

Culturally Framing Aboriginal Literacy and Learning

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This article examines the importance of literacy as expressed from an Aboriginal perspective as a way of life based on a wholistic world view. In this article wholistic refers to the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical aspect of human beings and our relationship to the Creator and the environment. It is from this wholistic perspective that as an Aboriginal researcher I examine Aboriginal literacy conceptual frameworks that integrate culturally appropriate ways. Models of developing ways to incorporate traditional Aboriginal knowledge and methodologies into the learning situations of Aboriginal learners are held up here to counter the assimilation process that continues to be detrimental to Aboriginal societies. Although this particular article is concerned specifically with community Aboriginal literacy programs functioning in an English-language setting, Aboriginal practitioners in Aboriginal literacy programs in Ontario incorporate broader goals concerned with safeguarding and reclaiming Aboriginal languages and culture rather than promoting assimilation.

In reclaiming Aboriginal literacy in culturally appropriate ways, I begin by introducing myself in my original language.

Sekoli Swa kwe kon, Tsi kayon ni yukwalihotΛ yukwayoté. Onkwehonwe ni:i Onyota'a:ka Tsi twa ka tuh ti. London Ontario akta. Tyot sΛnit ne Hotinnoshoni ne yukats, kale Kaliwisaks ne yukyats Eileen Antone ne ah slo ni kek ne yukyats. Ano:wal ni wa ki ta lo tΛ

Sekoli is a formal greeting in the Oneida language. Swakwekon includes everyone that is here. At this time I bring greetings to you as we engage in this work concerning Literacy and Aboriginal people. I am one of the Original people of Turtle Island (North America). I come from Onyota'a:ka known as Oneida First Nation of the Thames, near London, Ontario. My name in the Longhouse is Tsyot sΛnit, which means "She works hard" in the Iroquois Confederacy Oneida Longhouse. Ka li wi saks is my research name and it means "She who gathers information." An Elder who was a participant in my original thesis research gave this name to me. As we were talking and she was telling me about her journey through the residential school system, she stopped and asked me what my Indian name was. I had to tell her that I did not have an Indian name. My mother and father, who were former participants in the residential school system, wanted to protect me from the strap or other harsh punishments that were applied to students heard speaking a traditional Aboriginal language. Eileen Antone is my English name. I am from the Turtle Clan.

In keeping with the cultural traditions of the *Hotinnoshoni* it is important I start with *Ka nu he la tūk sla*—Words that come before all else. These words are called *Te twa nu he la tΛ'* the Thanksgiving Address.

As we draw our minds together the Elders tell us that we give thanks to and for the people who have been able to join in this particular event. So we give thanks to and for you.

We give thanks to and for Mother Earth our sustainer of life.

We give thanks to and for all the plants that grow on Mother Earth with special thanks for the medicines of the four directions: Tobacco, Cedar, Sage and Sweetgrass.

We give thanks to and for all the water that flows on Mother Earth as well as the water animals.

We give thanks to and for all of the animals that walk or crawl on Mother Earth.

We give thanks to and for the birds that fly overhead and we give a special thanks to the Eagle who flies high and gives us the gift of vision.

We give thanks to and for the Thunders that come from the west bring warm winds and rain to replenish the water system.

We give thanks to and for our Elder brother the sun, for the light and warmth that we have.

We give thanks to and for our grandmother the moon who regulates the water and coming of children.

We give thanks to and for our ancestors the stars who continue to tell us the time to carry out our cycles and ceremonies.

We give thanks to and for the four guardians who continue to give us guidance and direction.

We give thanks to and for the prophets that brought the message of the good mind from Sonkwayatison.

We give thanks to Sonkwayatison the Creator for all of these things.
Ta ne tho nō ya wa

In this article I stress the importance of literacy as expressed from an Aboriginal perspective as a way of life based on a wholistic world view. In this article *wholistic* refers to the spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical aspects of human beings and our relationship to the Creator and the environment. It is from this wholistic perspective that as an Aboriginal researcher I examine Aboriginal literacy in respect to culturally appropriate ways.

As an Aboriginal educator working as an assistant professor in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto in the Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology, my interest and work center around the education of Aboriginal people in Canada. It is in this framework that I have become interested in the field of Adult Literacy as it concerns Aboriginal People.

