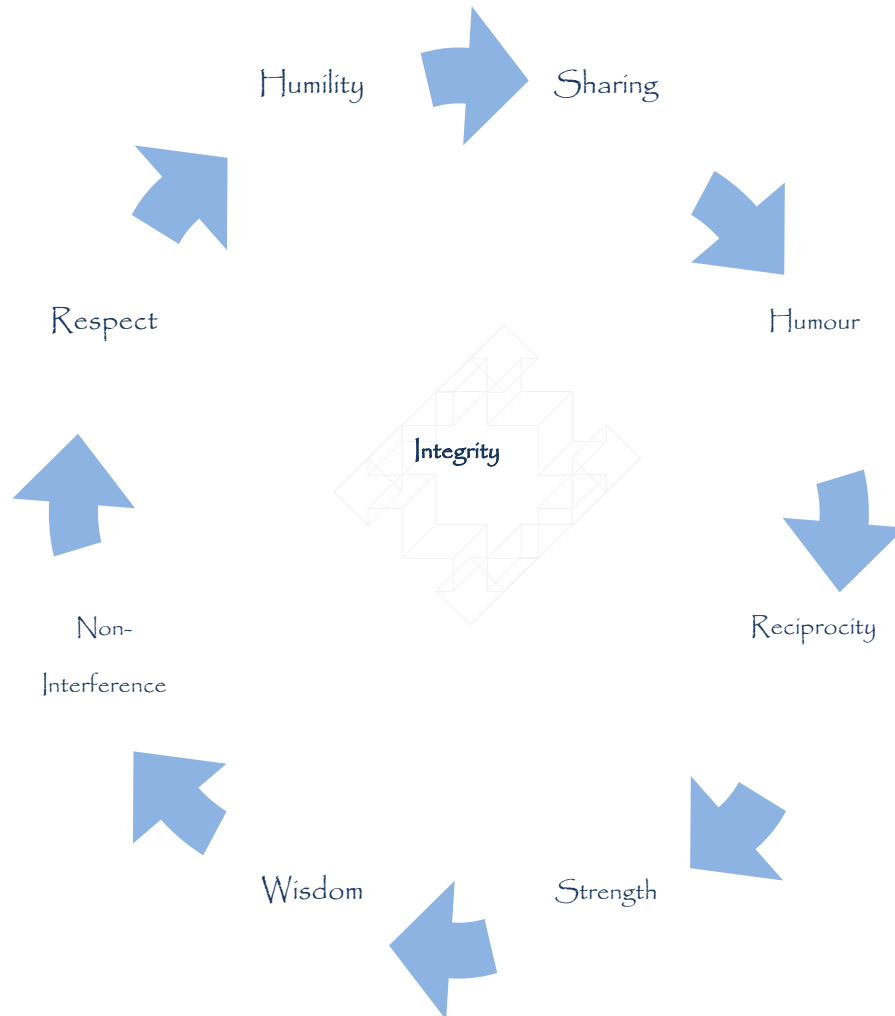
Elaborating on this “cultural barrier” faced by Aboriginal learners in the postsecondary system, the authors explain: “Universities typically have long-established practices, norms, and policies seen as serving the values and cultural norms of the dominant non-Aboriginal society” (18). When Indigenous learners enter a postsecondary educational system organized to perpetuate and consolidate the “values and norms of the dominant non-Aboriginal society,” Indigenous learners may lack the necessary cultural background that would increase their opportunities for success.

In light of the recognition that values have an important impact upon the success rate of learners, proponents of Aboriginal education insist that Aboriginal values and world-views *must be respected*. Not only must Aboriginal values be accorded equal recognition and respect as other social values, but Aboriginal values must *form an integral part of the development of education* to increase the success rate of Aboriginal students. Testifying to the formative strength of Aboriginal values, Little Bear observes that “First Nations values offer strength, a sense of belonging, rules for proper behaviours and a sense of identity in their [students’] life” (6). Certain of the positive gains to be obtained in incorporating Aboriginal values in the educational process, we believe that educators must become knowledgeable in the Aboriginal values of the communities within which they work. At the same time, educators must understand their own values and how they will influence the educational process and the dynamics of teacher-student relations.

Since the introduction of Western-European values justifying European ways of life that have been often hostile and destructive to Aboriginal values and ways of life, we have changed, compromised and eliminated many of the values that have made us who we are. Consequently, we need to reclaim the values unique to Aboriginal world-views not only as a means to reassert our cultural identities, but as a means to raise our awareness of the sources of conflict between Aboriginal values and European values that have been so detrimental to Aboriginal people. By becoming more critically conscious of how the philosophies, values and customs of Aboriginal cultures differ from Eurocentric cultures, we will understand why Aboriginal worldviews clash with Eurocentric worldviews (7, Little Bear). The examination by the Aboriginal student and educator of these different value-systems that constitute separate worldviews will create a learning environment that enhances a greater mutual understanding. If there is an attempt to achieve a critical awareness of these different worldviews, there are fewer chances for future value-conflicts within the classroom that might disadvantage Aboriginal students. Moreover, the pedagogical aim to raise the awareness of Aboriginal values will create the necessary learning environment of *respect for these values*.

## Aboriginal Values –Indigenizing Education and the Aboriginal Model of Literacy

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—depicted by the following diagram:

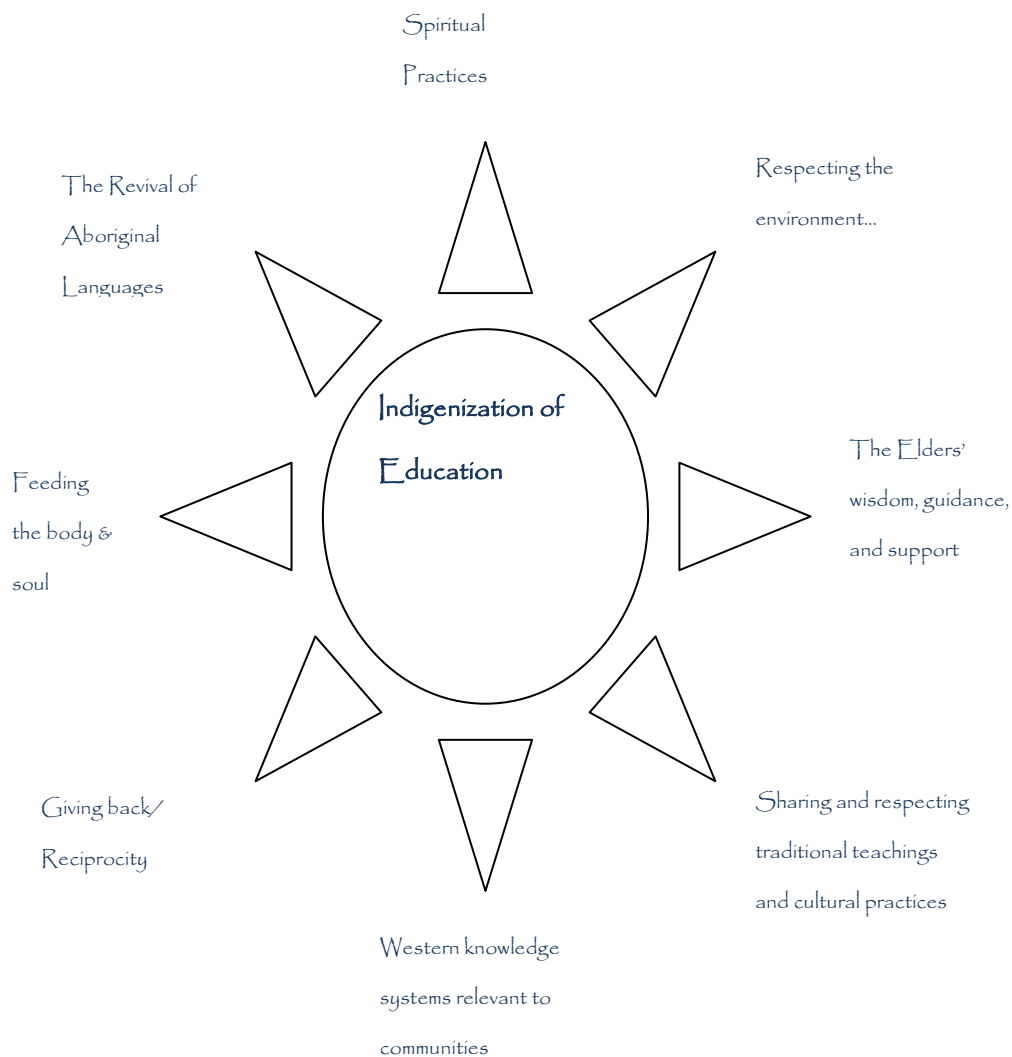


These Indigenous values serve as important ethical guides for indigenizing the educational process and the Aboriginal model of literacy

It will be noted that the value of **Integrity** is given prominence by being placed within the centre of the circle. Like the centre pole of a tipi, the principle of integrity supports all other values. For without a personal sense of integrity nurtured by the community, there is no intrinsic motivation to embrace and practice all the other Indigenous values.

### Learning in and for the Aboriginal Community: Curricular Streams

To further advance the process of indigenization, we have identified the following curricular streams whose relevancy to our Aboriginal communities will contribute to the success of our students and the continued development of the communities. While Aboriginal learners may apply their skills in different contexts, these curricular streams are grounded in the notion of Aboriginal community encapsulated by the caption—*Learning in and for the Community*.



Each one of the arrows radiating outward from the circle points to a curricular stream. To explain some of the important features of this diagram, the central caption learning in and for community not only implies a community-based approach to learning, but also an approach in which Aboriginal students learn to contribute to the community by using their knowledge and skills. Therefore, when students learn *for* the community, they are sharing and giving back (reciprocity) their knowledge and skills relevant to community needs. Respecting the environment within the community might be demonstrated by exploring traditional Indigenous ecological teachings. Although Aboriginal teachings (ways of knowing) and cultural practices are numerous, especially depending upon the individual nation, traditional forms of hunting and gathering, sharing and healing circles, attending sweat ceremonies, and oral story-telling are a few examples. It will be noted that Elders constitute a separate stream because they were the traditional educators in Aboriginal societies; so, Elders could be a source of knowledge in each of these streams. Highlighted by the diagram is also the stream that must “feed” the needs of the body and soul—a focus consistent with a holistic model of Aboriginal education that addresses the learner as a whole. Since Aboriginal languages are literally the original fountainhead from which most other forms of Indigenous knowledge flow, the revival and maintenance of Aboriginal languages should also constitute a core part of Indigenous curriculum. By learning Aboriginal languages, Aboriginal learners will be in the position to understand Indigenous knowledge within its original context and meaning.

## The Revival of Aboriginal Languages

If one considers the historical, social, and cultural value of languages in the formation of identity and the survival of societies, then it is impossible to underestimate their significance. In expressing the sacred origin and critical value of Aboriginal languages, the Assembly of First Nations provides a landmark summary statement:

*The Aboriginal Languages were given by the Creator as an integral part of life. Embodied in Aboriginal languages is our unique relationship to the Creator, our attitudes, beliefs, values, and the fundamental notion of what is truth. Aboriginal language is an asset to one's own education, formal and informal. Aboriginal language contributes to greater pride in the history and culture of the community; greater involvement and interest of parents in the education of their children, and greater respect for Elders. Language is the principal means by which culture is accumulated, shared and transmitted from generation to generation. The key to identity and retention of culture is one's ancestral language. (cited in “The Canadian Linguistic Association Statement on Aboriginal Language Rights, May 2004”)*

Fully integrated with all aspects of life, Aboriginal languages are a gift from the Creator. Such a sacred notion of language exceeds the popular concept of communications theory that reduces

language to the vehicle of a message between a sender and a receiver. Since 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. Central to the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual lives of Indigenous people, Aboriginal languages are also indispensable for understanding what is true in the world. Without the legacy of attitudes, beliefs and values embedded in Aboriginal languages, the notion of what is true for Aboriginal people becomes imperiled.

The integral relation between Aboriginal languages and what is true for Aboriginal people becomes illuminated by examining some of the expressions that refer to *fundamental philosophical and spiritual truths*. At the “Elders and Healers Roundtable” held at McMaster University to propose “Ethical Guidelines for Aboriginal Research,” the Elders and Healers compiled a list of different Aboriginal expressions referring to a series of core philosophical concepts:

**Navajo:** *Linabidiq’ saadaqo’ lina bindii a’ aq’eq’h:* “the rules/protocols of our life language convey.”

**Lakota:** *Mitakuye Oyasin:* “we are all related.”

**Lakota:** *Wicoicage:* “that the generations may continue.”

**Cayuga:** *Ĕdwus’ra s’ogwihwagy’one s’ogwuyudēs’o:* “follow the ways given to us by our creator.”

**Cree:** *Nihiyawewin:* “four parts of humans, physical, spiritual, mental, emotional. Life is a gift, accountability.”

**Mohawk:** *Skennen:* “peace,” *skanikonra:* “one mind,” *kasatshtensera:* “righteousness.”

**Ojibwa:** *Hozh’oo nah hasdtii, miigwech kina gegoo gii miizhoyanng:* “beauty way,” *Mashkikii waawayaanarny:* “strength.” (30-31, Martin-Hill and Soucy)

If one considers the fact that Aboriginal expressions lose the multi-dimensional complexity of their meanings when they are translated into another language (e.g., English), *one realizes how indispensable Aboriginal languages are for connecting Aboriginal people to the truth of their inner and outer worlds, to the world of spirit and the world of Nature.*

Suggested by the fact that Aboriginal values, beliefs, and truths are embedded in Aboriginal languages, these languages become living storehouses of Indigenous knowledge. That is, Aboriginal languages contain multiple domains of Indigenous knowledge by which Aboriginal people have come to know the world throughout the millennia.

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 addition, the teaching of Aboriginal languages will create an educational bond between children and parents and a relation of greater respect between young people and Elders. In terms of pedagogical benefits, Aboriginal language instruction will become an irreplaceable means to transmit and share the precious wealth of Indigenous knowledge.

When one accounts for the immense value of Aboriginal languages for Indigenous society, Aboriginal language instruction must be regarded as a primary means for indigenizing the educational process and an Aboriginal literacy program. This is especially the case when we consider the fact that Aboriginal languages are in danger of becoming extinct. In “Strategies for Indigenous Language Revival and Maintenance,” Onowa McIvor elaborates upon this serious threat:

*It is estimated that at the time of first contact with Europeans, there were approximately 450 Aboriginal languages and dialects in Canada (Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 1992). In the last 100 years alone, at least ten of Canada’s Aboriginal languages have become extinct (Norris, 1998), in addition to those lost prior to the last century. There are now approximately 60 Indigenous languages still spoken in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2008). Only three of these 60 languages (i.e., Cree, Inuktitut, and Anishnaabe) are expected to remain and flourish in Aboriginal communities due to their population base (Burnaby, 1996; Norris, 1998). However, new research states that the number of speakers alone is a poor indicator of the health of a language; what is most important is the occurrence of intergenerational language transmission and especially how many children are learning the language (Barrena et al., 2007; Norris, 2003). (1, 2009)*

Of an estimated 450 Aboriginal languages in Canada, there are only 60 spoken languages remaining, which is a tragedy by any standard. What is especially alarming about this assessment is that out of these 60 languages, only 3 languages are expected to flourish due to the existing number of speakers. Therefore, it is imperative that Aboriginal language programs be implemented to ensure that more children and youth learn to speak their ancestral languages.

