

Teaching Native Students at the College Level

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Descriptions of teaching in two Native-oriented projects in postsecondary education in Quebec provide the basis for the personal reflections of a teacher who is determined to teach well. Finding direction in a literature about Native adult learning, the author finds that her experience does not support the specific claims of much of the literature. Experience in teaching and communicating with Native postsecondary students brings the author to the realization that by attempting to articulate how best to teach Native students, she comes to the conclusion that all the strategies reflect good teaching practice in general and suggests that by becoming more sensitive to the needs and perspectives of Native students, postsecondary instructors will also become more sensitive to non-Native students.

Native Education in Context

As Diane Longboat (1990) points out, in Canada today an Indian adolescent male has more chance of ending up in Kingston Penitentiary than of going to university; a Native girl has more chance of being a mother at the age of 18 than of graduating from high school. Neither of these facts can leave those of us involved in postsecondary education indifferent. We must work with Native people at finding ways of making postsecondary education more accessible and meaningful.

This article sets out: (a) to give information on two pilot programs involving Native students at John Abbott College, a Cegep (community college) on the island of Montreal; (b) to look at the research presently available on teaching older and adult Native students in a college or college-type environment; (c) to give an anecdotal account of how two classes I taught that included Native students made me reflect on the literature on Native learning styles and appropriate teaching styles; and (d) to point to some paths for research in the future.

Two Projects Aimed at Improving Native Prospects in College Education Kativik Postsecondary Program and the EAP Program

Established by the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement of 1975, the Kativik school board controls not only elementary and secondary schooling in the north, but also postsecondary education. Until the establishment of Kativik, education of the Inuit had been the domain of missionaries, then the federal government. In the mid-1960s, the provincial government also entered this field, resulting in some considerable duplication. Although several young Inuit were sent to Ottawa, Winnipeg, and other southern places for secondary school, only a handful had completed any postsecondary education by the end of the 1980s. By 1981-1982, the first Inuit adolescents graduating from Kativik's high schools

traveled south to attend various postsecondary institutions: Cegeps (community colleges), technical schools, and university. In 1990 some 25 Inuit attended such academic institutions in the south. (A separate corporation, Alikvik, exists for professional [technical] education.) Kativik maintains a fully supervised residence where first-year students must normally stay. As well, Kativik provides academic, career, and personal counseling for its students.

So far, if one asks how successful the postsecondary program has been, a purely statistical answer looks rather dismal. Of about 100 students who have attended postsecondary schooling, few have finished. However, most of those who have not completed their schooling in the south have been successful finding employment in the north; several have completed a special program for teachers in Kativik and now teach grades 1 through 3 in their communities. This is consistent with Degen's (1985) findings that standard measurements of success by such criteria as graduation miss what many Natives who have had some postsecondary education define as success in their personal and professional lives.

Nevertheless, keen to improve the chances of success of their students in postsecondary academic education, Kativik started a new program in fall 1990. Inspired by certain American universities' special programs for students from other cultures, Kativik had one of its teachers trained in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program offered at St. Michael's College, Vermont, in the summer of 1990. This program aims to help students from a different language and cultural background adapt to the American college system. Students register in regular courses, but the EAP teacher accompanies them to class in a particular designated course. The teacher's role is to demystify the course content, which means meeting the students regularly to go over class material. The teacher guides the students through the content in adjunct classes with the aim of enabling them to acquire the skills necessary to survive independently in college.

James Bay Nursing Program

The James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA) of 1975 made dramatic changes in the institutions of the north just as the reservoirs and dams did in its physical environment. The JBNQA established myriad committees and institutions, including the Cree school board and the Cree Regional Health Authority.

Through these two institutions, the Cree of the James Bay area had been seeking help, from about 1986, from the Quebec government to establish a program to graduate the Cree nurses badly needed in these communities. Proposals had been solicited from various colleges, but were turned down by the government as unfeasible, mostly on the basis of cost. John Abbott College had been engaged in discussions about the possibility of providing a program in 1988. But in winter 1989 when 10 Cree women applied individually to the nursing program of the College, nothing was in place to accommodate them as a special group. After a series of hurried meetings, project proposals, and budget preparations, funds were made available for a project to start in fall 1990. The college had initially hoped to establish three posts for people to work on the project, but the funds made available only covered two. Thus as of fall 1990, two nursing teachers had been released to work full time on the JBNP. One serves as a pedagogical counselor and the other as project coordinator. The goals of the project include assisting the original 10 applicants to finish the nursing program successfully; identifying appropriate

pedagogical methods; and identifying necessary curriculum modifications and enrichment.