In the last two decades more study and research have been directed to the field of literacy and Aboriginal people in Canada. Battiste (1986), Gaikezhoyongai (2000), Curwen Doige (2001), and Antone, Gamlin, and Provost-Turchetti (2003) are but a few of the cohort that have taken an interest in the literacy of Aboriginal people. In 1986 Marie Battiste an Aboriginal educator examined the concept of Aboriginal literacy in her work with the Micmac people of eastern Canada. She found that "Literacy is a relative social concept more reflective of culture and context than of the levels of formal instruction by which it is usually measured" (p. 24). Sally Gaikezhoyongai (2000), an Aboriginal literacy practitioner, conducted her research in Toronto through the Native Women's Resource Centre. Her findings indicate:

A successful Native literacy program empowers each learner to reach for more than a grade 12 or college diploma, or a university degree. Learning goals should be about more than acquiring an official piece of paper that provides no guarantee of employment or independence. (p. 30)

In her study of Aboriginal literacy Curwen Doige (2001), coming from an academic historical perspective, found that it is necessary to consider the spiritual component of development in learning. She states,

It is not enough to hear the Aboriginal voice and to acknowledge the Aboriginal presence; Aboriginal people must be valued as an integral, important part of their own education. Also who Aboriginal people are as human beings must be valued and treasured. (p. 127)

The work conducted by Antone et al. (2003) in Aboriginal communities in Ontario also reflects the common theme that Aboriginal literacy is more than the ability to read, write, and do mathematics in the Euro-Canadian English language in the hope of obtaining gainful employment. Aboriginal literacy practitioners made it clear that literacy is "part of everyday life," involving relationships between self, community, nation, and creation with a focus on words, language, listening, and comprehension. Aboriginal literacy is not individualization; it is about relationship. During the May 3-4, 2002 Symposium on Literacy and Aboriginal Peoples in Toronto at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE/UT), grandmother Lillian McGregor, an Ojibway Elder originally from Birch Island, Whitefish River First Nation in Northern Ontario, articulated that Aboriginal literacy "reflects a way of life" (Antone, 2003).

The work in Aboriginal literacy attempts to counter the colonial education effects based on the goals of assimilation and individual economic improvement. Residential schools used by the Euro-Canadian government and the various missionary sects to carry out goals of assimilation resulted in issues described by Ball (1996) as she cites the National Anti-Poverty Organization (NAPO, 1992):

Residential schools are gone now, but the legacy lives on among many Native people in the form of self-hatred, substance abuse and child abuse. The damage cannot be overstated. People lost their pride, their hope, and the chance to learn from the Elders. An entire

generation of adults experienced the pain of losing their children to residential schools. Those who grew up in the schools often have frightful memories which may prevent them from getting involved today in their own [and their] children's schooling. (pp. 20-31)

In respect to the legacy of residential schools, Aboriginal practitioners in Aboriginal literacy programs incorporate broader goals concerned with safeguarding Aboriginal language and culture rather than promoting assimilation (Antone et al., 2003). Many factors such as healing; self-determination; and reclamation of identity, language, and cultures play a major role in the complex issue of Aboriginal literacy.

Ontario Perspective of Aboriginal Literacy

In Ontario this move toward a broader view of Aboriginal literacy began in late 1986 when the Ontario Community Literacy (OCL) grants program began. The purpose of OCL was to improve the development and delivery of a community-based adult basic literacy (ABL) program for Ontario residents (Ministry of Education and Training, MET, 1993). It was also at this time that the identification of three separate streams for the grant program occurred: Anglophone, Francophone, and Native. Early in 1987 Native people gathered in Toronto to talk about literacy. During this meeting, initiation and activation of the idea of an Ontario Native Literacy Coalition took place. The coalition received its first funding later that year. It was used to facilitate the original mandate, which was to provide advocacy, training, information, cultural awareness and sensitivity in all materials developed and program approaches, and development of methods to strengthen the concept of independent community literacy self-help groups.

According to the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition:

Native literacy is a tool, which empowers the spirit of Native people. Native literacy services recognize and affirm the unique cultures of Native Peoples and the interconnectedness of all aspects of creation. As part of a life-long path of learning, Native literacy contributes to the development of self-knowledge and critical thinking. It is a continuum of skills that encompasses reading, writing, numeracy, speaking, good study habits and communication in other forms of language as needed. Based on the experience, abilities and goals of learners, Native literacy fosters and promotes achievement and a sense of purpose, which are both central to self-determination. (George, n.d., p. 6)

Although the 1986 Ontario Government Plan for Adult Basic Literacy included structures for developing Native literacy programs, the underlying goal was not to support the Aboriginal way of life, but to provide a way for each individual to become part of mainstream "Canadian" society. However, this was not the goal of the Aboriginal People as shown by the definition of literacy from the perspective of the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition statement above.