As a scholarly association that has recognized the dangers of extinction of Aboriginal languages, the Canadian Linguistic Association has proposed that “Aboriginal/First Nations peoples should be guaranteed the following”:

- A. The means to maintain or revitalize their Aboriginal/First Nations languages and, should they so desire, to pass them on to their children (for example by making Aboriginal/First Nations languages part of the core school curriculum).
- B. That legislation be enacted to recognize and protect Aboriginal/First Nations languages, not as artifacts of a distant past but as essential parts of contemporary vibrant cultures.
- C. That stable, long-term funding be provided to all Aboriginal/First Nations peoples to maintain or revitalize their native languages (much like the Nunavut-Canada agreements, the North West Territories-Canada agreements and Yukon-Canada agreements on Native languages). ([http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~cla-acl/CLA\\_rights.pdf](http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~cla-acl/CLA_rights.pdf))

At present, there are various pedagogical strategies that are practiced in Canada to revitalize and maintain Aboriginal languages. As part of a more general strategy to ensure that Aboriginal languages *are being transmitted to Aboriginal learners*, this range of multiple strategies consists of curriculum and resource development; teacher training programs that provide certification to instructors in Aboriginal languages; language classes; bilingual schooling; and immersion practices through the K – 12 system (2–5, McIvor). Although these strategies are promising in reviving Aboriginal languages, progress is hindered because of a lack of sufficient Government funding. According to McIvor’s study

*The Aboriginal Languages Initiative (ALI), which provides \$5 million dollars a year to be divided equally amongst provinces and territories (Andrews Miller, 2008), is helpful but less than adequate. Given that Aboriginal people total 1,172,790 (Statistics Canada, 2008), the ALI funding adds up to a contribution of about \$4.25 per person per year. Some provinces and territories supplement this federal funding to make language revitalization more possible for Indigenous people, however, these overtures still fall short of enabling meaningful, realistic resurrection of languages to everyday use within homes and communities. (6)*

While Canada’s educational institutions and Indigenous people are pursuing diverse strategies to transmit Aboriginal languages across generations, governments must be willing to devote adequate funding to accomplish this goal.

### TOWARDS CONCEPTUALIZING AN ABORIGINAL MODEL OF LITERACY

When we are speaking of indigenizing education for Aboriginal students, it might not be clearly understood what is meant by *Indigenization*. This is because there is no one way of indigenizing education. Misunderstandings might also arise because there is an important distinction between indigenizing the curriculum content and indigenizing the teaching styles for Aboriginal students. Too often it is commonly assumed that merely adding Indigenous authors to a reading list or covering topics relevant to Aboriginal people in the course syllabus is sufficient to indigenize the educational process. While including the necessary cultural content in the curriculum is one step in this process, it is, after all, only one step forward, because indigenizing pedagogy must be comprehensive and global in its approach.

If we review “An Integrated Program for a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy,” we find that *indigenizing the educational process entails a comprehensive effort to redefine what education consists of for Aboriginal people*:

- ✦ Based upon the holistic philosophy of the Medicine Wheel, we must *reconceptualise what constitutes an Aboriginal student*. The learner is not just an intellect, but the student is a heart, mind, body and spirit;
- ✦ Based upon the value-systems of Indigenous people, we must *incorporate these values or sacred gifts into the educational process*; these values are intended to foster knowledgeable, respectful, caring and giving Aboriginal citizens who will assume roles as contributing members of their nations;
- ✦ Based upon the curricular streams, we must *create relevant curriculum that ensures the success of Aboriginal learners and fulfills the social, cultural, economic, and political needs of the community*;
- ✦ Based upon the fact Aboriginal languages are essential to understanding Indigenous knowledge, values, beliefs and truths, Aboriginal language instruction is a priority for indigenizing the educational process.

When indigenizing the educational process, these are some of the steps that must be taken. When *indigenizing programs for teaching literacy to Aboriginal learners*, we might take additional steps. While Aboriginal language instruction is essential for indigenizing the overall educational process, the teaching of ancestral languages must also form the core of Aboriginal literacy programs. Along with the revival of Aboriginal languages, we must mine the knowledge and values preserved within the Aboriginal Oral Tradition by making a central place for this tradition in our programs. To indigenize literacy programs, we must also include the offering of contemporary

Aboriginal writers whose powerful voices and visions are culturally relevant and provide literary models from which students may learn.

Yet we must go beyond these measures that are beyond dispute essential approaches in themselves. We must move beyond these approaches because there are other means for indigenizing literacy programs evident from the growing research and ongoing discussions among educators. To propose how we might indigenize our literacy programs in a more *comprehensive fashion*, we need to revisit our definition of Aboriginal literacy elaborated in this document:

*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 have a choice to participate in western society, while revitalizing and preserving our cultures, languages and governance systems. AND, most importantly, it legitimizes and empowers Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing.*

On the one hand, an Aboriginal model for literacy must ensure that it is capable of teaching Aboriginal learners to use a variety of symbolic systems—oral, written, visual—to both transmit culture and communicate between nations. This literacy model must also assist in the ongoing task of revitalizing and preserving Aboriginal cultures and languages as well as providing literacy training for the recovery and practice of traditional Aboriginal governance systems. In addition to these goals, an Aboriginal literacy model—whether the language of instruction is either couched in a traditional language *or English*—must legitimize and empower Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing. On the other hand, such a model must provide opportunities for each individual within Aboriginal communities to participate in mainstream society. Hence, an Aboriginal model of literacy must also be capable of instructing Aboriginal learners in a variety of types of written discourse, electronic media, and even other languages. Therefore, an Aboriginal literacy model must be inclusive yet sensitive to the priorities of Aboriginal communities. Based upon our definition of Aboriginal literacy, we must design literacy programs that will fulfill the multiple communication needs of Indigenous communities from cultural preservation to building bridges between Aboriginal society and mainstream society.

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;
- ⊕ To accommodate the diverse multiple needs of 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 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 (e.g., A.B.E. in B.C. – 2008-2009 Articulation Handbook).

Given the multiple demands that living in mainstream society places upon the Aboriginal student, our Aboriginal model for literacy must be flexible without sacrificing the core Indigenous cultural and spiritual traditions, values, beliefs, and needs. Therefore, the indigenization of literacy must enable students to engage with and succeed in Aboriginal *and* mainstream society. As part of this process of indigenizing literacy, we propose eight strategies that will increase the success of Aboriginal learners in their ability to meet the often onerous—culturally and politically oppressive—demands of writing in Standard English. In addition, these strategies will improve the ability of Aboriginal students to think critically and to implement the technical knowledge and other literacy skills to contribute to their communities. Moreover, the strategies will reinforce the language skills and traditional modes of understanding that students already possess. Forming a comprehensive holistic model for indigenizing literacy, the eight strategies are:

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
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

## FIRST STRATEGY OF INDIGENIZATION: THE PRINCIPLE OF “THINKING THE HIGHEST THOUGHT”

Before we can begin to define this principle that will guide the Aboriginal literacy model whose objectives are varied, we need to recall a constant theme that has appeared in the section “What is Aboriginal Literacy?” and reappeared throughout “An Integrated Approach for a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy.” To generalize this theme according to its various formulations, Aboriginal culture and community are the social context in which any concept of Aboriginal models of literacy education must be developed. Based upon this theme, one can derive a principle that epitomizes the spirit of what it means to found an Aboriginal literacy model within the social context of Aboriginal cultures and communities. While giving due consideration to the fact that Aboriginal communities are diverse as they are complex, Gregory Cajete provides us

with a starting point for articulating this principle in his concept of “thinking the highest thought” as a means for attaining the “good life.” In *Indigenous Storywork*, Jo-ann Archibald quotes Cajete:

*The Indigenous ideal of living “a good life” in Indian [sic] traditions is at times referred “to always think the highest thought” .... Thinking the highest thoughts means thinking of one’s self, one’s community, and one’s environment richly. This thinking in the highest, most respectful, and compassionate way systematically influences the actions of both individuals and the community. It is a way to perpetuate “a good life,” a respectful and spiritual life, a wholesome life. (12-13)*

To think the highest thought within Indigenous society is the basis of an ethical, good life. By thinking the highest thought about our selves, community, and environment, we hope to exert a positive influence in our whole world. When we do think the highest thought, we perpetuate a respectful, spiritual and wholesome life for our communities.

As a principle for our Aboriginal Model of Literacy, our students must learn to always *think the highest thought to perpetuate the good life for themselves, for our communities, and for nature*. If Aboriginal learners learn to think the highest thought in respect to Nature (Mother Earth) by writing about traditional Indigenous ecological knowledge, for example, they will begin the process of living the good life. Through such ecological writings, students 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

In the research literature, there is much discussion about Aboriginal ways of knowing the world. Among researchers who study pedagogy, the concept of ways of knowing is also referred to as *learning styles*. Although researchers are often cautious about generalizing their claims about the learning style of a specific ethnic group for fear of making ethnocentric claims, they make these claims nonetheless in hopes of matching teaching styles to learning styles, thereby improving the success of the students of this ethnicity. It is therefore not uncommon to read in the literature that Aboriginal people are “field-dependent” learners. For example, they may contextualize knowledge within the lives of their communities as opposed to abstracting knowledge from any social context. Or we might read that Aboriginal people learn-through-observation and then repeat the processes that they have observed to achieve mastery. Or we might read that Aboriginal people are collaborative learners, learning most effectively when they learn in groups, producing and sharing knowledge together rather than individualistically competing in a way that is destructive of community solidarity. While it might be true that these learning styles are preferred by Aboriginal

people, the tradition of oral story-telling is the most commonly recognized form of an Aboriginal way of knowing the world.

Reduced to their basic structural form, stories are essentially narratives, that is, they recount a series of inter-related events or ideas in some kind of relevant sequential form. It is important to note that *conventional* Western narrative structure differs from Indigenous traditional narratives. Paradigmatically speaking, conventional Western narrative structure tends to be organized chronologically, in which each detail is placed in a temporal order or cause-effect order; moreover, Western narratives demand explicit connections and logical transitions between these details. In contrast, Aboriginal narratives entail a creative play involving a partial selection of details and omitted connections:

*There are certain elements that are required in each story, certain elements that may be omitted, and places for original elements to fit. It is uncommon for Ute storytellers to recount the “whole story”; instead they select a focal segment or segments as appropriate for the specific storytelling event. [...] The Ute tell stories in such a way that **connections are implied** but not explicit, requiring the reader to make the mental connections themselves. This is further achieved by a nonlinear, nonchronological style of topic development. These features, which are a sign of good storytelling and make for enjoyable stories, are the same ones that would likely cause mainstream American listeners to find the story confusing or pointless. In Ute storytelling, inexplicit and indirect connections are highly valued. (20-21, Jessica Ball et al.)*

Despite the fact that there may be differences between Western narrative traditions and Aboriginal narrative traditions, these traditions involve a mode of representation that depicts a coherent sequence of events or ideas. Further, narrative as a mode of discourse underlies a wide-range of other forms of discourse: process narratives, historical narratives, and scientific narratives of procedures and discoveries.

Because narrative may be 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 quadrants of literacy based upon narrative discourse. Each quadrant deals with the cultural needs of Aboriginal communities but also with their needs for communicating within Western society. These quadrants of literacy are:

1. Storytelling (realized as poetry, song, short fiction, novels, drama, anecdotes, and jokes)
2. Oral history (realized as autobiography, biography, history of the family, community, and nation)
3. Oratory (realized as editorials, letters to the editor, sermons, dissertations, and public speech)
4. Reportage (realized as brochures, newsletters, manuals, cookbooks) (6, Linda-Ruth Dyck)

Encompassing Aboriginal and Western forms of literacy, Keeshig Tobias' Aboriginal model of literacy incorporates traditional oral history as well as advanced levels of academic discourse, such as the doctoral dissertation. Reviewing the various types or genres of discourse inherent within this story-telling circle, one can readily apprehend that the truth strength of this literacy model consists in its versatile richness that can accommodate just about any form of literacy, providing that type of literacy meets the social, political, economic, cultural and spiritual needs of the Aboriginal community. From writing the history of the nation to composing colourful brochures advertising Aboriginal cultural centers promoted by a community, this Aboriginal model of literacy may be adapted for almost any purpose.

### THIRD STRATEGY OF INDIGENIZATION: TEACHING STANDARD ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL DIALECT

Standard English is the language of power and prestige. As the language of International Finance, Standard English asserts a global hegemony. Entry into Universities is based upon a competency in Standard English. The mastery of oral and written skills in Standard English is perceived to be the gateway to professional and economic success.

Since Standard English is taken as dominant within Euro-American society, the economic, political, and educational establishment generally regards other dialects of English as sub-standard. For example, Black English—or Ebonics, as it is commonly called—has been marginalized as inferior to Standard English. Similarly, mainstream society has denigrated Aboriginal English (pejoratively called “Broken English”) as a nonstandard language that deviates from the linguistic norm. Despite the stigmatization of Black English, linguists note that Black English is not a substandard variety of English but a language with its own vocabulary and a rule-governed grammatical structure, thereby qualifying Black English as a language rather than as a Pidgin English spoken by semi-literate language users. Thus, Black English is not parasitic upon Standard English but has evolved into a language of equal social value and linguistic complexity as Standard English. Likewise, Aboriginal English has evolved into a grammatically consistent

dialect of equal social value and linguistic complexity as Standard English. Essentially, Aboriginal English represents *the indigenization of Standard English* by Aboriginal people when they adapted to a new communication environment.

Despite the legitimacy of Aboriginal English, Aboriginal learners are still tested and evaluated based upon their competency in Standard English. The institutionally biased norm of Standard English detracts from the legitimacy of Aboriginal English. From a political perspective, this dismissal of Aboriginal English is a form of colonial oppression entrenched within the educational system, because language instructors will often evaluate Aboriginal students based upon what they are supposedly lacking rather than what they possess. In “Recognizing Aboriginal English as a Dialect in Curriculum: Advancing Aboriginal Students’ Academic Successes,” Fadden and LeFrance have noted:

*From the first day of school, the Aboriginal student's communicative style is deemed defective and must be corrected. This negative method of acknowledging a young child's personal, family and speech community is an unacceptable educational strategy and may be one of the factors that underlie the high prevalence of Aboriginal children in “behavioural adjustment programs.” (2)*

Rather than acknowledging Aboriginal English as a powerful nuanced form of communication, instructors will often determine such communication skills as in need of correction. By refusing to legitimize the language heritage of Aboriginal learners, instructors erroneously perceive Aboriginal learners as possessing *language-deficits*. Evaluating students based upon the skills that students lack rather than what they possess is referred to as the deficit-based model of literacy. Ultimately, it is not an exaggeration to assert that educators *predetermine the failure of Aboriginal students* and perpetuate this deficit-based model by seeing only a void rather than a solid foundation within learners.

A consideration that emerges from our effort to construct an Aboriginal model of literacy is that this model must fulfill two objectives. Such a model (1) must preserve Aboriginal ways of speaking and knowing and (2) enable learners to acquire the competency to speak and write in Standard English—the latter form of literacy considered necessary to succeed within mainstream society. While such objectives might appear to be at cross-purposes with one another, they might be resolved by *indigenizing the approach to teaching Standard English*. Since Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators have recognized that teaching Standard English (SE) by conventional methods—doing rote grammatical exercises, analyzing the form of the research essay, and copying model essays—have not worked with Aboriginal students, the teaching of Standard English must be indigenized to accommodate both of the objectives.

Commenting upon the obstacle facing Aboriginal students in acquiring SE, Dr. Gerry William has written in an unpublished email: “NVIT has shown that the use of Standard English (as opposed to languages used within Aboriginal communities) is a crucial factor in limiting student success in advanced education and employment.” To improve Aboriginal student success in acquiring SE, Dr. William has suggested that there must be innovations in language instruction: “Since language use is acquired in cultural/social environments, it is unrealistic to assume students will gain fluency in Standard English without the development of innovations such as SEAD” (Standard English as an Additional Dialect). Developing innovations and culturally appropriate instructional approaches to teach Standard English, Dr. William proposes, “will enable students to more effectively achieve their education and career/vocational goals” as well as lead to other positive outcomes. Based upon these insights, we propose that indigenizing the teaching of SE will consist in utilizing the *Standard English as an Additional Dialect* approach.

One culturally appropriate instructional approach to teaching SE *is to use Aboriginal English as the initial foundation for language instruction*. By combining the use of Aboriginal English, culturally relevant curricular materials, and innovative assignments designed to address Aboriginal learning styles and needs, the instructor will experience a greater degree of success in enabling Indigenous students to acquire SE. Thus, the next section of this framework will propose various pedagogical strategies and specific culturally relevant assignments that will point out a direction how the use of Aboriginal English might be successfully employed to teach Standard English to Indigenous learners.

### Aboriginal English as a Legitimate 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. Since SE is institutionalized as the norm according to which other languages are judged, Aboriginal students perceive themselves at a cultural and linguistic disadvantage. Unless educators can help Aboriginal students realize that SE is not a superior dialect to other dialects because SE is simply one dialect among others, students may continue to mistake their own language as “illegitimate” and without value.

