

Editorial: Advancing Aboriginal Languages and Literacy

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We are pleased to present the *Canadian Journal of Native Education* theme issue "Advancing Aboriginal Languages and Literacy." This theme came about through two separate inquiries made to Jo-ann Archibald (Editor of the theme issues) by Eileen Antone, who was interested in Aboriginal literacy and Heather Blair, who was interested in Aboriginal languages. Jo-ann wanted to find a way to bring these two important topics together and to engage in interuniversity collaboration. E-mail and teleconference conversations enabled us to work together. This *CJNE* theme issue is a result of a successful collaboration at many different levels. We begin by sharing our individual perspectives and interests to the theme topic of advancing Aboriginal languages and literacy.

Eileen Antone

As an Aboriginal literacy researcher I believe that it is important to have Aboriginal practitioners engage in research-in-practice. To this end, a two-day Native Literacy and Learning—Aboriginal Perspectives Symposium was held at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto (OISE/UT) on May 3-4, 2002 where nearly 80 practitioners came together. The 14 practitioners presented on a broad range of topics related to barriers and supports in literacy ranging from "Healing the Spirit" to "Deaf Literacy." This gathering created a forum for Aboriginal literacy practitioners to come together and discuss issues that would enhance literacy for the Aboriginal learners accessing Aboriginal literacy programs. This was also a way to encourage, enhance, recognize, and validate practitioners' work accomplishments. The Symposium was one aspect of a larger Aboriginal research project.

The above-mentioned research project provided an unprecedented opportunity in Canada for collaboration between an Aboriginal and a non-Aboriginal professor in the field of Aboriginal literacy at OISE/UT. In addition, Aboriginal student researchers used traditional protocols to approach Aboriginal practitioners, and the research process itself became an

opportunity and an occasion for reciprocal learning. This research project provided opportunities for Aboriginal peoples to define distinctive Aboriginal approaches to research ethics in general and to research in Aboriginal literacy in particular. Because of the inclusive nature of the Symposium, we were able to welcome and include practitioners from a broad spectrum of areas: from literacy and Native language instructors to artists in education and academics in higher education. These people gathered and worked together on Aboriginal literacy issues toward the common goal of acknowledging and affirming Aboriginal peoples' supports in overcoming barriers to literacy and learning.

The Symposium itself was a major highlight for all participants. In Aboriginal terms this would have been described as a *Gathering*. We had to clarify that the Symposium was in fact an Aboriginal Gathering for the purpose of sharing information from their programs. In this sense there was a feeling of reciprocity, mutuality, respect, and equality in pursuit of a common goal between those from the academy and those from the literacy field. The various literacy papers published in this issue of *CJNE* document and thereby provide this well-needed complementarity and balance. The articles portray diversity, yet they are representative of the present efforts of Aboriginal peoples in Ontario to revitalize traditional Aboriginal perspectives on Aboriginal literacy in Aboriginal educational contexts. The practitioners were encouraged to present and write their papers using their *voice*. Because Aboriginal literacy is culture-based, the articles could be considered a form of popular education in support of Aboriginal communities and indirectly of traditional ecological knowledges.

Heather Blair

As I reflect on the journey that has brought me to advocacy for Aboriginal languages and as co-founder of the Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute, I keep coming back to the notion of the personal and political nature of language. I think about how much I learned from Freda Ahenakew, Verna Kirkness, and the late Ida McLeod as they fought for the preservation and promotion of Aboriginal languages.

As a young teacher in northern Saskatchewan in the mid 1970s working in one of the first band-controlled schools in Western Canada, I was impressed by the band council's determination to make a difference in the education of their children through language. This made me think about the political nature of language. In a community where everyone except the nurses and a few teachers spoke Cree, it was not evident then that the language there would ever change, yet the band leadership saw what was happening down south and were adamant that their children and grandchildren would not lose their Cree language. Their vision resulted in a bilingual/bicultural education program intended to support the children's Cree language development while learning English. I have returned

to visit this community on a regular basis over the years and have continually noticed the erosion of the Cree language in the community and school. I have come to recognize the insidious way that the language of power, in this case English, takes over the Aboriginal language, with few people recognizing the process until it is almost too late and even fewer knowing what to do about it.

Some years later I was working under the guidance of Freda Ahenakew on a research project and was reminded of the personal nature of language and language loss. We were interviewing an elderly monolingual Cree woman on a northern reserve, and we asked her, "What language do you speak to your grandchildren?" She looked at us as if we were asking an unusual question and finally said, "I don't talk to them because they only speak English and they don't understand Cree." I was taken aback by this response as I thought about all the things that this woman had to offer her grandchildren, but that without a common language she would never have an opportunity to share. I thought about how much these children would be losing by not being able to talk to her. I thought about the special bonds between grandparents and grandchildren. This memory still brings me a feeling of deep sadness. I tried to imagine the emotional wedge in this family that this language loss has driven between these generations, the whole community, northern Saskatchewan, northern Canada, and Indigenous people worldwide. There were family members who would never know each other, whose histories, stories, and beliefs would never be passed down. And perhaps even more important, there was the personal loss of not having the chance to visit with your *Kokum* over a cup of tea.

These kinds of experiences have brought me to believe even more adamantly that so much work remains to be done. Nevertheless, I am proud and pleased to be a part of the editorial team of this issue as we strive to support and promote Aboriginal languages and literacy issues and carry on the work of those who have inspired us in this endeavor.

