

# Transformation and Aboriginal Literacy

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*Literacy is presented in the broadest sense in this article. Being literate is about sustaining a particular world view and about the survival of a distinct and vital culture. Being literate is about resymbolizing and reinterpreting past experience while honoring traditional values. Being literate is about living these values in contemporary times. Being literate is about visioning a future in which an Aboriginal way of being will continue to thrive. Meaningful Aboriginal literacy is transformative. It will develop and find expression in everything that is done. Basic literacy skills will devolve from a unique and wholistic cultural perspective.*

The Elders tell us that creativity is an intrinsic aspect of survival. Creativity leads to new thinking and new behavior. New thinking, new behavior, and survival all follow from listening to traditional values and then finding ways to practice them. So as literacy theorists and practitioners we see that literacy begins with orality and the traditional values found in stories. When we follow these values, we are practicing Aboriginal ways in literacy, and more generally in every aspect of our lives.

In these words I am guided by Joe Couture (1987), who tells us that the Elders in a gathering in 1972 declared:

that in order to survive in the 20th century, we must really come to grips with the white man's culture and with white man ways. You must stop lamenting the past. The white man has many good things. Borrow. Master and apply his technology. Discover and define the harmonies between the two general cultures. To be fully Indian we must become bilingual and bicultural. In doing so, we will survive as Indian people, true to our past. (p. 5)

Couture points out that in this declaration, "Indian identity is redefined in terms of 20th-century conditions. And with this, fundamental traditional elements are re expressed and presented as fresh inspiration for a renewed action" (p. 5).

In these words Couture is making a declaration for transformational practice and transformational attitudes. Literacy is found in *living* these changing perspectives; giving voice to these changing perspectives.

One way to see transformation in attitudes and practice is in the great efforts and struggles by Aboriginal people to achieve identity redefinition. For example, in a recent article Jean-Paul Restoule (2000) speaks to Aboriginal identity and the need for historical and contextual perspectives. He shows us the limitations of conventional conceptions of cultural identity. In the spirit of transformational attitudes and change discussed above, he suggests that when we speak of Aboriginal *identity* we typically are referring to identity as transcending history and social situations. This kind of identity is represented in the Indian Act and its definition of *Indian*.

Identifying as *Indian*, in Restoule's view, is more subject to historical and situational influences. He uses as an example here his father, who at one point in history through "enfranchisement" "earned the right NOT to be an Indian" (p. 110) and at another time was seen as a Status Indian once again. I think the important teaching here is one that Restoule (2000) articulates well, "The criteria accepted in the legal system [about what constitutes 'Indian' identity] ... are often limited to material 'stuff.' What makes one Aboriginal is not the clothes one wears or the food one eats, but the values one holds" (p. 111). And to complete Restoule's teaching, we understand that although Aboriginal *identity* will remain intact when one holds to traditional values, no restriction should be placed on Aboriginal people to adapt and change over time. Clearly there are no restrictions placed on the "privileged" culture to do so. I repeat the quote from Couture's article below to make the point that creativity is an intrinsic aspect of survival, and creativity gives rise to transformational attitudes where "*fundamental traditional elements are re expressed and presented as fresh inspiration for a renewed action*" (p. 5). Here we find the heart of Aboriginal literacy.

Nishnaabe scholar Alan Corbiere (2000) similarly shows us how Aboriginal education will be transformed when traditional values are brought forward and attitudes transformed—when *aansookaanan* (legends) and *dbaaqmowinan* (narratives) and the centrality of *Nishnaabemwin* (language) are taken seriously. The Nishnaabe world view, with its assumption of spirituality and relationships, takes precedence over curricular details and in the case of literacy programs over the specific mechanics of basic literacy skills, at least when basic literacy skills are understood from a Western perspective.

### *The Primacy of Traditional Values*

Returning to Couture's (1987) article, we see that he identifies a number of primary traditional values that he believes lead to good application for Aboriginal educational needs, and by extension to a broad understanding of Aboriginal literacy.

The relation between values or principles or laws and their practice is critical:

Oral tradition teaches us that when certain values, or laws, are upheld and observed, the people survive: it devolves to elders to provide these precepts. However, the interpretation and application of the directives of elders is the responsibility of the younger generations. (p. 6)

I include from Couture's (1987) article, four distinctive characteristics of Aboriginal value and attitude:

1. Native cultures are dynamic, and adaptive, and adapting, not limited to the past.
2. These cultures are authentic and valid, inherently creative, capable of distinctive and sophisticated human development and expression, and, therefore, they can invent structural forms and institutions as needed to ensure and strengthen group/individual

survival. They are capable of a social and political rationality of their own and are as creative in this regard as the dominant culture.