To overcome this misconception about the cultural superiority of SE, educators must clearly 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. As Epstein and Xu argue in “Roots and Wings: Teaching English as a Second Dialect to Aboriginal Students”:

*research shows that the only appropriate attitude promoting Aboriginal students' success in learning English at school is to recognize their dialects as a legitimate, systematic, and rule-governed variations of language that exhibit varying degrees of differences in the areas of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and discourse patterns (Heit & Blair, 1993, Wolfram, et al, 1999, Malcolm, 1999, Goodwin, 1998). (18)*

### “The Dialectic Awareness Approach”

To begin the process of demystifying the often intimidating and formidable aura that surrounds SE, it is necessary to demonstrate to Aboriginal students that SE is just another dialect with no greater or lesser value than other dialects. Thus, the instructor may employ the “Dialect Awareness Approach” to instill 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.

There are a variety of approaches to increase the dialect awareness within students. For example, Epstein and Xu propose: “First, the teacher can raise students’ awareness of dialect diversity by providing them with samples of common dialect use in communities depicted in audio, video, and written material (Wolfram, et al., 1999, Adger, 1997, Goodwin, 1998) (20). While this proposal is rich in suggestiveness, there may be a lack of available curriculum within communities. Hence access to first-hand information already produced as formal curriculum may be non-existent. Fortunately, potential curricular materials that feature Aboriginal dialects are available through some literary publishing houses. As an exemplary instance of Aboriginal English, the oral stories told by Okanagan storyteller Harry Robinson, which have been transcribed by Wendy Wickwire, provide useful material for raising dialectic awareness. Therefore, one assignment fostering the development of a dialectic awareness of the differences between Aboriginal English and SE within Aboriginal students would 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.

For example, 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 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. Students might also become aware that 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. Additionally, students might note that 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. 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.

### "Contrastive Analysis"

The contrastive analysis approach is similar to the dialectic awareness approach because both approaches promote awareness of "structural differences" between Aboriginal English and SE. However, a contrastive analysis focuses more upon the *specific grammatical differences* rather than the general characteristic features that differentiate the two dialects from each other. Although "the grammatical analysis of structures in second language learning is not very effective to promote communicative competence, the contrastive analysis that draws students' attention to the specific structural differences between dialect and SE has been found to be effective in teaching English as a second dialect" (22). In contrast to teaching the grammatical structure of SE *in isolation such as in grammar drills*, the comparative analysis of the grammatical differences between Aboriginal English and SE will prove effective in teaching SE to Indigenous learners. What makes the contrastive analysis approach especially distinctive from conventional language

instruction of SE is the fact that the instructor teaching SE to Aboriginal students will usually mark “errors” in student papers as in *need of correction*. As emphasized earlier in our elaboration upon the deficit-based model of literacy, the negative focus on corrections teaches students that the “errors” that they make in their creative experimentation with SE are *deficits*. Yet the focus in the contrastive analysis approach shifts from an emphasis on “corrections” to emphasizing the “differences” between Aboriginal English and SE, which is a value neutral approach that destigmatizes the “errors” that Indigenous learners may make when composing in SE. This is not to propose that we must dispense with the grammatical analysis of SE. However, such analysis must occur in the context of a comparative analysis between Aboriginal English and SE. Hence English grammar books will serve a supplemental role—used mainly as explanatory guides—in the process of learning the grammatical structure of SE.

The effectiveness of the contrastive analysis approach will depend upon our ability to create assignments that will enable the success of Aboriginal learners. Since many researchers and Aboriginal educators argue that a student-centered and community-based approach is the most appropriate form of instruction for Aboriginal learners, then students might draw on their personal experiences within their communities as a source of inspiration and material for their writing. Epstein and Xu propose: “Teachers should use Aboriginal issues and cultural experiences as stimuli for student writing. [...] Taras (1996) notes that Aboriginal students can be successful by writing about their own cultural and life experiences” (36). Based on this observation, one learning activity in which to use the contrastive analysis approach is to have 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 then be able to analyze the grammatical differences between their stories written in Aboriginal English and the same story re-written in SE.

### 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 (28, Epstein and Xu). For example, the students might collaborate to write a funding proposal to launch a special community project, such as the establishment of a day-care centre. The reason why a particularly task-based approach is conducive to Aboriginal learners is because the approach builds upon an Aboriginal world-view and a preferred learning style. Since Aboriginal students are often context-dependent learners who learn by the practice of doing, they will be able to draw upon their strengths 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*:

*The literature supports task-based language teaching because it respects the Aboriginal world view and students' unique learning styles as well as the academic context in which they must learn to cope. This is because "within an Aboriginal world view, experience and knowledge are context dependent. Things are learned in the doing,..." a process involving "repetition and personal trial and error to solve a problem." (28, Epstein and Xu)*

The task-based approach has the objectives of enabling students to write in SE in an academic environment and encouraging them to develop learner autonomy, critical thinking skills, and other learning strategies (28).

When practicing the content-based and tasked-based approach, students might conduct research to gather a variety of written materials which will provide a model for their own writing. For example, students might use: "authentic language learning materials such as subject textbooks [...] and content-related materials such as library resources, magazines, and newspapers to provide students with relevant and meaningful language learning experiences" (28).

Once students have gained a proficiency in the other Learning Standard English as an Additional Dialect approaches—dialectic awareness and contrastive analysis—students will be ready to engage in the content-based and task-based approach. While there may be many task-based objectives that Aboriginal learners might seek to achieve, one 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*.

If educators use the (1) structure of story-narratives as a model for academic writing and (2) Aboriginal English as a foundation for teaching Standard English, they will combine two powerful pedagogical strategies for the indigenization of literacy instruction, because both strategies are *based within the language experiences of Aboriginal learners*.

## FOURTH STRATEGY OF INDIGENIZATION: READING AND WRITING—A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH

When students read to acquire a basic understanding of what the words mean on the page, this is called *reading comprehension*. In reading comprehension, there is basically a right or wrong answer to understanding what the words mean on the page. For instance, if a learner reads that "a coyote steals the shadow from a young hunter in the woods," then that's literally what the words mean: a coyote is stealing the shadow from a young hunter in the woods. There is a correct and incorrect answer in reading comprehension. When students attempt to understand

what the coyote's act might mean in a *symbolic sense*, then there is no right or wrong answer to such understanding. This kind of reading is called *interpretation*, because readers must interpret the metaphorical significance of the sentence, pull out moral lessons from the sentence, and assign a deeper meaning to the sentence than what the words say. For instance, when the coyote steals the hunter's shadow, the trickster might really be stealing the hunter's spirit.

While the skills involved in "reading comprehension" enable learners to understand the explicitly related facts of a story, the skills involved in "interpretation" enable learners to understand the unstated values and moral lessons of a story. The reason why there is no right or wrong answer in interpretation is because of the peculiar nature of figurative language. Particularly in stories, figurative language is used, such as metaphors which compare different objects of unlike nature or allegory that employs symbolic characters and action to convey a moral meaning. Since the potential meanings inhering in figurative language tend to make stories *ambiguous*, the stories may be interpreted from different perspectives depending upon the reader's perspective shaped by cultural values and experiences.

Although literary interpretation is largely based upon individual perspective, instructors often teach literature as if there was a right and wrong answer, most typically the teacher's answer. In other words, learners must interpret the piece of literature according to the instructor's perspective or according to what other "experts" have written about the literature. Rather than encouraging students to think independently and creatively about the literature, instructors become referees of meaning, authorizing which interpretation is correct and which interpretation has no validity. Within this power dynamics between instructor and learners, learners are excluded from the process of interpretation.

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 what they are reading. Consequently, interpretation becomes an abstract analytical procedure, hardly conducive to the mixture of creativity and critical thinking that is involved in any act of interpretation. According to Dr. Marie Battiste (2002), such a mechanical and purely cognitive process devoid of personal experiences can be a paralyzing affair:

*In the past, reading and writing centered on decoding, spelling, and literal comprehension. They were treated as mechanistic processes instead of as active, constructive processes. Among students, especially Aboriginal students, this approach to language made direct experience irrelevant, caused critical faculties to retreat, and suspended creative thought. Today, students are encouraged to find meaning in the text by relying on their prior knowledge and experience. (20)*

As a caveat to Battiste’s observations, instructors still hold up literal comprehension as a standard for interpreting the meaning of literature. However, perhaps more detrimentally to the learner, instructors mistakenly assume that understanding literature is restricted to understanding what the *author intended to mean* rather than what the learner might create out of a dialogue between his or her experiences and the text itself. During the *creative process of constructing meaning from the text*, the learner’s prior knowledge and experiences come into play, because the learner uses the frame of reference of the rich context of his or her life to understand. Unless the reader is able to personally identify with the text, the text would be virtually meaningless. Although the learner might be constructing meaning, this does not mean that the process is either arbitrary or oblivious to what the author might be trying to communicate. While learners might be constructing meaning that requires that they employ “creative thought,” they are also using their “critical faculties,” which are two cognitive processes that provide a space of creative freedom while placing limits on this freedom to avoid misconstruing or misinterpreting the themes articulated by the author.

As a form of indigenizing the reading and writing process for Aboriginal learners, the constructivist model has several important benefits. Battiste continues:

*There are many benefits for Aboriginal students to this learning model. First, making meaning helps students with the critical thinking and action-based skills they need to solve their own problems and problems facing their communities. Second, it recognizes that literacy is not abstract but embedded in social contexts, and that underlying meanings are to be found in the social world of individuals, families, and communities. Third, it teaches that people read and write because they are motivated to do something with print, which allows students to explore the functions of literacy. (20)*

To explain these benefits in a different order than Battiste has arranged them, the constructivist model for reading and writing 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. Coming to the realization that the substance and stories of their own lives count in the interpretative process, Aboriginal learners will experience a greater sense of autonomy and self-validation. When Aboriginal learners experience this profound and awakening sense of empowerment because they realize that their own interpretations are as legitimate as the instructor’s or any other cultural authority’s understandings, they experience a greater motivation “to do something with print, which allows students to explore the functions [other purposes] of literacy.” In addition to these paramount benefits, Aboriginal learners will 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 also for solving the problems that might be facing their communities.

## FIFTH STRATEGY OF INDIGENIZATION: A LEARNER-DIRECTED APPROACH FOR ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

The next strategy to discuss concerns the necessity of providing the Aboriginal learner with the educational environment to become a *self-directed learner*, thereby ensuring learner autonomy and enabling the student to draw on a learning style that may achieve a greater harmony with the preferred learning styles of Aboriginal people. Although Dr. Marie Battiste (2002) cautions against generalizing Aboriginal learning styles, she observes:

*“The distinctive features of Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy are learning by observation and doing, learning through authentic experiences and individualized instruction, and learning through enjoyment” (18).*

From Dr. Battiste’s observation about Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy, one might draw the following conclusion: Aboriginal students (particularly adult learners) have the potential to be highly independent learners who learn through direct experience within the authentic context of their lives. Hence they might benefit from undertaking independent projects based upon real-life situations which are guided by instructors. Within this learning context, educators are no longer the sole authorities and dispensers of knowledge at the front of the classroom, but they become facilitators and resource people to support Aboriginal learners in their educational projects. In this scenario, educators provide the conceptual support and resource materials that Aboriginal learners might need when they embark on their educational journeys. Not only does this pedagogical relationship based upon a considerable degree of respect and equality between the educator and learner increase the intrinsic motivation of the learner, but it also increases the enjoyment of the learner because he/she is exercising autonomy in defining the educational goals.

Such a pedagogical model that emphasizes learner autonomy within the wider field of education is not without theoretical precedent. In his theory of andragogy (i.e., learner-focused education), Malcolm Knowles identified various abilities characteristic of the autonomous learner. Some skills that a self-directed learner must possess:

1. The ability to develop and be in touch with curiosities. Perhaps another way to describe this skill would be "the ability to engage in divergent thinking."
2. The ability to diagnose one's learning needs in the light of models of competencies required for performing life roles.

3. The ability to formulate learning objectives in terms that describe performance outcomes.
4. The ability to identify human, material, and experiential resources for accomplishing various kinds of learning objectives.
5. The ability to carry out a learning plan systematically and sequentially. This skill is the beginning of the ability to engage in convergent thinking.
6. The ability to collect evidence of the accomplishment of learning objectives and have it validated through performance. (Dickinson, [http://www.newhorizons.org/future/Creating\\_the\\_Future/crfut\\_knowles.html](http://www.newhorizons.org/future/Creating_the_Future/crfut_knowles.html))

According to the “inventory of abilities” required of self-directed learners, Knowles states that self-directed learners must be curious and inquisitive, willing to accept the challenge to explore those paths of knowledge, thought, and research wherever they may lead. Besides being receptive to new areas of thinking, self-directed learners must be able to identify those core competencies that they will need to perform their duties in the capacity of their careers or various possible roles within their communities. Possessing an openness to knowledge and a clear idea what skills and knowledge that will be necessary for their future roles (employment and/or leadership), self-directed learners, in the *planning stage* of a course, will need to formulate the specific learning objectives in terms of concrete skills and knowledge that they must be able to demonstrate at the end of the course. Self-directed learners will also need to identify the learning resources—course readings, speakers (Elders), writing assignments, and possible personal experiences—that will enable them to achieve their objectives. In the *learning stage*, self-directed learners must be able to carry out the learning plan—each component of the course—in a sequential fashion to build upon their previous knowledge and skills. As part of this process throughout the course, self-directed learners must be able to perform their assignments—produce the knowledge—as proof that the learning objectives have been accomplished.

In “Self-Directed Learning,” Mardziah Hayati Abdullah characterizes this pedagogy by stating that learners must decide upon three primary aspects of their learning: they must make “decisions concerning what is to be learned, when and how it is to be learned, and how it should be evaluated” (ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication Digest #169, 2001). While evidence supports the fact that self-directed learning is compatible with Aboriginal ways of learning and knowing, it is relevant to inquire if this mode of indigenizing the learning process is conducive to encouraging Aboriginal learners to write within an academic context. As a possible answer, Abdullah observes that advocates of Self-Directed Learning emphasize “the importance of allowing learners to pursue their own interests so that learning becomes more meaningful. Morrow et al. (1993) report that when writers are allowed to choose their own topics, they write more often and they write longer pieces.” If students are motivated to write because they have chosen topics meaningful to them, they will write with greater frequency and in greater volume.

Since some Aboriginal learners may not be ready to assume complete responsibility for their learning, which is a daunting prospect for any learner, we must acknowledge that “Students do not have to be given total freedom [...]. Instead, teachers could establish a thematic framework within which students are given choices” (Abdullah). However instructors plan to support students, they must be able to discern when it is appropriate to maximize the support for insecure, inexperienced, or younger students who may be unable to enjoy the full benefits of learner autonomy.

