Considerations for Aboriginal Adult Education Program Planning

Peter Martin
University of Saskatchewan

Advice is given here in the area of adult education program planning, based on the central tenet that Aboriginal values, cultural processes, and cultural perspectives are fundamental to program planning. Non-Aboriginal program planners must accommodate their processes of planning to create biculturally oriented programs.

Introduction

What becomes obvious then is that, although information often exists at the local Indian community level, the specific types of information needed on adult Indians are simply not available or reported in a form that would be appropriate for making national appropriations and programming decisions. (Brod & McQuiston, 1982, p. 23)

Although this quote describes the situation that existed in the United States in 1981, it could easily be describing the state of program planning for Aboriginal adults as it exists across North America in the 1990s. Although much planning for adult programs has been done at the reserve or community level, there is no collected body of knowledge to assist the program planner in making rational decisions for Aboriginal adults. Program planning efforts for Aboriginal adults that have been described in the literature have generally been specific to a certain tribe, location, or project. There is no well developed model of Aboriginal adult program planning like those espoused by Knowles (1980) or Kowalski (1988) for the dominant society. Program planners are therefore left to make programming decisions for Aboriginal adults on the basis of what they know of other Aboriginal adult education programs, the skeletal program planning models for Aboriginal adults that exist, andragogy, and Aboriginal cultures. The attempts of adult educators to marry these heterogenous elements into coherent and effective programs have been met with widely varied levels of success.

During recent years much information has been disseminated about the cultural differences between Aboriginal peoples and the non-Aboriginal majority in both Canada and the United States. Aboriginal peoples are now demanding that educational programs address their unique cultural, social, political, and economic needs in a manner that confirms their Aboriginal identity yet simultaneously promotes their ability to work within the dominant society. According to French (1980) the philosophy of Aboriginal adult education is to reduce cultural ambiguity and to adequately prepare an Aboriginal person for a viable social position. This philosophy has been expanded by Sanderson (1991) who states:

In helping adult Indian students to bridge the gap between being literate in a socially useful way and being literate in a completely useful way, educators must attempt to provide the depth and breadth of the dominant culture and Indigenous culture—metaknowledge—within its programming vision. (p. 7)

This philosophy envisions Aboriginal adults learning in a bicultural setting, so that on leaving the program they can function comfortably and effectively in both cultures to an equal degree.

Although this philosophy represents the current ideal of program planning for Aboriginal persons, its implementation forms the central core of the problem faced by the program planner. In order for an effective program for Aboriginal adults to be planned, French (1980) says "that an adult educator of Native students must act as a bicultural change agent and should follow an instructional model that relates the minority sub cultural value system to that of the dominant society" (p. 5). As few people of Aboriginal ancestry are sufficiently trained to develop and manage an adult education program, most program planners of Aboriginal adult education programs do not share the same cultural heritage and world view as their potential students. This poses a problem to program planners who wish to act effectively as bicultural change agents because they must be knowledgeable about the cultural and educational traditions of both societies in order to produce programs with a bicultural vision.

The non-Aboriginal program planner must remain attuned to a number of considerations that are congruent with the bicultural mission of Aboriginal adult education. According to Carney (1982) successful Aboriginal adult education programs share the following characteristics:

1.   they are established by the community and operated and managed at the local level.
2.   each program is seen as a long term venture—not a quick fix solution.
3.   each program is located in a Native community and takes on community identification and support.
4.   each program is seen as being part of other community programs.
5.   Native people play dominant managerial roles in such programs.
6.   programs are seen as a method of self fulfillment not as avenues of employment. (p. 9)

The non-Aboriginal program planner must make planning decisions in accordance with the characteristics of successful programs and the bicultural mission of Aboriginal adult education. Decisions about the level of community participation in the planning process, instructional design, content, site, instructional personnel, and student support services will determine the level of the program's success.