The Author's Personal Involvement in these Programs

To graduate from a Cegep, all students must successfully complete courses in certain core disciplines as well as those courses in their particular program. I teach humanities, one of those core disciplines. In fall 1990 Kativtik registered its new students in one of my classes, and one of the Cree took another. This semester, again Kativik registered its students in one section of a course, Indian and Inuit Views, which I started teaching again after a break of some years, and several of the Cree registered in that section or another section of the same course. Thus I have been involved as a teacher with both projects from their beginnings as special projects in Fall 1990.

Native Learning Styles; Appropriate Teaching Styles: The Literature

Most of the literature dealing with Native learning styles concerns itself with children, and to date little research has been published on the adult Native learner, or even the postsecondary Native learner (see, e.g., Bowman, 1984, p. 20: "very little has been done specifically on teaching the native adult"). This report goes on to state that the indications are that adult Native learners have similar concerns to non-Native adult learners, such as "will I look silly?" "will I feel out of place?" "am I capable of learning at my age?" and so forth.

Moreover, much of the literature refers to research conducted in all-Native environments, in Inuit communities or in schools on reserves (Kaulback, 1984). Yet almost all postsecondary institutions comprise overwhelmingly non-Native students. Some research does deal, though, with the issues concerning Indian children attending urban schools, which are much more mixed. In such a study, Lee (1986) notes that although community-based support systems may exist to help students in school, when they reach college level, these supports are withdrawn "and it is in this age group that the native dropout rate is most shocking."

Literature available on Native learning styles tends to fall into three categories:

1. That which deals with right and left hemispheres of the brain and promotes the belief that Natives are "right-brained" (Browne, 1990). Chrisjohn and Peters (1986) take on this theory to refute it. In fact, they go so far as to say that the "right-brained Indian is myth not science" and point to the potentially harmful effects of this theory.
2. Learning style theory, which states that Natives behave quietly in school because the traditional way of learning emphasizes watching and learning, a nonverbal form of communication. Pepper and Henry (1986), for example, point to the importance of teachers being aware of, and teaching to the different learning styles of Native children.
3. Interference theory, which posits that Native children in nonschool contexts talk a mile a minute, and that their silence in class derives from the culture of the classroom, because the instructor and context require different language to learn this foreign material (Whyte, 1986). As Whyte points out, much research backs up the learning style theory. On the other hand, "the interference theory perhaps is the key that opens the door widest" (p. 3). He goes on to say that "the problem [of classroom silence] lies not with the child but rather is an educational problem of designing a learning setting which is right for the chil-

dren—in which children feel comfortable and secure enough to participate verbally” (p. 3).

Whyte points to several flaws with learning style theory, based on various ethnographic sources and numerous intelligence tests. For one thing, verbal instruction had an important place in many Native societies, for example, storytelling; for another, those who espouse this theory may have underestimated the verbal capacity of Indian/Metis students with the end result, in some cases, of their being streamed away from academic programs, with their emphasis on verbal skills. The theory then becomes self-fulfilling.

This theory also ignores factors of

motivation, interest, content, and bridging the gap between the Indian community and the school. Central to the development of interest and intrinsic motivation is feeling. All too often the student has no feeling or identification with the content nor does he or she feel any identification with the collective social values and norms of most teachers. (Whyte, 1986, pp. 13-14)

The normal school curriculum has little or nothing to do with Native lifestyles and values. This is also true at the college level. History courses, after a cursory bow to the fact that Native people lived here, start with Jacques Cartier; few courses where Native content could easily be introduced, such as social studies, literature or creative arts include any Native content. Even today Native people are not accepted as making up part of our collective culture. Even today, in college and university courses, if they are dealt with at all, they are often seen as a kind of Wild West, Buffalo Bill side show that is of some folkloric appeal; or as historic has-beens who should now “catch up with society.” Native people still are not really an integral part of our history, present lives and hopes for the future. (The Mohawk position, emphasizing the statehood of the Mohawk, eschews being seen as an integral part of Canadian culture.)

If schools are to do justice to Indian and Metis students [I would add Inuit too] they cannot continue to represent a culture that ignores and oppresses and denigrates the indigenous culture.... A curriculum infused with content of an Indian and Metis cultural heritage will go a long way in helping generate interest and motivation among Indian and Metis youth. (Whyte, 1986, p. 5)

Sawyer’s (1991) further review of learning-style literature suggests that the argument is in fact one of teacher adaptation, not of defining a typical or stereotypic learning style.