One foreseeable obstacle that arises when we examine the pedagogical values of student autonomy in developing learning course objectives is the fact that curriculum development involves other respective parties, most particularly the Aboriginal community typically acting in partnership with a fully accredited College-University. It may be the case that the educational needs of the community as a whole and the operating standards of the University will take precedence over the needs of the learner. Although the Aboriginal community and the College-University will doubtlessly develop curriculum that is culturally relevant for the learner, the autonomy necessary for the Aboriginal learner to become self-directed may not always be of primary consideration. Describing the process of curriculum development that evolves between the partnership of UNBC and Aboriginal communities, Mike Evans et al. explain:

*The second major tool we are developing to articulate the community and the institution in a non-colonial manner is community based curriculum development. We adopted the collaborative approach as most applicable for developing and delivering culturally appropriate curriculum with indigenous communities undergoing social, cultural, and intellectual decolonization. Yet, again, we must deal with the contradiction of providing a type of education based on the university credit system that, as a consequence, contains institutional limits that must be recognized and met. Since this contradiction lays on a highly charged political ground, the more clarity we can bring to the work, the more quickly we can progress; hence our methodology of acknowledging the separate needs of both partners. As a beginning point, we must specify and clarify any limitations that exist, as acknowledged bottom line assumptions for the community and UNBC. (10)*

The pivotal role that Aboriginal communities play in partnership with Universities in curriculum development is imperative to indigenize the educational process. At the same time, the *indigenization of teaching literacy* requires that Aboriginal learners become self-directed by not only adapting the curriculum to their interests, but also by becoming students capable of independent planning, research, writing, and self-evaluation. Resolving this apparent dilemma in “Opening Doors to the Future: Applying Local Knowledge in Curriculum Development,” Veronica Ignas notes how the curriculum for a British Columbian provincial high school was developed by

obtaining the Aboriginal community input *while allowing for learner autonomy*. Regarding the partnership between the University and the community, Ignas explains that Tsimshian Community Elders, University and community-based researchers, and other knowledge holders collaborated together to develop culturally relevant curriculum for the ecological sciences:

The lesson plans, designed to address the prescribed learning outcomes for British Columbia's provincial high school curriculum, were prepared on the basis of interview data gathered by university and community based researchers working in the Tsimshian territory of British Columbia. [...] Community Elders and other knowledge holders were interviewed and asked to discuss their local ecological knowledge. Particular attention was paid to local knowledge that might help achieve practical ends such as economic development, environmental responsibility, and cultural resilience [...]. (50)

Notwithstanding the multiple educational partners involved in developing lesson plans to address the learning outcomes for British Columbia's high school curriculum, Ignas discusses how "inquiry research," which is identical to self-directed learning, might be utilized to foster learner autonomy within the framework of established curriculum:

The strength of the inquiry approach for Indigenous students is that it demands that the teacher adopt an indirect and facilitative role in the learning process of students. When using the inquiry approach teachers support the students in their learning endeavors as opposed to orchestrating the learning process. *Hence, it is the students who "assume the primary responsibility for planning, conducting and evaluating their investigations" [...].* This particular approach is well suited to the learning needs of Indigenous students as it mirrors similar processes of learning involved in hunting, fishing, and gathering. (Emphasis added, 51-52)

By enabling Aboriginal learners to become self-directed, they are allowed a personal space of autonomy within the parameters of the curriculum established by the Aboriginal community and the University. Supported by the educator within the context of a learner-directed approach, inspired by curriculum relevant to the social and cultural needs of the community, students are able to assume control over their learning as autonomous researchers and writers.

One example of a self-directed learner approach in which Aboriginal students assume autonomy over their own learning is recounted by Judith C. Thompson (*Edo sdi*). According to her teaching experiences, she explains:

*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)*

According to Judith C. Thompson's pedagogical story, students pursue a variety of modes of research: they seek ecological knowledge from the Elders, other community members, books, the internet, and other media. They also perform some actual field research by accompanying the Elders into the bush to collect samples of plants. When they are through compiling their research, they produce a book composed "of all the knowledge that they have learned" and "images and plant samples that they have accumulated." In addition to acquiring the oral, written, and visual literacy skills that are presupposed by the production of this plant booklet on the traditional Aboriginal usage of plants, the students have become active researchers which is one of the key 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. While there are exceptions to this rule, the tendency to construe writing and reading as a singular activity is the norm. For example, in UBC's description for English 110—a first-year English course—there is no indication students will learn to write as a community of writers:

*Through the study of selected samples of poetry, fiction, and drama, this course will introduce students to the fundamentals of university-level literary study, and furnish them with the skills to think and write critically about literature. In lectures and discussions, students will be taught the basic concepts of genre and form in literature, and methods of literary analysis, to enable them to continue in more specialized English courses at the second year or beyond.*  
(<http://www.english.ubc.ca/courses/winter2008/110.htm>)

Implied by the phrase “lectures and discussions,” this is a teacher-centered course, because the teacher gives lectures and engages in a question-and-answer style of discussion with the students. Although there may be a “class discussion” that could in principle serve as a form of collaborative learning involving dialogue, the focus of discussion is regulated by the teacher—who is the principle authority in the classroom—asking questions while the students provide the appropriate responses. Therefore, classroom discussions occur within the parameters established by the teacher and course syllabus. Whatever sense of collaborative learning that might be involved in this course, it is not evident by the mode of instruction because the teacher rather than the students controls the educational process.

This fundamental lack of a student’s agency to acquire a more active role among peers is further evident in the course description: “[T]his course will introduce students to the fundamentals of university-level literary study, and furnish them with the skills to think and write critically about literature. [...] students will be taught the basic concepts of genre and form in literature, and methods of literary analysis.” As the course description indicates, students will be introduced to; students will be furnished with; students will be taught.” In other words, they will become acted upon by the deliverer of the course instead of students becoming actors who will actively engage with what is to be learned.

Thus a teacher-centered course that relegates students to the passive role of objects rather than empowering them as active learners narrows their options and limits them from participating in more collaborative venues of learning.

In “Collaborative learning in an Aboriginal Adult Literacy Centre,” Hauer and Taylor use the metaphor of entering a house of literacy learning “to describe how learners become part of a community of literacy practice” (172). Before entering the house of literacy learning, prospective Aboriginal learners must come to the program with certain “hopes and dreams for the future” (172). Basing their observations upon a study that they conducted at an Adult Literacy Centre in a community in North-West Ontario, Hauer and Taylor describe the experience of an Aboriginal learner:

*Pauline, a new learner to the Literacy Centre, decided to embark upon a new path in a new town. She came to the Literacy Centre with the hope that by engaging in learning activities she would be able to obtain employment although she had not previously held a job. She stood at the threshold of the Literacy Centre with her dream to work with children and decided to enter the house of literacy learning, the next phase of her life journey. (172-173)*

Arriving at the house of literacy learning, Pauline possesses the dream of working with children that will probably not be met by a teacher-centered English 110 course. Such an English course typical of the college-university system may fail to provide the personalized support for the unique life-enhancing literacy needs of Pauline, because such an English course does not involve the community-oriented, collaborative, and supportive practices that the house of literacy learning provides.

To create the appropriate environment that will improve the success of Aboriginal learners in the attainment of their literacy goals, there are certain pedagogical steps that must be taken. Educators must develop a sense of “personal safety [for learners], encourage a sense of mutual respect between learners, and increase motivation and form groups of like-minded learners” (173). 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)*

In summary, four basic pedagogical conditions must be established to create a collaborative literacy environment: (1) develop a sense of personal safety for learners; (2) encourage a sense of mutual respect between them; (3) increase the motivation for learners to write; and (4) form learners into small groups that share similar goals and aspirations.

At the core of the program resides the secret of its success, which is the cultivation of interpersonal social relations. Emphasizing the importance of relations, Hauer and Taylor quote Ann, a former director of the Literacy Centre, who describes the importance of the development of relations, “We could eat together, have coffee together, be together. I still see people that I ... worked with years ago and there is still that connection. ... I believe that’s how people learn. It’s through the connection”. She maintains that individuals learn through their relationships with others, rather than engaging with information. Andrea concurs, adding, “Literacy learning has as much to do with communication with other people and building relationships”. (173)

Within the context of collaborative literacy learning, what is the role of the instructor? Hauer and Taylor report that the

*Instructors at the Literacy Centre considered that their role in assisting learners was to be a 'guide on the side' (King, 1993). Rather than acting in the traditional role of teacher, literacy instructors take their lead from learners and provide assistance as would a mature member to a newcomer in a group. Instructors acting as a 'guide' is an example of the concept of non-interference (Ross, 1992). "Understanding the ethic of non-interference, the belief that it is not right to tell another what to do ... is integral to comprehending Aboriginal world view" (Wihak & Price, 2006). By practicing the principle of non-interference, the instructors were acting in a manner consistent with Aboriginal cultural values. (174)*

Acting in a facilitative role as resource people, instructors practice the ethic of non-interference. This Indigenous ethic necessitates an attitude of respect for the autonomy of Aboriginal learners and their inherent abilities and willingness to think, interpret, and creatively problem-solve in the course of their writing activities. When and if Aboriginal learners need assistance, then the Instructors as helpful "guides on the side" must be prepared to extend the full capacity of their support and expertise to enable Aboriginal learners to succeed in attaining their self-determined literacy goals.

## SEVENTH STRATEGY OF INDIGENIZATION: A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY OF PLACE, SOCIAL ACTION, AND ABORIGINAL LITERACY

One major theme that has driven the Aboriginal model of literacy thus far is the concept that learning takes place within and *for the community*. In other words, Aboriginal learners study curriculum that is relevant to Indigenous communities—both local communities and the larger nation—as a means to "give back" to the community and nation, thereby seeking to benefit the two in some significant respect. We encounter this theme of learning for the community in the principle of "Thinking the Highest Thought" which requires that Aboriginal learners strive to think and write in an ethical manner that will ensure the community is able to live the "good life." To think the highest thought may mean that the Aboriginal learner guides and informs his/her studies with Aboriginal values: Wisdom, Humility, Respect, Humour, Sharing, Integrity, Strength, non-Interference, and Reciprocity. As a community-oriented literacy, such writing would hopefully have the consequence of promoting these social values within and beyond the classroom.

We also encounter the concept of learning for the community in writing projects based upon "critical pedagogy." Developed by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, critical pedagogy—or "participatory action research"—occurs when the educator raises the critical consciousness of learners to enable them to become aware of an externally imposed colonial oppression. This consciousness raising or *conscientization* is facilitated through the process of a critical dialogue between the educator and community learners. In socio-psychological terms, *conscientization* is a form of emotional and intellectual decolonization so that learners are able to perceive the

conditions of their oppression: “In order to overcome their internalized oppression and restore their true identity as human beings Freire proposes a dialogical process of reflection and action between the oppressed and outside facilitators. The first step is to help the oppressed gain a critical awareness of their context through a critical reflection of their situation” (2, Zenz).

Raising the critical awareness within learners is one part of this pedagogy, because it empowers learners with a sense that they can challenge and change the real conditions of their oppression. In other words, they can become agents of social transformation when they discover that their social actions can change an oppressive reality. The second part of critical pedagogy occurs when learners perform social actions to transform their circumstances.

Critical Pedagogy has inspired various innovations in education, especially when the goal is to promote social and environmental justice. One such type of education is referred to as a “Critical Pedagogy of Place.” According to David A. Gruenewald, “a critical pedagogy of place ultimately encourages teachers and students to reinhabit their places, that is, to pursue the kind of social action that improves the social and ecological life of places, near and far, now and in the future” (7). So considered, a critical pedagogy of place requires a relationship between teachers and learners in which they must engage in a critical dialogue and research project with the goal of discovering how to improve the environmental conditions of the local ecology to make it more habitable for all life in a sustainable manner. In other words, a critical pedagogy of place demands critical dialogue and social action to save a damaged environment.

To implement this critical pedagogy of place where the necessity of environmental preservation is the absolute premium goal, such a critical pedagogy must first overcome various challenges. One challenge is the still persistent and unexamined ideology that the student is presumably a passive learner who receives knowledge from an instructor within the confines of a classroom. Yet such a regressive belief is an impediment to a critical pedagogy of place. Discussing how this challenge might be overcome within the context of a place-based pedagogy, Gruenewald claims: “place-based educators [propose that the challenge] is to expand school experience to foster connection, exploration, and action in socio-ecological places ‘just beyond the classroom’” (9). Rather than teaching curriculum within the conventional environment of the classroom to a group of passive learners, educators must accompany learners into the natural environment and foster within them a connection to Nature, so that learners might actively study the ecology, thereby developing the desire to take ecological social action. Besides transcending the limitations of classroom learning, learners acquire an active critical role in their education by pursuing social action because of their emotional investment in creating a healthy and sustainable environment.

It is necessary that a *dialogue* between educators and learners forms a core component of a critical pedagogy of place to foster an environmental awareness of the negative conditions that have damaged the ecology. It is also necessary that a place-based education must be accomplished *within the field* where learners might observe and devise plans for social action to create the necessary transformation so that the local eco-systems retain their biodiversity in a sustainable manner. When learners conduct their research in the field, they must learn to “read the world,” which is a form of understanding the world that moves beyond print culture. To explain, Gruenewald writes:

*Reading the world radically redefines conventional notions of print-based literacy and conventional school curriculum. For critical pedagogues [educators], the ‘texts’ students and teachers should ‘decode’ are the images of their own concrete, situated experiences with the world. According to Freire, ‘reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word continually implies reading the world’ (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 35). In other words, reading the world is not a retreat from reading the word. (5)*

If the dialogue that transpires between educator and learners functions to foster the critical awareness of learners in which they begin to understand the conditions of their own oppression, then “reading the world” might form one of the literacy outcomes of such dialogues. 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 precipitated by numerous causes. While reading (analyzing) the physical signs of ecological degradation in the world counts as one type of reading, the more conventional style of pedagogy of reading print-based texts counts as another kind of reading. When learners read print-based texts, they inevitably broaden their range of understanding about the multiple causes of the destruction of the environment, such as by strip-mining, clear-cutting, and the dumping of toxic wastes. It is the reinforcing relation between reading the world and reading print-based texts that will enable Aboriginal learners to develop plans to pursue ecological social action.

In addition to emphasizing the necessity of learners developing the skills to read the world and print-based texts, Gruenewald proposes two related learning objectives that must be achieved to succeed at ecological social action:

- ⊕ Reinhabitation
- ⊕ Decolonization

On the one hand, the objective of *reinhabitation* requires that learners “identify, recover, and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments” (9). On the other hand, the goal of *decolonization* necessitates that learners “identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit people and places” (9). Unless learners are able to recognize and change the colonial ways of thinking that cause ecological disruption and injury to the environment, they cannot learn how to dwell within the ecology in a manner that is respectful and sustainable.

*To accomplish these two objectives that inform a critical pedagogy of place, there are two lines of inquiry that must be pursued that will lead to transforming injurious practices and discovering new practices that will enable communities to live well within the environment. The first line of inquiry is to ask the fundamental question: “What [...within] local places, both in terms of ecologically sustainable patterns and human and biotic diversity, needs to be conserved” (10)? To paraphrase, when learners ask the question “what needs to be conserved,” they ask what needs to be conserved within the current ecosystems and cultural practices that sustain these local ecologies. In the second line of inquiry, students must ask what cultural practices are the causes of environmental disruption and injury that must be transformed. To assist in developing these lines of inquiry, educators must use dialogue to encourage learners to read their environments and “to ask constantly what needs to be transformed and what needs to be conserved” (10).*

To use a critical pedagogy of place, educators must become adept at engaging Aboriginal students in dialogue so that the latter are able to become aware of the destructive forces of environmental colonization. As an outcome of this dialogue, Aboriginal learners must be able to *read the world* and identify the causes of the 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. Through reading the environment and print-based texts, Aboriginal learners must understand the causes of the destruction of the environment and understand what constitutes a proper Indigenous relation to the environment—how to live well within Nature. When they have arrived at this state of understanding, Aboriginal learners must also be able to write critically about their observations and propose social action. This social action should enable the learners to heal and conserve the ecology and transform those practices responsible for threatening the bio-diversity of the environment.

It is possible to glean 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 11<sup>th</sup> 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's responded: "And the study that came out of that was . . . I was just shocked."

While the involvement of the students in the critical pedagogy of place was limited to the decolonizing phase of this process, 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: "The students' report on the state of the Salmon River motivated Mary to start working with the people of Salmon Arm to protect and restore the river by establishing the Salmon River Roundtable" (3, Blackstock). Established in 1991, The Salmon River Watershed Roundtable has defined its role as "a catalyst to achieve and maintain a healthy Salmon River Watershed through coordinated management of all resources, respect for all concerns and cooperative positive action" ([http://www.srwr.ca/about\\_us.php](http://www.srwr.ca/about_us.php)). If one examines the full history before The Salmon River Watershed Roundtable was actually established, then one must conclude that the critical pedagogy of place initiated by Elder Mary Thomas and Jim Bruce led to the report written by the learners. In turn, the students' written report functioned as a source of inspiration and motivation for Mary Thomas to pursue a course of social action that led to the transformation of the Salmon River achieved under the supervision of the Salmon River Watershed Roundtable.

## EIGHTH STRATEGY OF INDIGENIZATION: ABORIGINAL LITERACY AND THE MASS MEDIA

As the eighth indigenization strategy, the mass media contains multiple forms of literacy, although they may not always consist exclusively of written texts. While the mass media includes plural forms of literacy (both verbal and non-verbal), the mass media typically requires *writing* at some point in the stages of production, regardless if we are talking about the mass communications of the printed media or the production of video documentaries. Therefore, the mass media is a means for the teaching of written literacy and for promoting the attainment of other types of literacy.