Jo-ann Archibald

I have gained a greater appreciation of Aboriginal literacy and its many forms throughout the process of reviewing and editing the articles in this journal issue. The dedication and skill of the literacy practitioners in providing quality education to Aboriginal learners, especially after "mainstream" education has failed, is remarkable. The Aboriginal learners find a learning environment that is caring, culturally relevant, and educationally challenging. The *CJNE* has not had Aboriginal literacy as a theme before. In Aboriginal education discourse we talk a lot about the need for Indigenous knowledge frameworks. The Aboriginal literacy authors of this journal issue show us examples of Indigenous knowledge frameworks: some are in formative stages, whereas others have been evolving through extended practice.

The other topic of Aboriginal languages continues to be of prime importance. The articles that discuss Aboriginal languages emphasize the dynamic relationship between Aboriginal language and identity. We need to read and feel the stories and narratives about Aboriginal language loss and appreciate that even having some aspects of one's language provides hope and is central to one's identity. The persistence that Elders and Aboriginal language teachers demonstrate by never giving up despite the continuing struggle to develop meaningful Aboriginal language programs is also remarkable.

I thank Eileen and Heather for agreeing to work with me and for agreeing to bring the significant topics of Aboriginal languages and literacy together. Our interuniversity collaboration shows that it is possible for universities to work together without a competitive discourse. More important, our collaboration shows that we (the Indigenous collective) need to continue to work together to really and truly advance Aboriginal languages and literacy.

The first three articles in this theme issue by Eileen Antone, Peter Gamlin, and Rhonda Paulsen provide a theoretical-practitioner framework about Aboriginal literacy and address some implications about the relationship between literacy and Aboriginal language. These three authors discuss the many meanings of literacy, especially in Aboriginal community-based contexts and present theoretical and practice considerations and issues. These authors establish a comprehensive historical, cultural, political, and educational landscape of literature and thoughtful perspectives in which to experience the articles in this issue.

Following this are the keynote talks presented at the May 2002 Native Literacy and Learning—Aboriginal Perspectives Symposium held at OISE/UT. Priscilla George, a well-respected adult literacy educator, shares her "Rainbow/Holistic Approach to Aboriginal Literacy," which has evolved through her educational practice and from interactions with many Aboriginal educators. Sally Gaikezhongai speaks about "Aboriginal Literacy: Raising Standards, Blazing Trails" and shares many inspirational First Nations teachings in order to challenge educators to transform Aboriginal literacy into quality programs. Priscilla George and Sally Gaikezhongai are seasoned guides who lead us into the exciting territory of Aboriginal literacy.

The third section contains examples of best practices in Aboriginal literacy. These articles are like lived-experience stories of adult education practitioners and programs. The approaches to Aboriginal literacy reflected here are specific to Aboriginal peoples in Ontario. These practitioners come from Moosonee in Northern Ontario, the Wikwemikong Unceded First Nation on Manitoulin Island in Mid-Northern Ontario, and Six Nations in Southern Ontario to the urban community of Toronto.

Christianna Jones, a practitioner with the M'Chegeeng Literacy and Basic Skills program, facilitates a learning process that enables learners to become more aware of themselves, their skills, family dynamics, and community involvement. She brings the conscientization of Aboriginal ecological knowledge to her work by drawing on the Ojibway teachings of the "Seven Grandfathers." Elva Lickers, a practitioner at the Six Nations Literacy Achievement Centre, also brings a life-skills component called "Insights" into the literacy program that she facilitates. The learners at this literacy program were able to find a place to heal the spirit wounded in previous attempts in the educational system. Sharon Swanson, a practitioner in the Literacy and Basic Skills program for the Moose Cree Education Authority in Moose Factory, Ontario discusses motivating learners in Northern communities. She says that although many factors influence the motivation of individual learners to succeed in a literacy program, the most effective methods relate to culture, cultural teaching practices, and community location. Charles Miller, a learner and practitioner of Aboriginal literacy, shares his educational experience in mainstream education as well as his experience as a learner with hearing difficulties. He stresses the need for deaf Aboriginal people to have access to literacy programs that promote "our traditional way of life."

In the absence of developed Aboriginal language resources, Shirley Williams, a language literacy practitioner, creates Aboriginal language material relevant to the learners of the Ojibway heritage in Wikwemikong. Isadore Toulouse, another language practitioner, is dynamic and transformative in his delivery of the Ojibway/Odawa language. He discusses his rich teaching experiences and argues that "as you learn the language, you get a better knowledge of the culture."

Each of these practitioners brought their best practices to the symposium. As is shown by these articles there is no single type of Aboriginal literacy program or best practice. Effective and successful programs and practices are those that learners perceive as directly relevant to their own environments and cultural traditions. Consequently, the situations presented here by the practitioners are best practices in which learners were motivated to participate.

The concluding section includes literacy and language research articles that focus on stories or narratives of personal lived experiences and case studies of university courses. Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, a well-known Aboriginal writer, teacher, and storyteller, discusses the realities of power differentials for Aboriginal people with respect to English and Indigenous languages through her life-experience story. She probes the complexities of knowing and not knowing her mother tongue in a powerful and personal story about language loss. Mary Young, an Anishnabe scholar, demonstrates the power of learning from family and Elders. She reminds us of the importance of recognizing the spiritual dimensions of Indigenous

languages. She cautions readers to acknowledge and value the role of speakers and asks that we each think about our personal role in language preservation

Yvonne McLeod presents a description of a team of Aboriginal educators collaborating to develop a University course that promotes awareness of issues in Indigenous languages and literacy. Patrick Moore's article concludes this issue with a model for how the Elders can create yet another pathway for learning Aboriginal languages. Moore describes a university-level Kaska language course held on the land in northern Canada, where students participate in a rich cultural and linguistic experience. We need seriously to take up the challenge to increase these Aboriginal language learning pathways.