Toronto Aboriginal Community Perspective

Sally Gaikhezheyongai (2000) reports that in 1987 members of the Aboriginal community in Toronto began a literacy movement to improve the quality of education for their learners. They began to explore and build connections between Aboriginal literacy, healing, community development, and self-determination. She asserts:

Stepping onto the healing path or discovering the "good red road" entails developing the willingness to explore one's social reality and accepting self/identity to assert one's rightful place and purpose in a society that still aims to assimilate First Nations people. The lifelong healing/learning journey must begin without the imposition of mainstream culture. (p. 11).

Gaikhezheyongai reports that since the inception of the inclusion of Native literacy programming by the Ontario government there has been much change in the services offered in Toronto. Her contention is:

Ongoing experiments in birthing Aboriginal-based approaches to Native adult learning have contributed to the Native literacy programs and services we have today. Native literacy is a model of education based on a philosophy for transformative learning. To implement such a model would require that we rise collectively as the possessors of ancient wisdom to take our place in the circle of learning in a good way to fulfill our prophecies. It may be that we can only pave the way, in a warrior-like fashion, for those coming behind us: our youth and children. (p. 46)

She states, "Perhaps, all we can do is pass on the best from our bundles (resources), so the power of the gifts buried in our collective minds, hearts, and spirits will have room to expand. Let us seek that vision together" (p. 46).

Literacy Perspective of Other Aboriginal Communities

Other Aboriginal peoples have also been developing ways of incorporating traditional Aboriginal knowledge and methodologies into the learning situations of Aboriginal learners. The First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) established in 1985, an Aboriginal-owned and operated education and training facility located on the Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory near Deseronto, Ontario, developed a Medicine Wheel Model of learning. This model incorporates four stages: Awareness, Struggle, Building, and Preservation. This wholistic approach to learning centers on spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical attributes (illustrated in Figure 1).

I have heard Elders say there are as many ways to see things as there are people to see them. The beauty of the Medicine Wheel as a conceptual framework can describe many different situations in life. The difficulty with using it in a written form occurs when a new model is presented and we tend to rely on the old model to base our judgment without giving this new model a chance.

In one anonymous review of this article, there seemed to be a tendency to question the FNTI conceptual model of this Medicine Wheel of Learning, stemming from different teachings. The review stated:

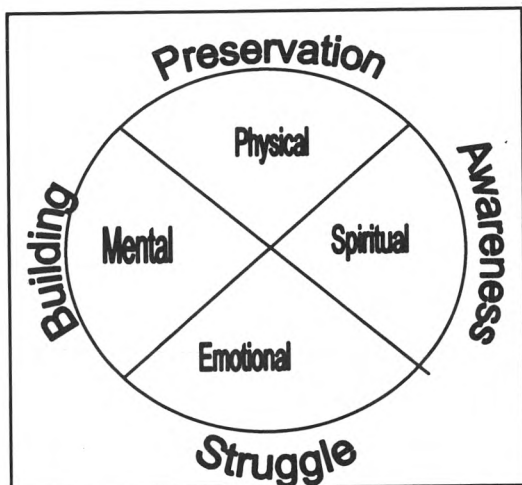


Figure 1.

The Medicine wheel has the physical and mental areas reversed from the widely used model that places the mental in the North and the physical in the West. The FNTI model places the mental in the west and the physical in the North. This appears as unusual to the point that it makes the reader wonder if it is a misprint. Although there are many variations of the Medicine wheel the path from the mind to the heart exists within the human body as a movement from north to south. This movement is *generally* referred to as the "good red road." The other path of the medicine wheel is the blue road. This is the path from the physical to the spiritual and is usually related to the path of the sun as it moves from the east to the west. Therefore, the positioning of the four realms of the FNTI medicine wheel seems to contradict *generally* accepted beliefs to the extent that the authors should have commented on this if it is not a misprint. (emphasis mine)

This reminds us that we need to be careful in our generalizations so that they do not become stereotypes. This also helps us to remember the diversity of the Aboriginal peoples across Canada. There is no one right way but many right ways to use the Medicine Wheel as a conceptual model as is shown in the Medicine Wheel of Learning. Another important lesson is that we need to discuss the Medicine Wheel teachings and symbolism so that others will understand how a particular group is using the Medicine Wheel.