The “Teacher’s Tale”

Kleinfeld, McDiarmid, Grubis, and Parrett (1983) suggest that directing our efforts toward finding models of effective teaching forces us to make such generalizations that the end results may very well be useless to teachers. As Zumwalt (1982) posits, the most useful studies on teacher effectiveness are the ones that sensitize teachers. From my own experience, I can say unhesitatingly that I agree that “it is the concrete cases describing particular teaching problems, not the generalizations about teacher characteristics, that teachers find interesting, that leads them to reflect critically” (Zumwalt, 1982, p. 102). Kleinfeld et al. point out that “the teacher tale provides an opportunity for the collection of related experiences and invites critical, collaborative reflection on these experiences” (p. 104). Although, as they note, one can object that these tales are, at bottom, anecdotes and

not research-based theories with quantifiable and reproducible results, they serve the purpose for which they are intended. This purpose is not to discover a recipe for successful and effective teaching that is generalizable, but rather to “sharpen teachers’ perceptions.” Interestingly enough, much of a lawyer’s education consists of studying case law and drawing out general principles, a study also prized in business education. Perhaps teachers too could follow this method of study.

The Author’s Own Teacher’s Tale

Knowing that I would be teaching two groups of Native students in my humanities course Indian and Inuit Views made me, a non-Native, rather nervous. Previously, Native students have enrolled in these sections individually, but I had not taught the course for a few years. As well, being in a college situated just over the bridge from the scene of major confrontations during the previous summer, and close to Kanasatake, what I felt to be quite a responsibility of being involved in these two new programs at the college weighed on my mind. It should be noted in passing that of the eight Inuit students who came for fall 1990, all had returned to their communities by the 12th week of the semester. Five returned after one week; the events of Montreal’s long hot summer also played a role here, with some hoodlums threatening the Inuit near their residence.

I felt that it would be important for the students to know me.¹ Fortunately, I had a headstart with the Cree because I had dropped into the JBNP office several times during the fall semester. The office, a small one, houses the headquarters of the JBNP, its two staff, and has become the drop-in center for Native students in the college. Because the new Inuit students arrived only at the beginning of term, I was unable to meet them before the semester started.

Once the semester started, enthusiasm soon replaced nervousness. I was excited at having the Native students in my class and saw them as important assets—as did the non-Native students.² There is a potential advantage for Native students in a Native studies course, provided the content and instructor deal with cultural content with respect. Being recognized as being at an advantage in a course in a non-Native institution may well be a new experience for many Natives in school. As well, non-Native students in such a class value the Native people and their contributions to the class. This in turn bolsters the confidence of the Native students. For their part, being in a course that naturally draws more Native students means that they have the added bonus of being in a class where, as one student said to me, “I see faces like back home.”

Having read about Native learning styles, and after discussing the subject with others, I was prepared for the Native students to act differently in the classroom from the non-Natives. Here, though, is where I have had my greatest surprises. In one class, a Native student plays a leading role in the classroom, bringing in personal experience, anecdotes, and pertinent questions. Others join in too, relating personal experiences to the entire class. At the end of class, invariably several Native students surround me to carry on a point of discussion that came up during class. In the other section of the course, though, the Natives will not speak out to the class; they sit prominently in the front row and make comments to me directly. In both classes, the Native students chose to do presentations rather than written assignments.

Given my reading and some past experience, I believe I had constructed a stereotype of “Native reaction in the classroom” that included the Natives not

venturing to make comments aloud in class, general quietness, and perhaps even lack of eye contact. This semester has disabused me of these ideas. In both classes, I often look around or move around the classroom only to find several pairs of Native eyes fixed firmly on mine. As for quietness, in my experience this varies from one individual to another. The smaller the class size, the easier it seems for Native people to speak out in class, but that is, of course, true for non-Natives too.

I would hesitate to say that a recipe exists for teaching Native students at the college level, but I believe that a few basic points might be of use to other teachers.

1. Never put Native students on the spot, asking them directly by name to answer a question, unless you are quite sure the student will not mind answering in public. Similarly, even such a well-used technique as going around the room at the beginning of term to introduce ourselves or have others introduce us can be off-putting. If a student demurs, pass on quickly. In the same vein, Native students find it hard to enter a classroom after class has started; if they are brave enough to do it, just ignore them as they come in late. Any comments can wait till the teacher sees the student privately.
2. Small-group work provides Native (and non-Native) students with easier opportunities to speak and go over the material than large class situations.
3. Humor has a place in the classroom; it makes everyone feel more at home and eases tension. I have in mind not so much the teacher telling jokes, but rather encouraging laughter as an appropriate response in some circumstances.
4. Native students like to have a personal relationship with their teachers, so if you can take the time to get to know them personally, it helps.

Reflections on the Above

Initially, I had wanted to write this article because I felt that the reaction of the Native students in my class did not reflect the stereotypical behaviors some studies had described. On further reflection, however, I realize that such a contrary generalization would also be untrue. Instead I should like to make the following reflections.