3. Native ways of life are rooted in a perception of the interconnectedness among all natural things, and all forms of life. Within this the sense of the land is a central determining experience.
4. There is a characteristic sense of community, of the people, a collective or communal sense which contrasts sharply with Western individualism and institutional forms based on private ownership. (p. 6)

From Couture's (1987) perspective and in his concluding statement he says, "It seems clear to me that a *holistic philosophy and psychology of education rooted in traditional native values* can improve the educational opportunities for native children" (p. 12). And finally, Couture suggests that the objective of Aboriginal education is

To develop knowledge, skills and values rooted in the centuries old tradition. And here is found "the key at the heart of the two general traditions" [mainstream and Aboriginal]: The centered and quartered circle is the sign of wholeness, of inclusiveness of all reality, of balance and harmony between man and nature (Amerindian tradition). (p. 15)

From reading Alan Corbiere (2000) and Joe Couture (1987), the inescapable conclusion is that only a wholistic framework will reveal the true complexity and comprehensiveness of Aboriginal literacy.

#### *Wholistic Perspectives and Traditional Aboriginal Values*

The key to creativity and transformational practice in Aboriginal literacy is found in taking a wholistic perspective, which is a manifestation of following traditional Aboriginal values. I try to make this clear by showing how the concept of the "Good Mind" is wholistic and how it leads to creativity and transformation in practice. In the concept of the Good Mind we see a close relationship between holding to the value of not harming others, taking responsibility for our actions in how we treat others, and the creativity that is needed to do so. There is no formula to follow to do this.

Traditional knowledge on thinking and problem-solving goes well beyond mainstream efforts to measure isolated parts of cognitive information processes. It goes beyond mainstream notions of intelligence as being fast, analytic, and without social and moral dimensions. *Onkwehonne:we* traditional knowledge about thinking provides a wholistic account of a thinking process, a process that is governed not only by rational dimensions, but also by social, spiritual, and moral dimensions.

Thousands of years ago at a time when our people were in the midst of wars and strife the Peacemaker came and brought a message of love and peace. One of the gifts he brought to us at that time was the concept of the Good Mind. (Frieda Jacques, 1997).

The *Onkewhon:we* were given certain tools to help them live in a peaceful manner. One of the tools the *Onkewhon:we* was given is "the Good Mind" (Jacques, 1997). The Good Mind is a process of thinking that encourages taking personal responsibility for our thoughts and feelings, and consequently our actions, and ultimately the nature of our relationships

with the world around us. The Good Mind process is governed by culture-based standards of desirable conduct. *Traditional knowledge tells us that human beings should conduct themselves in kind and peaceful ways in all their relationships.*

Frieda Jacques (1987) gives us an example of what the Good Mind concept means in practice. Suppose, she says, that you wish to protect your family from harm. To do this you might go to the store and buy a gun. She asks, but what is one possible consequence of doing this? And her answer, you might actually have to use it. You might actually end up harming—killing—someone. She asks, what is your responsibility using the Good Mind? She answers, *not to buy the gun in the first place because you might end up harming someone.* This is not acting in a peaceful way. The creativity will come when you find a different way to protect your family.

The concept of the Good Mind shows us the importance of good thinking or *reflective thinking* and how good thinking is always guided by traditional values—in this case the value of not harming others. The Good Mind will instruct the tongue in Aboriginal literacy.

### *Meaningful Aboriginal Literacy Development*

In a recent article Dolores van der Wey (2001) suggests that meaningful literacy development requires reflective thinking as well as openness to new (serendipitous) experience.

She [van der Wey] beautifully weaves together the themes of cultural identity, history of the residential school era, and the pedagogical value of quality experiential learning. She shows how her roles and identities of being a graduate student, a teacher, and a person of Coast Salish and Haida ancestry influenced her pedagogy and research. (Archibald, 2001, p. 4)

Significantly, van der Wey (2001) shows us that although experience may be the foundation of learning, it does not in itself lead to it; there must be active critical engagement with it. And to continue with the theme of critical thinking she quotes Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2000): “Learning to be literate is always an act of a resymbolizing and reinterpreting past experience in relation to present and projected experience” (p. 248).

Notice how these words take us back to the original comments in this article about ensuring the survival of the people. Critical thinking is essential, but critical thinking cannot occur in a vacuum. Van der Wey (2001) shows us that our thinking must be rooted in personal experience, especially serendipitous experience that is unplanned. When it is unplanned and you stay open to new experience it is particularly powerful. Taking this personal experience and reflecting critically on it is a major factor for developing higher-level learning.