The demand for other types of literacy is supported by the definition of Aboriginal literacy articulated in this 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.” While the acquisition of Aboriginal languages must form the core of any Aboriginal literacy program, the definition supports the objective of learners becoming *multi-literate*. 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.” That is, computer literacy forms an integral part of literacy education because of its capacity to enable the student to perform Internet research upon almost any topic and to present this research by composing written documents on software programs. 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—on-line newspapers, personal and political blogs, electronic academic journals, college-university websites, 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.

The various reasons for Aboriginal people utilizing the mass media in the pursuit of self-determination are stated:

*Indigenous media production is like a contemporary talking stick that creates space for diverse experiences, perspectives, and stories to be shared both within and between communities at great distances. Combined with the forces of globalization, it presents a medium able to facilitate autonomous media representation that carries the potential to open up space for one to imagine different worldviews. Autonomous Indigenous media creation aimed at building alliances and creating support and space for self-determination is possible and it is one example of the historical and continual resistance of Indigenous peoples to colonial and hegemonic rule. For some Indigenous peoples, like the Secwepemc youth in British Columbia, Canada who are defending their traditional territory from the expansion of a ski resort owned by the Japanese Nippon Cable Corporation, and the Zapatistas of Chiapas who are also defending their territories from corporate expansion, autonomous media creation has also become a digital lifeline and a tool that ensures the outside world does not ignore, forget, or claim ignorance of the daily realities that face Indigenous peoples. For the newly established Aboriginal People's Television Network (APTN), which is the first Canadian national broadcasting station whose mandate is to serve Indigenous communities, Indigenous culture and aesthetics are embedded in media creation in ways that resist, co-opt, and transform globalization. (2, Rebeka Tabobondung)*

In her account of just some of the uses of the mass media, Tabobondung proposes that the media allows Indigenous peoples (1) to tell their stories and express their world-views, (2) to build global alliances among other Indigenous peoples in support of the goal of political self-determination, (3) and to bring attention to corporate encroachments upon Indigenous lands and injustices perpetrated against Indigenous peoples. The ultimate expression of Indigenous control over the mass media occurs when Aboriginal people operate their own television networks, such as APTN.

The significance of telecommunications for Indigenous people should not be underestimated. In the “Declaration of the International Forum on Communication for the Development of Indigenous peoples,” the participants have declared:

*We reaffirm that communication is a fundamental element of the liberation, transformation and development of societies and for the enjoyment of Indigenous Peoples' rights.*

*We demand conditions that guarantee that indigenous peoples enjoy the right to communication and development. This is directly related to the equal access to all forms of media, communications and information resources and in closing the digital divide that disproportionately affects indigenous peoples.*

*We call for goodwill and alliances to develop capacity building and exchange programmes in the field of communication for the development of indigenous peoples. Such programmes should be led by indigenous peoples' organizations and ensure the equal participation of women, taking advantage of all pedagogical resources and new technologies.*

*We request a significantly increased presence and space for community media and a greater presence of indigenous peoples in mass media. (2)*

Greater knowledge of, greater access to, and greater control over the mass media become enshrined as *necessary political and pedagogical rights* within this international declaration of Indigenous peoples, specifically because the communication technologies are directly linked to the development of Indigenous communities. Since media literacy could play a crucial role in the overall development of Aboriginal communities, such relevance merits the inclusion of courses and/or programs of study in the electronic mass media—including the print media—into a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy. By not including mass media literacy within “An Integrated Program of Aboriginal Literacy,” we also deny Aboriginal learners the tools to academically and professionally succeed within the course of their careers.

There are many ways to foster media literacy among Aboriginal youth. In the Traditional Pathways to Health (TPH) 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.)*

Along with the various research skills that they acquired to produce such videos, students learned technological skills:

*As part of the data gathering process for their project, students could search for information on the Internet, interview family and community members, or conduct library research. In addition to gathering the raw material for their videos, the students learned the skill sets for digital camera use and computer-based video editing, thus increasing their technological capacity. (Emphasis added, 268-269)*

In their video productions, the Aboriginal students did not simply report on health issues that are of specific concern, but the learners also focused on the *beneficial aspects of Indigenous culture that promote health and wellness*:

*A dozen students made videos on the benefits that accrue from cultural engagement. Healing circles, traditional foods, cultural ceremonies and tradition, drumming and dancing groups, and athletics have all been showcased in student videos as important aspects of their culture that have a powerful positive and transformative impact upon the individuals who engage in these activities.*  
(278)

By combining the pedagogies of participatory action research and the acquisition of video literacy, Aboriginal learners were able to broaden their literacy skills as well as contribute in a powerful way to themselves and their communities.

### 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 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*.

According to one source, ecology might be defined as “the study of the environment and the interaction of its various elements.” To elaborate on this definition, an ecology is a complete environment comprised of a variety of elements that coexist in an interdependent web of relations, say, for example, between humans and the rest of the natural world. Just as there are natural environments, there are also socially constructed environments, such as academic institutions. When we conceptualize an academic institution as a total learning environment assuming the dynamic form of an ecology, we may perceive that the various separate elements of this academic institution coexist in mutually supportive roles. That is, the complex relations between administrators, instructors, students, programs, curriculum, library, computer resources, and institutional spaces may reinforce one another. To develop this concept further, 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. It is only when we have created an Integrated Program of a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy that we have *successfully indigenized literacy*.

## THE MEDICINE WHEEL—WRITING FROM THE WHOLE SELF

To create a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal literacy we need to indigenize literacy in a comprehensive fashion. Already outlined in this framework, the measures recommended to indigenize education and literacy are the same measures that must be used to create a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy, which will engage learners at every level of their personal and social being. As one of the conditions for creating this ecology, we need to reconceptualise what constitutes the Aboriginal learner according to the wisdom of the Medicine Wheel. While the Medicine Wheel emphasizes that an Aboriginal model of literacy is much more than a purely cognitive process, 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. In contrast, an Aboriginal model of literacy must also regard the body, emotions and soul as essential to becoming literate. 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 Aboriginal learners embark on traditional canoe trips or attend sweat lodge ceremonies or perform sacred dances at Pow-wows. Equally important, the catalyst of the emotions and the visions of the spirit form the very stuff of good writing. Typically, experience-based writing is most aptly expressed in Native Autobiographies, for example, in an anthology like *Tell It Like It Is* that features autobiographies from some of the prominent First Nations writers in North America. To provide an example of the affective and spiritual power that pervades writing *expressed by the whole learner*, the poem by Theresa Jobin, an Aboriginal student, is included:

### Where I'm From

(Inspired by Victoria Retasket's poem "Where I'm From")

I am a descendent from the Cree people of the Cowessess Reservation in Saskatchewan.

I was born in Vancouver, British Columbia.

I'm from an unbreakable, hard working, and always protective single mother on welfare,

Who would give up her life for her children without hesitation.

I'm from a missing and unknown father whom I never met.

I'm from my brother Kory's caring heart.

I'm from my brother Sheldon's laugh and sense of humour.

I'm from my aunt Jayenell's generous Thanksgivings.

I'm from my Uncle Leon's courage and hustle in a city where "no one hires Natives."

I'm from my Aunt Candy's wild Cree woman spirit.

I'm a survivor of the impacts of racism in a school

Where I was the only Native student in the class.

I'm from South Vancouver where my family was the only Native family

In our neighbourhood.

I'm from a healing white light.

I'm from the memorial totem pole created for the missing Eastside women.

I'm from my cat Scottie's love.

I'm from the abundant goodness of sweet grass.

The Coast Salish People adopted me into their double-headed serpent canoe

And healing ocean and river waters.

I'm from always letting your family members sleep on the couch

When they have no place to call home.

I'm from the wings of my grandmother whose spirit name is Eagle Woman.

I'm from my grandmother who was a residential school survivor

And never forgot her language.

I'm from a grandmother who had thirteen children.

I'm from my grandfather whose gift of foresight is hereditary.

I'm from the spirit of the drum.

I'm from the spirit of the deer whose hide is on my drum.

I'm from the spirit of the tree whose wood is the frame of my drum.

I'm from the heartbeat of the jingle song and the jingle dance.

I'm from the present where I choose to follow in the path of my grandmother and ancestors.

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## ABORIGINAL VALUES—READING AND WRITING VALUES

Creating a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy must also be accomplished by incorporating Aboriginal values into the educational process. Through a process of deliberate integration, 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. Without humility and respect and truth forming the bond between instructor and learners, particularly since classroom-dialogue forms such a big part of a literacy education, the educational process will replicate the unequal power-structure that privileges educators over students in Western 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. Therefore, 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. In her doctoral thesis “Decolonizing the Classroom,” Geraldine Balzer articulates a “theory of literary criticism rooted in an Aboriginal world-view” and proposes that students might read how ideas of community are expressed in Aboriginal literature (51). Based upon this suggestion, Aboriginal students could learn about the Indigenous values of “sharing and caring”—which is a theme in Emma Lee Warrior’s story “Compatriots” (1994)—through talking and writing about Indigenous Literature.

One possible alternative to using Aboriginal written literature to create a comprehensive ecology of literacy would be to have educators request Elders to come into the classroom to tell oral stories about Aboriginal values that require students to interpret the stories themselves. Of necessity, classroom discussions and written assignments should form part of these culturally vital learning experiences to *combine the oral dimension with the written dimension*.

## CULTURALLY RELEVANT CURRICULUM—WRITING COMMUNITY

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.” While it is true that it is important that Aboriginal learners are given the opportunity to write within their cultural comfort zone, this is not to claim that learners are deprived of the opportunity to explore and produce original scholarship. On the contrary, Aboriginal learners will no doubt thrive intellectually when they are presented with a culturally relevant course that challenges, stimulates, and obliges them to learn something new.

If, for example, one develops a course in the multiple forms of Aboriginal Knowledge, the possibilities for learners to make discoveries and to produce writing that is both intellectually innovative and culturally valuable are numerous. While what counts as Aboriginal Knowledge will certainly vary from Indigenous community to community, Aboriginal Knowledge is a complex and varied field of inquiry that extends across a range of subject areas and cultural mediums of expression. To get an approximate idea of the potential diversity of Aboriginal Knowledge, Greg Young-Ing states:

*Indigenous knowledge range[s] from: ancient stories, songs and dances; traditional architecture and agricultural; biodiversity-related and medicinal, herbal and plant knowledge; ancient motifs, crests and other artistic designs; various artistic mediums, styles, forms and techniques; spiritual and religious institutions and their symbols; and various other forms of Indigenous knowledge. ("Indigenous Knowledge: Place, People, and Protocol," <http://pch.gc.ca/pc-ch/org/sectr/cp-ch/aa/trd/ppr-eng.cfm>)*

Besides Indigenous knowledge covering a spectrum of subjects and mediums of expression, there are also different ways of apprehending this knowledge that would provide direction for Aboriginal learners in their investigations:

*Indigenous methodologies are best up by Marlene Brant Castellano. She finds that the "knowledge valued in aboriginal societies derives from multiple sources, including traditional teachings, empirical observation, and [spiritual] revelations... Aboriginal knowledge is said to be personal, oral, experiential, holistic, and conveyed in narrative/or metaphorical language." (13, "Ethical Guidelines for Aboriginal Research: Elders and Healers Roundtable")*

In an academic course developed on Aboriginal Knowledge, Indigenous learners might pursue their research by seeking out traditional teachings, empirical observations, and spiritual wisdom through the guidance of community Elders. By maintaining a personal journal about their holistic experiences with Indigenous Knowledge, Aboriginal learners might use this research to compose a handbook on Aboriginal Knowledge that could provide curriculum for future learners. Given the fact that Aboriginal knowledge is conveyed through narrative and metaphorical writing, learners might therefore write their experiences and research findings in a similar form of creative discourse.

## THE REVITALIZATION OF ABORIGINAL LANGUAGES

Forming the innermost being of a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy must be Aboriginal language instruction which might be taught using any number of pedagogical approaches, particularly those approaches that may draw upon the cultural traditions of Aboriginal pedagogy. In “The Development of Aboriginal Language Programs: A Journey towards Understanding,” Barbara Graham chronicles her experiences in assisting to establish Cree and Ojibwe language programs that culminated in the adaptation of teaching practices that proved successful with Aboriginal students. In terms of curriculum development, one Aboriginal instructor recommended:

*we follow a thematic approach to curriculum development and implementation in the Aboriginal language programs. If the instructors identified themes and developed their own instructional resources and methods, the students would develop vocabulary, acquire linguistic structures in the respective target language, and learn aspects of their cultures. The instructors would use the target language as much as possible. (334)*

Instead of the conventional drill-and-memorize approach to teaching vocabulary and grammatical structure, the thematic approach provides an experiential context in which Aboriginal students learn vocabulary and grammar while simultaneously learning aspects of their culture. By the instructors using Aboriginal languages as often as possible, students become immersed within an Aboriginal language and cultural atmosphere that enriches the learning experience.

One example of the thematic approach is when the Aboriginal instructors “introduced the traditional teachings of the medicine wheel to their classes and conducted research to discover the roots of these teachings” (334). If learners are motivated to research Indigenous cultural themes, they will have added incentive to learn Aboriginal languages.

Besides introducing important cultural themes, the Aboriginal instructors employed a mode of delivery that provided explicit instructional guidance for the students: “They [the teachers] learned new pedagogical techniques that combined demonstration with explanation and guided practice for students” (334). Within the cultural context of experiential learning, the instructors implemented structured classes by demonstrating how to pronounce vocabulary and by showing how sentences in Aboriginal languages are grammatically formed, by explaining the nuances of the language, and then by guiding students in learning activities to enable them to master the lesson or competency.

One of the key educational objectives in this Aboriginal language program was for the educators to impart to the students an understanding of Aboriginal values. To enable students to meet this objective, the educators used interrelated approaches whose social and cultural benefits

extended far beyond the classroom, in which the Aboriginal language became a cultural force that influenced the lives of the students within the community:

*As much as possible, the instructors focused on using words from the target language to express the important values they wanted to teach. Throughout the second year of language classes, they introduced stories to help students understand how respect is manifested, what courage, honesty, kindness, and knowledge look like in traditional teachings, and linked those values to current issues. They culled examples from their own lives and those of the liaison workers to reinforce their lessons and helped students find ways to connect with the elders in the community. (334)*

Embedded within the words are Aboriginal values. These value-inflected words compose traditional stories that demonstrate how these values are to be morally understood and emulated. These moral lessons about values that are illustrated in traditional stories have a contemporary relevance to current issues in today's society. In fact, these values motivate the lives of Indigenous peoples, which is why the educators and liaison workers sought to "cull examples from their own lives [...] to reinforce the lessons" to help students. These values embedded in Aboriginal language and traditional stories become so integrated within the lives of students that the values become a healthy force of cultural revitalization and impetus for students to seek ways to reconnect with Elders in the communities.

Indigenizing the educational process provides the bedrock foundation for indigenizing literacy to create a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy. To lay this foundation for the Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy, educators 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.

## THE EIGHT STRATEGIES OF INDIGENIZING LITERACY TO CREATE A HOLISTIC ECOLOGY OF ABORIGINAL LITERACY

It has been proposed that a comprehensive approach to indigenizing literacy is the most effective means for improving the academic success rate of Aboriginal learners. In other words, the various strategies outlined here should not be regarded as a pick-and-choose menu of options but as an effort at constructing An Integrated Program of a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy—a total environment where literacy becomes a way of being and acting in the world rather than a tool-kit of abstract skills. This is not to say that these strategies cannot be used selectively when the appropriate context requires, especially when the human and material

resources are not available to create a comprehensive ecology. However, these indigenization strategies work together as an overall writing program:

1. The Principle of “Thinking the Highest Thought”
2. Story-Telling as a Model of Aboriginal Literacy
3. Teaching Standard English as an Additional Dialect
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

To guide each assignment and course within this writing program, the **principle of the highest thought** has been adopted, because when students think the highest thought, they assist in the creation of the “good life” for their communities. Thus Indigenous writers should seek to exert a positive influence within Aboriginal communities.