The teaching in this FNTI Medicine Wheel Model is that

In Aboriginal thought, a whole person consists of spirit, heart, mind, and body—the capacity to see, feel, know, and do. Therefore, in the learning process, a whole person engages his or her physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual capacities in receiving data or information for the brain to process. Understanding one's self well enough to know how one takes in information and then processes it increases a person's ability to take control of the learning process. (Hill, 1999, p. 100)

In relation to framing literacy in a culturally appropriate way, the FNTI model presents a way of understanding the development of whole human

beings. In the Medicine Wheel Model of Learning *awareness* is connected to the spirit and is the place where there is increasing understanding of self and the world. *Struggle* is connected to the heart or emotions, and it is here that learners deal with their understanding of self and others. This is the stage where learners may make changes to positive feelings and beliefs, which influence behavior. The stage of *building* connects to the mind, and it is here that the learner creates new life experiences and creates a view of life that includes integrating the strengths present. *Preservation* is the stage that relates to the body. It is here that positive ways of being become the ongoing system of lifelong learning (Hill, 1999). For learners this model allows a program of learning that will enable them to understand how changes take place within themselves. This model will also enable them to be culturally competent and skillful in their occupational goal.

Diane Hill (1995), an Aboriginal facilitator, postulates:

An Aboriginal-based program of learning will provide individuals with the opportunity to realize and understand his or her part within the total creation. An understanding of how all the other life forms follow their original instructions both naturally and instinctively provides the basis from which human beings can draw information for their own survival and well-being. Having been given the power of the mind to make choices, human beings must acquire the information they need to not only basically survive, but also to achieve a quality of life where all beings can co-exist in a state of peace, harmony, balance and interdependence. (cited in Gaikhezheyongai, 2000, p. 29)

Aboriginal literacy is more than just the development of skills used in the reading and writing process. Aboriginal facilitators contend that it is necessary to develop the whole being and not just concentrate on the mental. In the following citation, Hill (2001), an Aboriginal literacy practitioner in Northern Ontario, reminds us that it is important to reclaim traditional knowledge so the wholeness of self will support balance in the process of learning:

For Aboriginal peoples, learning must be associated with spiritual, physical, and emotional growth, as well as academic growth. The Sacred Circle concept can be used as a framework for the education of the whole person in all his or her dimensions and in all his or her stages of life. Holistic education means that educators must address the four interrelated dimensions of human potential and personality: the physical, emotional, spiritual and mental. (p. 44)

Rainbow Approach to Aboriginal Literacy

Based on the principles of a wholistic view of life, another Aboriginal practitioner has developed a conceptual model of Aboriginal literacy using various colors to represent various types of literacy. In 1996 Priscilla George (2000) developed the Rainbow Approach to Literacy. This is a wholistic approach to literacy based on the Medicine Wheel. It incorporates the four stages of learning from the FNTI Medicine Wheel Model with the literacies of various colors.

In the Rainbow Approach to Literacy red is the literacy of Aboriginal languages, which are descriptive and show the interconnectedness of life.

The color orange symbolizes the oral tradition of speaking and listening. Yellow in some communities connotes creativity, and this creativity was used to communicate with others through symbols and sign language. The color green refers to the multicultural, multilingual society in which we live. Blue in some cultures means truth; therefore, blue refers to the technology of communication. Indigo refers to a spiritual seeing or intuition. The color violet is connected to the wholistic base of Aboriginal literacy (spirit, heart, mind, and body).

The Rainbow Approach to literacy integrates the importance of language as the basis of culture and the importance of incorporating listening and speaking (Oracy). It also notes the importance of symbol literacy (e.g., letters, wampum) as well as the need to be aware of living in two worlds. This approach includes the need to continue to use the values of the ceremonies in the literacy program and also to be aware of the body reactions (intuition) to what is happening in relation to learning. So bringing these all together integrates the four aspects (spirit, heart, mind, and body) of developing the whole person

Like the previous practitioners, Hill (2001) maintains that a modern system of education for Native people has to be wholistic, culture-based, and community-based to reflect the world view, values, and patterns of social interaction of the Aboriginal community.

Conclusion

As Aboriginal scholars we are in the process of decolonization. We can no longer stand by and accept the Euro-Canadian style and content of literacy and learning as the only way of literacy. In my present study of Aboriginal literacy the findings indicate that the principle goal is to make Aboriginal people proud of who they are and raise their self-esteem so that they have the skills to learn and succeed in their lives.

Models of Aboriginal literacy find new ways of incorporating traditional Aboriginal knowledge and methodologies into the learning situations of Aboriginal learners. These models counter the assimilation process that continues to be detrimental to Aboriginal societies. Aboriginal models of literacy involve a process of transformation from oppression to revitalization. This transformation takes the form of reclaiming, revitalizing, and sustaining Native spirituality, world view, culture, and literacy.

All my relations.

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