Community Participation

One of the more important aspects of program planning a non-Aboriginal program planner must ensure is community participation. Community participation throughout the duration of the program is crucial to program success (Carney, 1982; Four Worlds Development Project, 1984; North Carolina Commission of Indian Affairs, 1987; Pease-Windy Boy, 1990; Winchell & Jones; 1981). If an Aboriginal community is given the opportunity to share its ideas on program location, course content, instructional methods, and sequence and sees its ideas actively considered and acted upon, the community will have a vested interest in the program. A community that is encouraged to take some responsibility and initiative in the planning of its own educational programs is more likely to support such an endeavor (Knowles, 1980).

Community participation in the planning process also empowers Aboriginal communities. By validating the worth of the community and its input through participatory planning, the distrust many Aboriginal communities feel toward

institutions and individuals from the dominant non-Aboriginal society will be reduced (McIntosh, 1987). Community participation also ensures that education is relevant to community issues and needs. This in turn will more probably stimulate the interest and participation of adult students from the community (Pease-Windy Boy, 1990; Friesen, 1986; British Columbia Department of Education, 1984; Winchell & Jones, 1981). As Roberts says, "Effective programs grow from the experiences of the students and reflect the realities of their communities" (p. 8).

In order to facilitate Aboriginal community participation, a program planner should attempt to form an advisory panel to assist in planning, managing, and evaluating the program. Such a panel should be composed of community members who have an interest in adult education and a willingness and ability to share the community's vision with the program planner. The advisory panel should ideally include representatives from the community's political leadership, all clans or families, and the program's future students. If a needs assessment is necessary, the program planner and advisory panel should use methods that accurately reflect community needs, employ community members in the collection of data, and are congruent with Aboriginal knowledge production traditions. Needs assessment methods that are culturally compatible with Aboriginal peoples are participatory and involve members of the community in a reflective process in which they examine the lessons of the past, their current experience, and their hopes for the future (Sanderson, 1991). These measures will not only create a complete picture of the community's needs and concerns but will also encourage the community to take ownership of the program and responsibility for its success.

Curriculum and Instructional Design

In keeping with their bicultural mission, successful Aboriginal adult education programs actively utilize the community, its members, its problems and issues, and its cultural traditions as part of the instructional design. One of the suggestions of the Native Literacy and Life Skills Curriculum is to have "a school without walls where learning activities occur in the context of the community" (British Columbia Department of Education, 1984, p. 26). This concept of community learning encourages the instructor to incorporate Aboriginal community events into the instructional design of the program. For example, basic bookkeeping skills could be given relevance by using them to examine a band's financial statements, or a biology, geography, or English assignment could center around indigenous food gathering occupations like hunting or fishing. *Native English Curriculum Guidelines* (Sawyer, 1991) goes even further by suggesting that the curriculum should be entirely based on problems and issues that concern Aboriginal students and their communities. Such a curriculum acknowledges the experiences of the students and their communities, gives them a deeper understanding of their circumstances, and encourages them to engage in practical action after critical reflection through the medium of English language education.

However, the instructional design of a well-planned Aboriginal adult education program is not made congruent with its bicultural mission simply by addressing local problems and issues. As Winchell and Jones (1981) maintain: "A good education program will attempt to identify traditional education patterns and skills that exist within different cultures, and then design an education system that uses those patterns in creating the education programs that meet the needs of today" (p. 1).

Well-planned Aboriginal adult education programs must therefore teach material that is of relevance and interest to their students but must do so in a manner that is culturally appropriate. Little Big Horn College adheres to this philosophy by inviting elders to instruct some of its Crow studies classes in a traditional format. Elders, in their historic role of teacher, gather in a circle with their students and relate the history, religion, and stories of the Crow people (Pease-Windy Boy, 1990). Although the study of Aboriginal peoples may not form the bulk of an Aboriginal adult education program, all courses should incorporate traditional Aboriginal learning styles into the instructional design.