When literacy practitioners propose that academic writing, business reports, newspaper articles and other kinds of writing are essentially close-cousins to story-telling, they emphasize the narrative structure of writing. Since many Aboriginal learners will often possess well-honed narrative (oral and written) skills, educators should adopt an approach that demonstrates **academic writing is basically another form of story-telling**. Thus, the instructor might try to show that various genres, from political and economic texts to historical and religious accounts, employ narrative to obtain coherence. By laying bare narrative structures that hold together academic texts, educators demystify the complexities of scholarly writing.

Within a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy, teaching academic writing as a form of story-telling will improve the success of learners. In “Developing Academic Story-Telling,” Gavin Fairbairn asserts the benefits of this method:

*I want to, finally, turn to story-telling and my view that if we want to improve the ways that we write and that our students write, we should think of it as a form of story-telling, because that is what it is. All academic writing can benefit by being construed in terms of story, whether you writing something like an article, chapter or even a whole book. Thinking of academic writing as narrative is helpful in facilitating inexperienced and experienced writers alike in developing a style which, adopting conventions of their discipline, they can begin to effectively communicate their ideas to others. (6)*

Although Aboriginal learners will be able to draw upon their prior story-telling experience when academic writing is taught as a form of narrative, each academic discipline has its own unique formal conventions of story-telling:

*Of course, academics of different kinds not only have different areas of interest but different ways of telling stories, and in telling your academic tales, it is important that you should adopt the narrative forms that are appropriate to your discipline and to the material that you are writing about. For example, whereas scientists and social scientists will often employ visual means such as charts and tables of results; graphs and diagrams of various kinds, because such devices show them what is difficult to express in words, others – including philosophers, theologians and historians will be more likely to use detailed examples and carefully constructed arguments. And despite my reservations about jargon, difficult language and overuse of citation, it is clear that in telling their stories some academics will make extensive use of specialized vocabularies (in some areas indeed, it is no doubt necessary for them to do so), and some will make reference to what others have written. The stories academics tell may thus be told in different languages, or at any rate, in different dialects of the same language. However, all will be stories of a kind. (7)*

Developing instructional methods and assignments for teaching academic writing as story-telling is limited only by the ingenuity of the instructor and the learning needs of the student. While prescribing instructional methods and assignments may curtail creativity, there are culturally sensitive pedagogies that will prove more effective with Aboriginal learners. To locate a teaching methodology for achieving this objective, one might look for guidance in the preliminary research found in the literacy work of Karen Redfield: “Redfield is interested in the differences between academic writing, and ‘domestic rhetoric,’ particularly the ‘vital and pervasive form of storytelling used in American Indian [sic] homes and communities to pass down traditions, knowledge, and values.’ She is also working to help students make the transition from domestic rhetoric to academic writing” (“Telling Stories vs. Structuring Essays: Understanding Contrasting Rhetorics,” <http://cela.albany.edu/newslet/spring97/redfield.html>). While Redfield is a literacy practitioner who is committed to making a pedagogical space within her classroom for Aboriginal story-telling, she also “aims to give students translation skills, or ‘bridge-building’ skills, between story telling and college essays.” Enabling students to make this transition from story-telling to writing academic essays, Redfield employs a pedagogy referred to as *contrastive rhetoric*. To teach academic writing as another form of story-telling, literacy practitioners might use the pedagogy of contrastive rhetoric by facilitating discussions among Aboriginal learners to assist them in recognizing the similarities and differences between their personal stories and academic story-telling. Besides focusing on the differences, contrastive rhetoric must focus upon the *similarities* between student stories and academic story-telling, thereby building a connection between these two modes of story-telling rather than *exacerbating the differences*.

In conjunction with Contrastive Rhetoric, literacy instructors should introduce a form of story-telling called “narrative scholarship” to Aboriginal learners to assist them in writing academic story-telling. According to Stephanie Sarver,

*As its name suggests, narrative scholarship may serve a didactic [educational] function, informing by way of a story. When the story deals in facts not easily corroborated by the reader, it provides evidence that nonetheless allows us to trust in the writer's authority. The reliable narrative scholar includes enough information to reflect a careful consideration of the topic discussed, which can be corroborated by the research and experience of others. Effective narrative scholarship is grounded in a rigorous scholarly method, that is, the writer knows her subject, either through research or experience, and this knowledge is reflected in the text, into which the "scholarship" has been artfully woven. (“Narrative Scholarship: Storytelling in Ecocriticism,” <http://www.asle.org/site/resources/ecocritical-library/intro/narrative/sarver/>)*

As a unique form of storytelling, narrative scholarship includes the *personal experiences* that learners have had with the subject. Writing narrative scholarship, students might also conduct research—such as text-based research and oral interviews—to weave within their narratives. Just as conventional academic essays are written to persuade or to inform, so is narrative scholarship, because these stories have an educational function, “informing by way of story.”

If learners are given the opportunity to explore subjects and topics by writing scholarly narratives, they are provided with an expressive medium to explain how they *feel* about a subject in addition to what they *think* about the subject. When learners experience a creative freedom within the less formal textual space of scholarly narratives, learners are neither constrained by the burden of providing the explicit textual evidence of an author's citations nor by stringently interpreting these quotations word for word, line by line.<sup>2</sup> Borrowing core or general ideas from other writers, learners may reflect upon these ideas by invoking their own personal stories and opinions. While the criterion of thematic relevance and organizational coherence should still apply when writing scholarly narratives, learners must be at liberty to develop their own responses by using the full spectrum of their knowledge, experiential and academic.

After Aboriginal learners have completed their scholarly narratives, literacy practitioners should employ 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. To guide these discussions, instructors should ask

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<sup>2</sup> When writing narrative scholarship, learners experience a degree of freedom from the often inhibiting conventions of academic essays. Despite this unconventional approach to academic writing, learners must still cite the sources of their ideas—at least within a footnote if not a bibliography—whenever they borrow these ideas from texts or other thinkers. By following this practice, students will (1) avoid plagiarism and (2) learn the principle of academic integrity.

questions about the *structures* and the *purposes* of the modes of story-telling. 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? Lastly, what are the appropriate contexts to write scholarly narratives and what are the appropriate contexts to tell academic stories?

When Aboriginal learners write narrative scholarship and then use contrastive rhetoric to analyze and compare their own stories with academic story-telling, they may draw on their existing narrative skills to make the transition from writing primarily autobiographical stories to writing academic stories that are more outward-focused and restrictive in the formal requirements.

Forming part of the Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy, the approach of teaching **Standard English as an Additional Dialect** legitimizes the language skills that Aboriginal learners already possess. Rather than viewing Aboriginal English as composed of grammatical deficits when compared to Standard English, educators need to direct students to the contrasts between the two dialects to demonstrate that Aboriginal English is of equal social value as Standard English. While Aboriginal dialects must be emphatically validated as legitimate languages, grammatical instruction in SE must still be taught alongside strengthening and building upon the language skills that Aboriginal learners bring with them into the classroom. To accomplish this objective in an assignment, educators might require learners to compose poetry or short stories in Aboriginal English. Then students might paraphrase their creative writing into Standard English. Having produced a version of the same story or poem in Aboriginal and Standard English, students will be guided through the process of analyzing both versions to compare the marked differences in grammatical structure.

**Reading and Writing—a Constructivist Approach** is another indigenization strategy that will foster a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy. Essentially, a Constructivist Approach to reading and writing about texts focuses more on Aboriginal learners *creating meaning* than reading for literal meaning. Such an approach is based on the idea that when we interpret the world around us, we tend to create meaning as opposed to finding objective meanings that pre-exist our interactions with reality. In “A Social Constructivist Approach to Teaching Reading: Turning rhetoric into reality,” Kate Wilson enumerates some practical steps for instructors to facilitate the process of students “making meaning” from texts. First, the instructor must stress what reader-

role the students will play, for example, a “code breaker, meaning maker, text user, and text analyst.” Whereas *code-breakers* might be defined as interpreters who scrutinize the possible meanings of both visual imagery (photographic and film images) and literary symbols within the various media, *text analysts* subject written texts to meticulous interpretations of the implicit meanings within an essay, textbook, novel, magazine or newspaper, etc. While *text users* are more concerned with supporting their own textual scholarship with the authoritative voices of other writers, *meaning makers* are unique to the degree that they creatively use their own experiences to elaborate and build upon the meanings in images and texts. To state this matter another way, meaning makers are as much creators as interpreters of any visual image and written text.

When the instructor has stressed the reader-role that the students will play, the instructor must establish a learning context, such as requiring students to “make meaning” in specific response to the film *Freedom Writers* (2007). Rather than allowing complete autonomy to students, the instructor might use the support-system of “peer-scaffolding.” In this learning-dynamic when students act as role models for one another to raise their level of mutual understanding, students work in groups whereby they, in making meaning, “co-construct a response” to the film by relating the story to their own experiences. It is important to note that the Constructivist Approach of meaning-making might 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” (Wilson).

**A learner-directed approach to education** and **collaborative learning** are two more indigenization strategies that will support a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy. While a learner-directed approach encourages student autonomy over the planning, learning, and evaluative stages of the educational process, a collaborative learning approach creates the conditions whereby students can work cooperatively in a mutually supportive environment with common pedagogical goals that might take the form of a group project. It must be added that a learner-directed approach and collaborative learning do not preclude one another. For groups as well as individuals can autonomously decide on their learning objectives, select the curricular resources, plan out the learning activities to meet the objectives, and work together to achieve the objectives. Both approaches are student-centered with the instructor acting primarily as a facilitator and resource person. Each approach encourages students to develop writing and critical thinking skills.

In the indigenization strategy of **A Critical Pedagogy of Place, Social Action, and Aboriginal Literacy**, all the other strategies come together to form a tightly structured Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy. Here is where each of the six indigenization strategies might be combined to create a dynamic cohort of Aboriginal learners in which written literacy assumes a powerful social function to assist in the building of healthy Indigenous communities. For this pedagogical strategy

to achieve maximum effectiveness, students must be able to read and write to construct meaning in the narrative form of Standard English. Students must also be able to become self-directed learners who are able to work cooperatively together. Students must also be able to apply their learning—research and writing—to identify areas in their community in need of change. By attaining these other skills, students will possess the learner autonomy and political agency to employ a critical pedagogy of place leading to positive social transformation.

It should be recalled that critical pedagogy (Participatory Action Research in a more general sense) requires that educators engage in a dialogue with the learners to develop their historical consciousness of the conditions of their oppression, whether construed in ecological, social, economic, political, educational, racial or legal terms. What this pedagogy means is that the educator must lead learners to the recognition that the historical forces of colonization have created the conditions of oppression, while, at the same time, the educator must enable the learners to come to the recognition that they possess the critical power to intervene in these conditions to create positive social change.

When this initial form of educational decolonization has occurred, educators need to enable students to “read the world. *Reading the world* requires that students become adept at critically thinking to read their social and ecological environments to identify the factors of those oppressive conditions that need to be transformed. Identifying areas for change, developing plans for change, and implementing those plans are the main components of a critical pedagogy.

Although a critical pedagogy of place—Participatory Action Research—may be applied to taking action to restore a damaged ecology with lasting effect, *a critical pedagogy might also be applied to social issues that need to be addressed*. As an example of this form of pedagogy, literacy practitioner Dee McRae has used Participatory Action Research with Adult Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in the “Hair Straight Back Project” in Houston, British Columbia. Citing Merrifield (1997), McRae defines Participatory Action Research (PAR) accordingly: “At its heart PAR (participatory action research) is about action. Its purpose is not to generate knowledge that is filed away... but to provide a solid and thoughtful basis for change—and not just any change, but one that benefits the people that will be affected by it” (1). In her work with adult learners, McRae guided them in a process that encouraged them to produce research, knowledge, and social action in the form of packaged information that would benefit other adult learners.

Reporting her work in “Make it Real: Participatory Action Research with Adult Learners,” McRae describes how:

*In the Hair Straight Back project, the research team was made up of adult learners who had overcome multiple barriers in order to attend school. This made them knowledgeable experts in the area of study. The team used their experience and knowledge as adult students to describe the needs of adult learners. They then explored the various source providers in the community to determine where individuals could go for assistance in meeting those multiple needs. (3)*

Thus there are two learning objectives that formed part of the Hair Straight Back project: (1) adult learners had to identify the *needs of students* who require additional or special forms of support to attend school; (2) adult learners identified the *social resource providers within the community* that would support the needs of potential students.

After completing their research, the adult learners produced knowledge in visual and written form: “They collected their data in order to answer their research question related to accessing services for adult learners. They then took their own experiences and their new found knowledge and created a map and brochure to communicate the information with the community” (6). While the development of literacy skills was one of the primary learning objectives, Participatory Action Research also required the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students to produce a *social action*: a publication of a town map and brochure.

In addition to improving their critical thinking, research, visual and written literacy skills that such a collaborative project necessitated, the adult students may have also experienced an enhanced degree of “personal agency through facilitated group decision-making processes and the different learning opportunities related to the project” (9).

Within the Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy, there is a great deal of creative flexibility for both practitioners and Aboriginal learners, depending upon the educational objectives to be achieved. When integrating **media literacy** into this learning environment, there are a range of possibilities for assignments just as there are a range of possibilities for the use of the media. For instance, a group of learners might create computer websites to publish their literature, produce audio-visual documentaries upon current issues to raise public awareness, or record CDs of personal music to express their feelings about emotionally powerful issues that affect their lives, either positively or negatively.

Overall, the mass media consists of ideal platforms for the *expression of creativity* and the *development of personal voice* that may be either explicit or implicit learning objectives in literacy programs. One illustrative example of students expressing creativity and developing personal voice is reviewed in Diane Wishart Leard and Brett Lashua’s “Popular Media, Critical Pedagogy,

and Inner City Youth.” While the authors’ projects focus on inner city youth who have not experienced success in conventional programs of mainstream education, their projects are also relevant for rural youth. Within their projects, “Over 50 per cent of the students in our studies reported Aboriginal heritage” (245).

Usually, when English teachers speak of *students developing personal voice* in their writing, teachers are using the term “personal voice” to denote personal style. That is, personal voice is associated with how students arrange the particular words that they have chosen, express a certain tone and dominant emotion and use figurative language to create a distinctive “personal voice.” In short, English teachers have a very aesthetic or formal idea of personal voice as opposed to a social concept of what voice might mean. In contrast to English teachers whose voices are usually construed by most as authoritative, young people might have a whole other idea of what voice might mean, especially if these young people are ignored, not taken seriously, or blatantly discriminated against in society. For these young people, voice is synonymous with being heard, with being recognized as valuable, with mattering in a society that conjures up the worst stereotypes of youth in the media.

In his work to “reengage young people in education through their interests in popular music, particularly rap and hip-hop” (250) at the pedagogically rich Boyle Street Education Centre in Edmonton, Brett Lashua reflects upon how:

*students often expressed that they believed no one was listening to them. One student at Boyle Street Education Centre related the following narrative about an interaction he had while recording city sounds for a sonic composition about the city subway system.*

*At times it’s like, it’s like, ‘cause they see a Native guy they think I’m gonna ask them for money. Like, I had this stereotype just a couple of days ago. I was walking down the street, and went up to ask this lady a question. I was like, ‘um, I was wondering if you could help me out?’ and she was ‘no no, I got nothing!’ and I’m like ‘hold on man, you never even listened to the question yet!’ I just wanted to interview you about what you thought about Churchill Station!’ (MC ED Mile) (248-249)*

For instructors, one key lesson that should resound from student anecdotes about their experiences of not being heard is the “need to listen to young people, and create spaces for the discussion of issues that are closed down in other conversations. Stories that young people have to tell open up possibilities to engage in shared dialogue” (249).