I take from this the teaching that meaningful Aboriginal literacy development must combine experiential learning with reflective practice: an analytical component. But in addition, when a wholistic framework is

adopted “*fundamental traditional elements*” will be “*presented as fresh inspiration for a renewed action*” (Couture, 1987, p. 5). I think Couture’s teaching is that personal reflection, no matter that it might be reflective and critical, cannot stand alone. And similarly, opening yourself to experience, even serendipitous experience—including “understanding the events of history, even if they might be perceived as troubling” (van der Wey, 2001, p. 64)—is not enough. To repeat:

Oral tradition teaches us that when certain values, or laws, are upheld and observed, the people survive: it devolves to elders to provide these precepts. However, the interpretation and application of the directives of elders is the responsibility of the younger generations. (Couture, 1987, p. 6)

This means, I think, that traditional values will guide the critical reflective mind. I think also that Joe Couture (1987) is telling us that traditional values will help us interpret our experience, especially in respect to our responsibilities to one another. And finally, I think the teaching here is that younger generations must creatively interpret and apply the directives of Elders by critically reflecting on their own experience. It is in this sense that Aboriginal literacy development if it is to be meaningful must and will be transformative.

Meaningful transformative Aboriginal literacy development is always about resymbolizing and reinterpreting past experience in relation to present and projected experience. But as we see, it is always more than that. Fundamentally it is about attending to traditional values as guiding principles or laws—as *we go about*—resymbolizing and reinterpreting past experience in relation to present and projected experience. And from Frieda Jacques’s (1997) teaching I believe we can conclude that meaningful transformative Aboriginal literacy development is about using the Good Mind (good thinking along with traditional values)—with all our relations—in everything that is done.

#### *Wholistic Perspectives Revisited*

From Joe Couture’s (1987) words we understand that “*a holistic philosophy and psychology of education rooted in traditional native values can improve the educational opportunities for Native children*” (emphasis mine). Aboriginal scholars take up this refrain as a main theme in their teachings. For example, Corbiere (2000) of the M’Chigeeng First Nation brings new perspectives on wholistic education *putting first* the Nishnaabe world view of spirituality and relationship. Aboriginal education is transformed as a result.

Eileen Antone (2000) acknowledges the importance of wholistic perspectives in her work: “*Onyota’a:ka along with other Aboriginal people continue to strive for cultural wholeness as they seek to prepare their children to carry on their nations with traditional knowledge and values*” (p. 98).

Antone (2000) goes on to quote Jo-ann Archibald (1995), who says,

First Nations people traditionally adopted a holistic approach to education. Principles of spiritual, physical, and emotional growth, as well as economic and physical survival skills, were developed in each individual to ensure eventual family and village survival. Certain learning specialties in these areas were emphasized, including independence, self-reliance, observation, discovery, empirical practicality, and respect for nature. (p. 289)

Antone (2000) is emphatic when she says, "The *Onyota'a:ka* people must continue to validate the traditional knowledge, values, and skills they have in order for them to survive as a unique Aboriginal nation" (p. 98).

Clearly Antone (2000) does not believe that realizing wholistic perspectives can be achieved by turning solely to the past. She quotes Arlene Stairs (1994), who says, "We must always remember that culture is something that does not keep still; it develops through challenges and interactions of people and events or it becomes distorted and dies" (p. 63). Similarly, from Hampton (1995), "It is the continuity of *living* culture that is important to Indian education" (emphasis mine, p. 29).

These observations are congruent with Couture's (1987) comments about the centrality of wholistic concepts as traditional values. And most important, they are congruent with Couture's (1987) insistence that the working out of this wholistic perspective in contemporary times requires a transformational attitude and *inspirational* solutions in practice. As literacy theorists and practitioners we must find a way to put traditional values and wholistic perspectives into our everyday behavior. And we must find a way to put this perspective into achieving institutional change. Perhaps there is no better way than to put the Good Mind to work on the problem. In any case, a full understanding of Aboriginal literacy will not be achieved until we take a wholistic perspective and creatively work out the meaning of Aboriginal literacy development as a *living legacy* transformed by traditional values.

### Conclusion

Literacy is presented in the broadest sense in this article. Being literate is about sustaining a particular world view and about the survival of a distinct and vital culture. Being literate is about resymbolizing and reinterpreting past experience while honoring traditional values. Being literate is about *living* these values in contemporary times. Being literate is about *visioning* a future in which an Aboriginal *way of being* will continue to thrive. Meaningful Aboriginal literacy will develop and find expression in everything that is done. Basic skills in literacy are understood from a unique and wholistic cultural perspective.

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