Aboriginal adults, according to *Native Literacy and Life Skills Curriculum Guidelines* (BC Department of Education, 1984), have traditionally viewed education as an interpersonal process, not an impersonal task. In keeping with this educational tradition, non-Aboriginal program planners should base an adult education program on an interactive model of program design. This model is dialogic in nature and not only uses all forms of dialogue to accomplish its instructional goals, but also engages the instructor and the students in a collaborative process to formulate those goals.

This interactive model has several advantages not found in the prepackaged courses commonly used in adult education programs. It allows the program planner and the Aboriginal community to create a program that addresses specific community needs and aspirations. At the classroom level, this model encourages adult educators and their students to cooperatively develop educational experiences tailored to individual or collective needs, interests, or learning styles. Students are still able to learn at their own pace, but in the company of others who will be able to enlarge and deepen an individual student's knowledge through their own efforts to master a subject.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of this interactive model is that it facilitates the creation of a mutually supportive community within the classroom where all members of the class are united in learning. This interactive model of program design is "designed to avoid isolating the student from other students as well as from his or her own community" (Sawyer, 1991, p. 2). Aboriginal adult education programs such as the Four Worlds Development Project (1984), Little Big Horn College, and the National American Indian Court Judges Association's parent process training curriculum (1983) designed by Aboriginal people or in consultation with Aboriginal people reflect this concern with the emotional tone of the educational experience. Instructional methods like small group work and discussion that promote a supportive environment are an integral part of these programs. This emotionally warm environment promotes continued student attendance and course completion (Stuhr, 1987). The importance of the interactive model of instructional design promoting emotional warmth in the classroom cannot be overstressed.

Student Support Services

According to Dr. Fred Carnew, director of the Maskwachees Cultural College in Hobbema, Alberta, the primary needs of Aboriginal adult students are a supportive environment and access to counseling services (personal communication, March 1990). To this end Maskwachees Cultural College employs the services of academic, personal, and cultural counselors, trains its instructors in communication techniques, and gives student needs the highest priority. Other organizations

and individuals have also notes the importance of providing counseling services to Aboriginal students. The North Carolina Commission of Indian Affairs (1987) notes that given the current level of social deprivation in most Aboriginal communities, counseling services are necessary in any community based program. McIntosh (1987), Stuhr (1987), and Malmberg (1983) all propose that Aboriginal students should be able to receive personal and academic counseling while enrolled in an adult education program. Clearly the provision of counseling services in the program is necessary and will prove its worth in increased student retention and course completion.

Selection and Cross-Cultural Training of Instructors

The next most important task for program planners and advisory panels is to select appropriate instructional personnel. The instructor(s) should be competent professionals and possess personal qualities that are appealing to Aboriginal adults. Although instructor mastery of course content and the principles of adult education are extremely important in promoting student success, these qualities cannot overshadow the necessity of having instructors with warm, supportive personalities. The instructor's attitude toward the students will affect the students' academic progress and their level of motivation for continuing their studies (Stuhr, 1987; Knowles, 1980). Instructors with warm, positive attitudes are particularly necessary for Aboriginal students who have often endured hostility, racism, and alienation in previous educational experiences.

Ideally, Aboriginal instructors should be hired as they are often the best teachers of Aboriginal adults (Brewington, 1985). Aboriginal instructors, aside from their professional abilities, share a common cultural heritage and world view with their students and can act as role models because of their demonstrated ability to flourish in a bicultural world. Nevertheless, until the present dearth of Aboriginal instructors and educational administrators is rectified, Aboriginal adult education programs will still have to recruit non-Aboriginal professionals for some time to come.

Non-Aboriginal instructors who choose to teach in Aboriginal adult education programs must be able to teach in a bicultural context: a cultural context different from the dominant society's in which they were raised and educated. In order to enhance an instructor's ability to function in a bicultural environment, the North Carolina Commission of Indian Affairs (1987) believes that non-Aboriginal adult educators should acquire an awareness and appreciation of Aboriginal culture by undergoing intense bicultural awareness training prior to and throughout their employment. Such a program of bicultural training informs the participants of traditional Aboriginal learning styles, verbal and nonverbal communication patterns, and the history and cultural traditions of the Aboriginal nation with whom the instructor will be working.