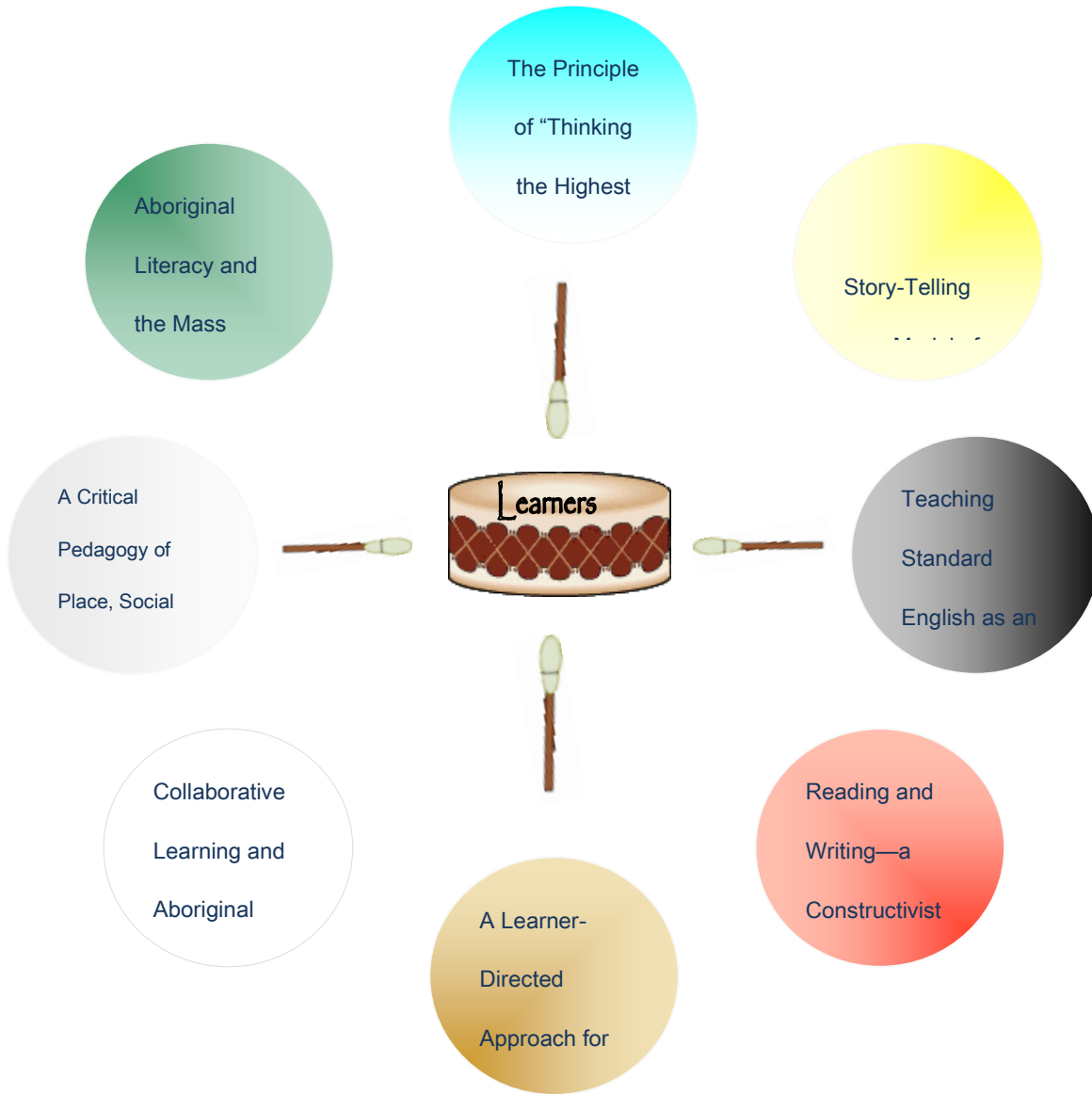
To foster these spaces that would enable student voices to be heard at the Boyle Street Education Centre, Lashua engaged in research called *The Beat of Boyle Street* music program. He worked at “the school four days a week for three years to teach students to use audio production software to create their own music, raps, beats, dance tracks, soundscapes, and spoken word poems” (249-250). Combining both music and written literacy, the project of the

*Beat of Boyle Street [was] innovative in that students learned how to make their own rap music using computers and audio production software. Many students at BSEC reported that music class, with the opportunity to rap, make remixes, or simply hang out and talk about their music, was the primary reason they got up in the morning and came to school. Making a rap song provided a sense of accomplishment and success, and an area to build upon existing strengths and confidence, which in turn translated across a whole range of school competencies. (252-253)*

Along with creative, written and technological skills that students acquire through a mass media approach to indigenizing literacy instruction, students also experience a sense of meaning and accomplishment which are powerful motivators that give students incentive to continue with their education. No less important, students build upon their existing skills and knowledge—by developing mass media literacy—which translates into other forms of academic competencies. Therefore, the learning outcomes obtained through mass media literacy are multiple.

To create a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy, 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 incorporate the eight strategies for indigenizing literacy for Aboriginal learners. To summarize this comprehensive literacy program, a *total of eight strategies* for indigenizing literacy are visualized in the diagram:

# An Integrated Program of a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy



### A HOLISTIC ECOLOGY OF ABORIGINAL LITERACY FOR CHILDREN

In many respects, the Holistic Ecology for Aboriginal Literacy is designed for adults. Although Teaching Standard English as an Additional Dialect and Collaborative Learning will prove successful as indigenization strategies to teach literacy to Aboriginal children, more advanced forms of critical pedagogy might be ill-suited for younger learners, namely because their literacy needs are different during the formative stages of language development. That is, children are still at the stage in their learning when printed language will provide a greater challenge for them than for adults. Therefore, other literacy strategies will be deemed more appropriate to create the learning environment that will provide the adequate support and the necessary playful fun for children who are engaged in the adventure of entering the world of written language. To create the conditions for this alternative Holistic Ecology for Aboriginal Literacy, there are assorted pedagogical techniques being currently explored and used by childhood educators.

According to composition theorists, inexperienced writers learn to write best in real-life situations. More specifically, writers learn to write when they have a practical purpose for their writing within a social context. It is with this insight in mind that the newsletter of “B.C. First Nations Head Start: Literacy and Young Children” recommends: “THOSE WHO WORK WITH YOUNG CHILDREN PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE IN LITERACY DEVELOPMENT and can promote literacy by providing as many opportunities as possible for children to use the printed word in real-life, purposeful situations” (4). To provide one practical writing context for children, literacy practitioners might assist children in creating small books. While the possible topics for books can be drawn from many experiences in the lives of children, the BCFNHS suggests that children compose books about themselves, because children “love being the topic of a book [. . .] using their drawings or photos to illustrate it. Work with children, letting them tell you the story” (5). Using “print materials in dramatic play” is another way to create a practical context for children to learn to write: “If you provide materials, children will always include print in their dramatic play. Always make paper and pencil available. If children are playing ‘store,’ ‘bank,’ or ‘post office,’ they will enjoy labeling things, writing prices, and addressing letters, etc.” (5). When educators guide children through such scenarios children learn to write in an experientially-based context, linking literacy to practice.

Writing activities for children can be purposive whereby each activity has a determinate learning objective; however, children should also be allowed the creative freedom to playfully experiment

with writing. Hence the BCFNHS proposes practitioners should let “children experiment with writing.” In the spirit of creativity and fun, children should have access to chalkboards and chalk; magnetic letters; unlined and lined paper of different colours, sizes, shapes and textures; blank, stapled paper “books” for children to do their own story-writing; type-writers and computers; cards and postcards; stamps and envelopes; markers, pencils, crayons, and pens; and ink stamps (4). In the same spirit of fun and creativity, the BCFNHS suggests to “create an inviting reading corner” in order to encourage children to read in pleasure: “Make it user friendly! Children will use a reading corner if it is comfy and quiet, and there is a variety of things to read (books, magazines, catalogues, home-made books, children-made books, etc.)” (4).

As a way of sharing information about how children might acquire literacy skills at an early age, the North West Territory Literacy Council has produced the *Family Literacy Times* that is stock-full of solid pedagogical techniques and resources designed to engage the young learner. For example, they suggest the use of “Storysacks” that is a hands-on method for teaching and learning literacy. Versatile as a method of instruction and form of curriculum,

*A storysack is a cloth bag that contains books, props and games to encourage reading. Storysacks give parents and caregivers the confidence to share stories. Many different people can use storysacks and in many different situations. [...] Anyone can make story-sacks: a school class, an adult education program, a group of friends, or a group of Elders. (5, NWT Literacy Council)*

As a literal grab-bag full of mysterious items, storysacks make learning an exciting adventure because children do not know what stories, games, props and other surprises are hidden inside. Equally important, story-sacks may foster critical thinking skills in Aboriginal children because they must *make meaning*. When children investigate and work out the various elements contained within the storysack, they create meaning which is a hands-on *and cognitive task*.

For the development of literacy in children, the *Family Literacy Times* discusses the use of rhyming games, because rhymes, songs and stories “are all great ways to encourage the language development of babies and young children” (2). When children learn to rhyme and sing, they associate language with pleasure and are exposed to vocabulary.

If care is given to creating a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy where learning to read and write are practical, fun, adventurous and interesting, Indigenous children are more likely to succeed in these environments. To achieve this success, Holistic Ecologies of Aboriginal Literacy must be established within pre-schools and primary schools for young learners. Yet learning environments must also be created within the home where children first begin to develop their language skills and talents. Family Literacy Programs are one of the major advances that ensure children are provided with educational support within the home. Following the example of the NWT Literacy Council, educational organizations must establish tutoring programs for parents “to

help their children improve their English reading and writing skills. Participants learn specific strategies and activities that they can use to support their child” (3). Culturally relevant and age-appropriate books must also be available within the home, particularly books that tell stories about local Indigenous cultures as exemplified by the *Books in the Home Kits* produced by the NWT Literacy Council (8).

There is another important resource that can be tapped into so that Aboriginal children and youth are given every opportunity to learn to read and write. As a potential model, Frontier College provides a hint about how Indigenous communities might utilize adult Aboriginal learners who are already enrolled in literacy courses and programs within existing educational institutions. Frontier College, the National Literacy Organization of Canada, summarizes this possibility: “Frontier College works with community-based groups and organizations to set up Reading Circles and volunteer-tutoring programs for children”

([http://www.frontiercollege.ca/english/learn/programs\\_children.html](http://www.frontiercollege.ca/english/learn/programs_children.html)).

To apply Frontier College as a model for literacy education, Aboriginal post-secondary institutions and adult learners must be willing to devote their resources, time and energies to invite children and teenagers from surrounding Indigenous communities and local high schools to participate in activities. For example, adult Aboriginal learners could conduct a Reading Circle, which “is a place where children and volunteers read together for enjoyment. Once a week for an hour, children and volunteers get together to enjoy books and stories.” Volunteering to work on a one-to-one basis or in small groups with children and youth, adult Aboriginal students might also offer tutoring services to provide “learners with literacy and homework support.” If Aboriginal post-secondary institutions formalize this service to communities into a general literacy program, they might also establish “Homework Clubs” to support children and teenagers. In these weekly Homework Clubs, “students meet one-to-one with volunteer tutors to read books, write stories, do homework, play word games – anything that will improve the reading and writing abilities of the students.”

There are two mutually reinforcing benefits to be derived by using such a model of literacy education: (1) children and teenagers receive the extra literacy support that they need; (2) adult Aboriginal learners are provided with the context to both acquire and utilize their literacy skills as an educational project and as a way *to give back to the community*.

When Aboriginal children and adolescents are provided with the right opportunities, activities, curriculum, educators, and places of learning within a *total environment of literacy education*, they will acquire the skills of reading and writing with a greater confidence and even joy. This holistic environment can be conceptualized by the diagram:

# A Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy For Children



## Literacy Educators Teaching Aboriginal Learners

Among literacy educators who are inexperienced in teaching Aboriginal learners, one common concern voiced is the uncertainty about how to establish a culturally respectful relationship between instructor and students. Such educators typically possess an awareness of the horrific legacy of the residential schools and the toxic racism prevalent in the mainstream public school-system that has wrought considerable sociological and psychological harm to Aboriginal students. This historical awareness has instilled within educators a political sensitivity to the issue that education has often been used as an instrument of colonial domination and a method of exclusion preventing the academic success of Indigenous students. Much to their credit, these educators may be culturally aware of the negative academic experiences that have affected many Aboriginal students; however, they are still uncertain how to translate this empathetic awareness into a pedagogical practice that will not repeat the mistakes of the colonial past.

On top of this issue, many well-intentioned educators might also be conscious of the danger of importing their own social and cultural biases into the classroom that may adversely affect the learning process of Indigenous students. To alleviate some of these genuine concerns, there are several suggestions that a literacy educator might take.

Trained within Western academic traditions, many educators still struggle with the difficulty in transforming their own pedagogical practices from those based on authoritarian models to those based on more democratic models. Within an authoritarian tradition, the educator becomes the all-knowing expert at the front of the classroom, conveying information to students as if they were no more than passive receptacles for the ideas and concepts of the educator. In classroom interactions, the educator does all the talking rather than attempting to engage the students in a dialogue in which they, too, are involved in the process of sharing and creating knowledge.

According to one of the indigenization strategies informing this literacy program, *critical literacy* requires that the interactions between educators and learners must be based not upon monologue but dialogue, “in which teachers and students actively pursue learning through discussion and debate of socio-political realities” (346, Bartlett). To make this transition from an authoritarian pedagogy that relies heavily on a lecture-type format to a more egalitarian pedagogy that exercises classroom dialogue requires that instructors first reconceptualise how such knowledge is produced. Paulo Freire, in his discussion about the production of knowledge, believes:

*all learning is relational, and knowledge is produced in interaction. “Knowledge is not a piece of data, something immobilized, concluded, finished, something to be transferred by one who acquired it to one who still does not possess it. Freire elaborates on this point: “I cannot think authentically unless others think. I cannot think for others, or without others. . . . Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry [people] pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.” (346)*

In their efforts to appreciate the value and function of dialogue, educators must therefore realize that knowledge is created through an open exchange of ideas and an elaboration upon these ideas through the process of discussion.

When literacy educators incorporate dialogue as part of the teaching-learning dynamic in their classrooms, they must also acknowledge that one of the primary sources of the knowledge of learners will be their own experiences. Hence educators must be prepared to establish a learning context in which the experiences and the language (Aboriginal English) of learners will form a large part of the dialogue of their literacy instruction: “Educators must develop radical pedagogical structures that provide students with the opportunity to use their own reality as a basis of literacy. This includes, obviously, the language they bring into the classroom” (346). It may frequently be the case that Aboriginal learners will relate the ideas and concepts being discussed to their own life experiences within their communities.

By implementing dialogue as an egalitarian pedagogical practice, by validating the experiences of students as legitimate forms of knowledge, educators overcome and transform the unequal power relations characteristic of many classrooms that license educators as the authorities and subordinate students as empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge. When learners are provided with the educational space to engage in dialogue as equal participants, it becomes just as likely that teachers might learn from their students as students might learn from their teachers (347).

While educators must be aware of the immense pedagogical value of dialogue for transforming authoritarian classrooms into democratic spaces and for critically engaging students, the adoption of this pedagogy does not mean that educators give up their roles *as educators*. Given the fact that educators have undergone the extensive education to acquire certain skills and a firm grounding in an area (or areas) of knowledge, educators still have a responsibility to impart these skills and knowledge to the students. What adopting the pedagogy of dialogue does mean is that educators will assume a “directive role” as an active guide while respecting “student autonomy” (348).

It must be emphasized that encouraging students to participate in public dialogue is fundamental to *developing their critical thinking skills*. When students are able to think critically, they are able to ask questions, they are able to articulate concerns, and they are able to propose solutions to problems in their communities and global society.

Educators should also be aware of other principles and practices that will provide them with the culturally sensitive means to support Aboriginal learners in their quest for academic success, particularly within literacy programs. In “Supporting Aboriginal Student Success: Self-Esteem and Identity, a Living Teachings Approach,” Dr. Pamela Rose Toulouse proposes that educators might follow some of the “Ojibwe Good Life Teachings.” For the purpose of teaching within an Aboriginal Literacy classroom, instructors might adhere to three of these teachings or principles: Respect, Love, and Humility. When instructors respect Indigenous students, they have “high expectations” of the student. According to Toulouse, educators can demonstrate respect “by ensuring that our own belief in the abilities of Aboriginal students is great” (3). Rather than lowering their expectations of Aboriginal students, educators must expect the best from them to build their confidence and encourage their highest performance. To incorporate the principle of love into the literacy classroom, educators must be committed to “fostering and supporting the Aboriginal student in their learning environment. [This support...] requires a change and commitment to the pedagogical transformation of the classroom” (4). While a commitment to the pedagogical transformation of the classroom will be accomplished by creating a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy, humility might be practiced by educators reaching out “to others for assistance. This is a key principle in our educational goal of ensuring that the Aboriginal learner has success in school. As educators we need to go beyond our realms and ask the ‘Aboriginal experts’ key questions. It is so important that we go to Aboriginal organizations, institutions and members of the communities for direction” (7). If educators are committed to the task of indigenizing literacy for Aboriginal learners, educators *should practice humility by seeking the assistance of Elders and advice from other community members responsible for education*.