1. Teachers must be careful that in our praiseworthy desire to respect cultural differences we do not create new stereotypes of Native behavior in the classroom. By overgeneralizing we risk creating stereotypes that will inevitably guide our teaching behavior, and these in turn will solicit certain responses from Natives and indeed from non-Native students toward Natives. The art of crossing cultures lies in situating ourselves and others somewhere on the continuum between Confucius' "All people are the same," meaning we all communicate through language and all perform certain tasks, and the prevailing North American notion that each individual differs essentially from others. Individuals' behavior differs within cultures; people respond according to their personality and life experience in different ways to the same stimulus. The culture is the ongoing steady beat and the individual behavior the tune. By the end of the semester, I find it hard to talk about teaching to "Native people," let alone "the Cree" or "the Inuit" because each individual's face and personality comes to mind. Talk of "Native students" obscures too the very real differences between Native cultures, encouraging another stereotype far from reality.
2. Both learning and interference theorists start from the proposition that Native students do not speak much in class and see this as a problem. At college level

we too risk labeling Native students as nonparticipatory, nonverbal, and defining this as a problem. I realized in writing this article that whereas I had felt that the Native students in my class were much more verbal and participated far more than seems to be the case generally according to current research, in fact while some speak out in class, others still do not. I have not felt, though, that their unwillingness to speak out individually in front of a class of 30 to 35 non-Natives demonstrates any lack of participation, enthusiasm, or understanding. They comment to me often in class and communicate their active presence and involvement. Many college teachers encourage students to challenge them verbally and feel stimulated and valorized by such discussion. Still, though, most of our students feel too shy to speak out in large classes of students who meet only once or twice a week, and experience tells us by now that those who speak loudest do not necessarily understand or think better than those who do not. Recent pedagogical theories, especially those inspired by feminist pedagogy, challenge the Socratic method of teaching that involves the teacher questioning the class and a few vocal students responding.

Looking again at some of the points I have made concerning teaching Native students, it strikes me that all of these make for regular good teaching practice. Perhaps by becoming more sensitive to Native students, we will also become more sensitive to our non-Native students.

Conclusion

Much more work needs to be done on the teaching and learning of Native students at the postsecondary level. Students coming from northern communities especially face a host of particular problems, many of which can be subsumed under the general heading of "culture shock": just catching buses in a big city and attending class in an institution of 5,000 students when you come from a home community of 350 can be traumatic. As well, non-Native educational institutions emphasize time and time management in a way foreign to many Natives. Many other factors work against their success. Radical changes in diet from country food to southern food can cause sickness and general despondency. Homesickness, family separations, demands of family, especially for the women and adolescent girls with babies, come to mind as other problems. All these factors make the attempt of Native students to graduate from a postsecondary institution in a foreign language, in a foreign place, in a foreign culture a truly heroic enterprise. Initiatives like the JBNP and the Kativik program³ set out to provide much-needed support to those embarked on this amazing journey.

Postscript

I initially submitted this article in April 1991, but due to various factors, including a leave from which I returned only at the end of June 1992, find it once again on my computer screen. Over one year has gone by, during which personnel have changed, students left, arrived, and returned. Here too we have gained experience over the past year. As I stated in my introduction, my intent was to give information on these projects, and I do not intend to change that into an evaluation at this stage. Readers may be interested to know, however, that both Kativik and the James Bay Nursing Project (which has now expanded to include nonnursing students) have submitted separate proposals with the college to the provincial government for funding to establish programs as a result of these pilot projects.

Obviously, neither of these programs fulfills the criteria of being “composed, constructed, designed, and created” or even taught by Natives, unlike the Crow College of which Pease-Windy Boy (1990) tells us. Meanwhile, more and more Native communities solicit the college to provide various educational services. And as long as this happens, and Native people do not attend Native-run colleges, we non-Native teachers will be searching for good teaching strategies so as not to repeat the disasters of the past (see, e.g., Dawson, 1988, on this topic.)

Notes

¹Many studies mention the importance of teachers knowing their students. Whyte quotes (1986, p. 4) a study done by Fisher and Sellens (1974) in which they conclude: “In sum, those teachers who succeeded in eliciting a high level of verbal participation from Native students tended to respond to them with an intense personal warmth rather than professional distance. Teachers communicated such feelings by developing friendships with students outside of the classroom in ways that some who hold a narrow view of the teacher’s professional role might consider inappropriate. Teachers communicated personal warmth within the classroom in large part through nonverbal messages of smiling, close body distance, and touch.”

²I believe this a most important point. Whyte too stresses the need for Native content. “A curriculum infused with content of an Indian and Metis [I would add Inuit] cultural heritage will go a long way in helping generate interest and motivation among Indian and Metis youth.” Ebona (1984) too speaks of the importance of Native studies courses for Indians. Jordan (1986) makes the same point.

³I extend my gratitude to Shirley Sawyer and Suzanne Taylor of the JBNP for the time they have spent explaining the project to me. Also to Bill Surkis, Academic Dean at John Abbott College, for his help to me in preparing this article. John McMahan, my “shadow teacher” also deserves my thanks for explaining the Kativik postsecondary program to me. Any errors are, of course, my own.

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