If the non-Aboriginal instructor will be working in an isolated Aboriginal community, this bicultural training should also be supplemented by a period of instructor/community familiarization. This should be planned so that the instructor, students, and other community members have the opportunity to get to know each other by engaging in traditional activities like hunting, fishing, and trapping and by attending events of particular cultural or political importance like band council meetings or potlatches. This type of training will soften the impact of culture shock on non-Aboriginal instructors and promote their mental and emo-

tional well-being. It will also lessen instructor and student anxiety about the upcoming program and reduce the possibility of instructors behaving in a culturally inappropriate manner. Because the success of the program depends to a large extent on the instructor's rapport with the students and community, the program planner should develop measures to facilitate rapport and provide adequate support services to the staff.

Selection of Program Site

In addition to personnel selection and preparation, the program planner and the advisory board must also select an appropriate site for the program. Malmberg (1983) and Edmo (1987) believe that the best location for an Aboriginal adult education program is in the heart of the community the program is to serve. Friesen (1986) believes that programs located in the community promote better student retention and completion of courses by reducing the impact that attendance at an educational program could have on a student's family. A local program site will also remove the possibility of culture shock common to many students who leave their communities to go to school. It also guarantees the program will be able to pursue the goal of bicultural education in an environment separated from the bureaucratic influence of dominant society institutions that could impede that goal.

Although program location is of prime importance, the program's building should also have a design that is congruent with the program's bicultural mission. The Adult Education Center in Tache, BC is housed in a log building built by members of the community, and its hallways, rooms, and offices are decorated with paintings, posters, and murals that celebrate Aboriginal life (David Laird, Director of Community Education, Tl'azt'en Nations, personal communication, 1992). Northwest Community College in Prince Rupert, BC and the Native Education Center in Vancouver, BC are reminiscent of the traditional long-houses of the Aboriginal people of the British Columbia coast. As Selman and Dampier (1991) state:

> The distinctive aspect of the Native Education Center's learning environment is how intentional it is, and it is readily apparent the center was created to appeal to Native people. The importance of this appeal to academic achievement is appreciated when one considers how for Native people there is no cultural equivalent to learning that takes place within a building designated for that purpose. For many Native people the association they have to institutionalized learning is in connection with residential schools, and this experience is seen as being culturally destructive.... Thus the Native Adult Education Center provides a culturally identifiable space where Native adults are able to learn together in a supportive environment. (p. 139)

Therefore, a necessary goal of any program planner and advisory panel is to construct, as far as constraints of time and money allow, a program site that is aesthetically pleasing to Aboriginal students and over which the Aboriginal community has ownership, either literal or cultural. By acknowledging the Aboriginal cultural traditions in the architecture and interior decoration of the building, the program planner and the advisory board will strengthen the bicultural philosophy of the program.

Conclusions

Aboriginal adult education programs must be planned in accordance with Aboriginal values and beliefs and must work toward combining them with the

non-Aboriginal skills, concepts, and information necessary for future student success in a bicultural world. To accomplish this bicultural mission, the program planner will have to ensure that the Aboriginal community and students are consulted about all aspects of the program's design and implementation.

With this in mind the program planner should use an interactive model of instructional design that allows student input into the planning of specific educational activities and encourages participation in these activities. In keeping with any successful Aboriginal adult education program's philosophy of developing the entire student, the program planner must also make sure that adequate counseling services are provided to the students. The instructors employed to carry out the program's bicultural mission should be carefully selected on the basis of their professional expertise and their ability to function successfully in a bicultural environment. In addition a site within the community should be selected and reflect the program's adherence to biculturalism by incorporating Aboriginal design principles in its architecture. If the bicultural mission of Aboriginal adult education is reflected in the actions, decisions, and attitudes of the program planner and instructional personnel, student retention and success will follow.

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