Drawing on the work of Swanson (2003), Toulouse proposes that there are other pedagogical practices that might be adopted that will contribute to a classroom amenable to the success of Aboriginal students. First, it is imperative that educators celebrate the individual achievements and cultural backgrounds of the students (6). Whether the celebration of student success is accomplished through formal acknowledgement in the community or through the more informal recognition in the classroom, it is imperative that instructors recognize the academic success of students, who might be working in groups or as individuals. Such public recognition is certain to provide extrinsic motivation. In addition, educators need to create “an environment where humour and ‘group talk’ is accepted” (6). There are at least two reasons why humour is such an indispensable pedagogical attitude for a literacy educator. First, humour is an Aboriginal value

which creates an environment of enjoyment, particularly enjoyment in learning. As an important reason for ensuring that humour provides one of the dominant emotional tones in the classroom, educators must realize that many Aboriginal learners have had negative experiences with literacy instruction for a variety of reasons. When humour and more casual forms of conversation on a range of topics are introduced into the literacy classroom, learning to read and write with greater degrees of competency becomes fun rather than an oppressive and burdensome chore that is a mood entirely antithetical to enthusiasm, creativity, pleasure, and a desire to learn.

## CONCLUSION: LIFE-LONG LEARNING, LITERACY PORTFOLIOS, AND SUCCESS-INDICATORS

"We believe that children begin learning in the womb and that the spirit of learning doesn't end until you die."

(Chief Dan George)

In an era of education when some students perceive education as a form of service performed by service-providers, education is reduced to a type of consumable product. Viewing education as a kind of fast-food, society in general and students in particular expect education to be served quickly without an investment in prolonged commitment. Once consumed by students, education is left by the roadside while students move onto their jobs and professions.

However, as students soon come to realize, education is neither a commodity to be hastily consumed nor is it a social good disposed of after students finish their degrees. Due to a rapidly changing economy and a high turn-over rate in jobs within the employment-market, professionals need to upgrade their skills, retrain to use new technologies, and study to acquire new areas of expertise. The reality of today's globalized world has led to the necessity of life-long learning, in which the young as well as adults can expect to sign up as students for the duration of their lives. While there is value in the ideal of learning for learning's sake in which knowledge becomes its own reward beyond any practical concern for career advancement, economic considerations are a factor in the life-long learning credo.

Educators also practice life-long learning by participating in professional development activities, such as giving papers at academic conferences or by performing research to keep abreast in the advances in scholarship made in their fields. Without pursuing life-long learning, instructors would quickly lose their current relevancy as educators.

Just as many students, professionals, and educators have adapted to social expectations that learning is a life-long endeavour, literacy students also need to be conscious of this prospect. For various reasons, any attempt to acquire literacy skills must be considered to be an ongoing-process. Since literacy is predominately a way of being in the world—creating meaning and constructing knowledge through language—rather than a tool-kit of skills that can be picked up in a course or two, the acquisition of literacy requires a long-term commitment to reading and writing. While literacy instruction is compartmentalized into blocks of time according to class hours and days of the week, to become truly literate students need to weave literacy activities into the daily fabric of their lives, such as by writing short stories or journals, participating in drama, or composing community newspapers. Thus, Aboriginal learners must regard literacy to be a life-long learning venture whose benefits are personal, social, and economic.

Noting that literacy is a skill achieved within the pedagogical context of life-long learning, one definition proposes: “Literacy is an important part of a life-long learning process, a skill that starts in infancy and continues to be built throughout life” (5, 2006, “Nurturing the Good Mind”). In keeping with the life-long learning process, advocates of Aboriginal Family Literacy Programs stress the cognitive importance of literacy training for pre-school children:

*The most crucial years for learning take place in the home, before children enter the formal school system. The rate of growth that takes place in the first five years of life is never matched again. Children need stimulation to build connections in their brain and nerve cells. Literacy activities such as rhymes, songs, conversation and reading help form connections in the brain that will be critical later in life. If these activities are not part of the environment in the early years, the child may have a more difficult time catching up later on. (6)*

In light of the fact that children are especially receptive to environmental stimulation within the first five years of their life, advocates of Aboriginal Family Literacy Programs assert: “Support for reading and language development during these years sets the foundation for literacy. Children need partners in this learning process. The most important teachers in a child’s life are parents, siblings, grandparents and other family members who are with the child everyday” (6). Before children enter primary school, they must be supported by a literacy-rich family environment.

As the definition of life-long learning in literacy states, adults may be compelled to continue to develop literacy skills throughout their lives. While the reasons for Aboriginal adults requiring a strong literacy competency may vary depending upon their multiple roles in life (as parents, Elders, educators, business people), one reason for raising the literacy skills of Aboriginal people is because they will obtain greater opportunities to participate in the labor market, especially

when as a demographic group they are growing more rapidly than the overall Canadian population:

*Furthermore, all federal programs aimed at increasing labour market participation of Aboriginal peoples in Canada should include basic education upgrading and literacy programs. [...] We must work together to address this education gap. Canada's Aboriginal population is growing more quickly than the overall Canadian population. Between 1991 and 1996, the Canadian population grew on average by 1.6% every year. The Aboriginal population increased on average by 3.6% -- more than twice as rapidly. We must work together to address issues of economic and social inequity, to ensure that Canada's Aboriginal peoples have the resources they need to thrive as communities, and as full participants and contributors to Canada's future economic and social prosperity. Investment in Aboriginal literacy development is a crucial step toward this goal. (Literacy BC, <http://www2.literacy.bc.ca/facts/workplac/8.htm>)*

If Aboriginal adults intend to participate as full equals within the Canadian job market, work-place literacy skills will be critical for professional success. Hence from infancy to adulthood, Aboriginal people need to develop literacy skills.

To keep track of their literacy development, Aboriginal learners might benefit from maintaining portfolios upon their accomplishments and achievements that are reflective of their growth throughout their academic and professional careers. By carefully preserving their work, Aboriginal learners will obtain a greater sense of themselves as language users. According to the “Adult Aboriginal Literacy Life Collection Project,” developing a literacy portfolio may result in the boosting of “self-esteem, confidence, capacity building, and awareness of the strengths” of the learners (9). Included within the portfolio will be a concrete and readily verifiable record of the creative, written, technological, and critical thinking skills that students have worked hard to develop. It might also include any material evidence of collaborative reports and special projects that students became involved in the spirit of community development.

The literacy portfolio might contain documents pertaining to “academic ability, personal development, and career awareness” (10). While the student might retain documents that provide examples of their *academic ability* ranging from evaluated written assignments to official transcripts to instructor letters of reference, the student might place in the portfolio a diverse array of items that provide the highlights of their *personal development*, such as “drawings and written forms of story-telling, documentation such as workshop completion certificates, and volunteer log hours” (10). Video productions, photographs, published poetry or newspaper articles—any type of symbolic material that signals a meaningful moment in the personal development of the student might be kept as a record. Any documents that relate to the student's goal of *career development*

should also be kept on record in the portfolio. Resumes, cover letters, letters of reference, and certificates of achievement are documents indicative of a student's career development (10).

Whenever there are new educational and training programs adopted, there is the inevitable issue of *accountability*. To require that an educational program is accountable is to expect that the program is successful in accomplishing the learning objectives that it has initially proposed that it will achieve. Basically, accountability raises the question of success. For example, has a literacy program been successful in raising the literacy rates of Aboriginal students?

When the issue of accountability is raised, accountable *to whom* is the corollary question that must be asked. What specific people must an educational program be accountable to? While the principle of accountability often favours Government or private sector funders of educational programs, because they have a practical interest in ensuring that their investments produce successful results, educational programs must also be accountable to participating students and communities. In view of the fact that students and communities are in the best position to assess if educational programs have been successful in meeting their needs, students and communities must be considered equal stakeholders—along with Government and business funders—in the process of evaluating program success.

Before the stakeholders in an educational program can even begin to measure a program's success, they must come up with a set of standards to define what success will look like to them. However, success may mean different things to different people. For example, in the Ministry of Advanced Education's "Adult Opportunities Action Plan," they have laid out a series of success indicators within the context of improving the literacy rates of adults, *particularly adult Aboriginal people*, "to participate fully in the modern society and global economy" (1). These success indicators are:

- ⊕ Short-term indicators include the number of learners taking literacy programs and courses, the number of courses and programs available and taken, and the number of instructional and tutorial hours taken. As data become more available and reliable, more indicators will be monitored, such as completion rates.
- ⊕ Literacy rates for key populations – immigrants and Aboriginal people in particular – will improve.
- ⊕ Overall literacy rates for the province will be enhanced, recognizing that improvements may take many years.
- ⊕ The average literacy score will improve. Most important is upward movement within Level 1 of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey.

- ✿ A long-term indicator is an increase in the number of people moving from Level 1 to Level 2. (2, 2007)

There are several points of interest in these “success indicators” that must be clarified to determine if they are an appropriate measure of success of Aboriginal literacy programs and Aboriginal learners. First, one must question if the “long-term indicator” of success—the last point—corresponds with the aspirations of Aboriginal people. Basing this indicator on “The International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey” (IALSS), the “Adult Opportunities Action Plan” stipulates that over the long-term a number of Aboriginal learners should move from “Level 1 to Level 2.” What this long-term success indicator is proposing in terms of Aboriginal literacy achievement must be ascertained by examining the IALSS definitions of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> levels of literacy published in “Literacy in British Columbia.” At level 1, people “have difficulty reading and have few basic skills or strategies for decoding and working with text. Generally, they are aware that they have a literacy problem” (2, “Literacy BC”). At the 2<sup>nd</sup> level, people “have limited skills and can deal well only with material that is simple and clearly laid-out. They often do not recognize their limitations” (2).

Even if reaching the 2nd level of literacy might be a realistic achievement for some Aboriginal learners, why should Level 2 be pegged as a long-term indicator of success? To appreciate the potential socio-economic consequences of this success-indicator, it is important to note that people at Level 3 have literacy competencies equivalent to “high school graduation” (2, “Adult Opportunities Action Plan”) and people “at Levels 4 & 5 have strong literacy skills and many strategies for dealing with complex materials” (“Literacy BC”). In other words, Levels 3, 4 and 5 are the levels of literacy that will be required to achieve a degree of socio-economic mobility within society. Although some Aboriginal learners might need to develop their literacy skills over an extended period of time, there is a political problem in having minimal expectations for Aboriginal people, because the “Adult Opportunities Action Plan” asserts that anything “below Level 3 is considered a low level of literacy” (2). If Aboriginal people do not reach at least a Level 3 or higher, they will not attain “the ‘desired level’ [of literacy] to cope with the increasing demands of the knowledge and information economy” (2). Thus, Aboriginal people will be unable to participate as equals in the global economy.

As stakeholders who must participate in evaluating the success of literacy programs, Aboriginal people must also question the over-reliance that the “Adult Opportunities Action Plan” places on numbers as a success-indicator of literacy education to decide if “statistics” are the most appropriate measure of Aboriginal literacy success. Interpreting success through the lens of a quantitative analysis, the plan proposes that indicators of success will include: the number of learners taking courses and programs; the number of courses and programs available and taken;

the number of instructional and tutorial hours taken; and, eventually, the number of learners who complete literacy courses and programs (2). Rating success in terms of statistics, the “Action Plan” negates the whole qualitative dimension of literacy education that is symbolized by the Medicine Wheel. To evaluate the success of both Aboriginal literacy pedagogy and learners by a statistical measurement is to deny the Indigenous concept of a Holistic education and the rich spiritual, emotional, cultural, and social dimensions that cannot be evaluated by numerical calculations.

As a final remark, the acquisition of literacy defined in this document is a life-long endeavor. Throughout primary school to the post-secondary system, Aboriginal students, whenever possible, should become fully and intensely immersed in a Holistic Ecology of Aboriginal Literacy. Since participation within such a learning environment is frequently a collaborative and community-oriented experience, commitment to literacy must not only come from the students and their communities or from the educational institutions and instructors and other literacy practitioners. For this commitment to Aboriginal literacy must come from everyone, particularly BC Government Ministries as well as business funding agencies who have a vested interest in increasing the literacy rate of Aboriginal learners in BC.

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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.

**Andragogy:** a theory of adult education developed by Malcolm Knowles. Knowles’ theory can be summarized in four simple postulates: 1) Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction, 2) Experience provides the basis for learning activities, 3) Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance to their job or personal life, and 4) Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented.

**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.

**Bloom’s Taxonomy:** Proposed in 1956 by Benjamin Bloom, an educational psychologist at the University of Chicago, Bloom’s Taxonomy divides educational objectives into three domains: the affective, the psychomotor and the cognitive. The goal of Bloom’s Taxonomy is to motivate educators to focus on all three domains creating a more holistic form of education.

**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.)

**Critical Literacy:** an active, challenging approach to reading and textual practices. Critical Literacy includes: examining meaning within texts, considering the purpose for the text and the composer's motives, understanding that texts are not neutral and that they represent particular views, questioning and challenging the ways in which texts have been constructed, analysing the power of language in contemporary society, emphasizing multiple readings of texts, having students take a stance on issues, providing students with opportunities to consider and clarify their own attitudes and values, and providing students with opportunities to take social action.

**Decolonization:** a learning objective and social action that requires learners to identify the causes of injury to an ecosystem (the prerequisite to *reinhabitation*).

**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.

**Epistemology:** (from Greek *episteme* "knowledge", *logia* "study of") a branch of philosophy that addresses the philosophical problems surrounding the study of knowledge. It addresses the questions: What is knowledge? How is knowledge acquired? What do people know? How do we know what we know? Why do we know what we know?

**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.

**Indigenization:** An indigenized literacy program includes a culturally relevant curriculum, Aboriginal teaching styles to accommodate the learning styles of learners and local Indigenous values and principles (the values and principles embedded within the content and institutional policies). Besides the purpose of increasing the participation and graduation rates of Aboriginal students, indigenization also enables Aboriginal people to achieve the goals of social health and self-determination.

**Indigenous Epistemological Foundation:** a foundation practitioners must establish if they wish to create an indigenized culture of education. This Indigenous Epistemological Foundation is a historically, culturally and cognitively familiar perspective for understanding the world, one that will enable Aboriginal learners to learn with greater success.

**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.

**Ojibwe Good Life Teachings:** the Ojibwe people are often grouped under Anishinabek (because those in this group speak closely-related Anishinaabe languages). See *Anishinaabe Teachings of the Seven Grandfathers*.

**Ontology:** (from Greek *ontos* “being”, *logia* “study of”) the philosophical study of the nature of being, existence or reality in general.

**Peer-Scaffolding:** Educational scaffolding is the attempt to provide clear structure and precisely stated expectations to students (like those structures thrown up alongside buildings to support workers in their skyward efforts) while at the same time not confining them or destroying their initiative, motivation and resourcefulness. *Peer-Scaffolding* is when students themselves (without the teacher) support each other towards higher levels of understanding.

**Personal Voice:** Traditionally teachers have used the term personal voice to denote a personal style, the manipulation of linguistic elements of style to create a distinctive voice –a predominantly aesthetic or formal idea of personal voice. However, for those young learners who are being ignored, personal voice is synonymous with being heard, with being recognized as valuable, with mattering in a society that conjures up the worst stereotypes of youth in the media.

**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.

**Reinhabitation:** the learning objective and social action that consists of learners learning to live-in-place in an area that has been disrupted and injured through past exploitation. The learning objectives involved in identifying, recovering and creating material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments. *Decolonization* is an important condition for reinhabitation.

**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.