

Native Literacy: A Living Language

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Literacy has been perceived as being synonymous with culture, tradition, world view, languages, and ways of knowing. In the perspective of Aboriginal peoples, literacy is not restricted to the written word; the true meaning of literacy is not confined to the page. This research shows that when one looks beyond the page and outside the limitations of words, one can begin exploring concepts and evidences of literacy. It is important, particularly when people are maneuvering their way through life and dealing with labels and definitions of literacy and being literate, to see the wholistic vision of ways of knowing and becoming in the lifelong process of learning. For example, when teachings are passed from the Elders to the younger generations, literacy is brought back into the everyday lives of contemporary Native peoples and is infused into the lifelong process of affirming Aboriginality. Literacy, then, is rooted in intergenerational teachings and is active in everyday living; it is a living language. Oral tradition, storytelling, culture, and language: these are aspects encapsulated in the definition of Native literacy explored in this article. As well, the differences between Native and Euro-Western definitions of literacy and the implications in the field of education are addressed. This is particularly important when Native students are measured against Euro-Western standards and their learning ability and aptitude measured accordingly. This article also explores the concept that significant learning occurs beyond the school walls. Learning—and the developmental process of literacy—is never finished; it is a part of everyday living: a lifelong process and a living language.

Ways of knowing and ways of being, wholistic learning, oral tradition, storytelling, culture, language: these are some of the aspects encapsulated in the definition of Native literacy (Beck, Walters, & Francisco, 1995; Ross, 1996; Smith, 1993; Williams, 1999). This research briefly explores Aboriginal concepts of literacy and language and the influence of these concepts on the people, particularly in the context of students in the Euro-Western (or mainstream) educational system.

The principal premise of this research is that it is imperative when defining Native literacy as distinct from Euro-Western concepts of literacy and language first to remove the place of Aboriginal people from a comparative role to Euro-Western ways. Such comparisons infer Native understanding as being measured against the mainstream, whereas Euro-Western institutes of education do not define their methods and understandings as measured against the people. This placement creates barriers and limitations for Aboriginal people, and as Graham (1997) and Milloy (1999) find, this is so particularly because of the history of subjugation and abuse that dominated the learning environment in the past in residential schools.

As Aboriginal scholars, members of communities, and families continue in the struggle to combat past and current subjugation in the educational system (Haig-Brown, 1995; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, vol. 1), the process of overcoming involves a transformation from oppression to revitalization. Such transformation takes the form of revitalizing and sustaining Native spirituality, world view, culture, and literacy (Battiste & Barman, 1995; Kirkness, 1992; Lame Deer et al., 1994). As well, the process of revitalizing traditional definitions of Aboriginal literacy not only involves transformation from subjugation to empowerment, but at the same time reaching an harmonious, as opposed to comparative and competitive, relationship between Native and non-Native cultures that live side by side.

Native literacy embodies factors of culture, tradition, language, and ways of knowing and being. These factors are all interconnected in defining Aboriginal literacy and as represented wholistically on the Medicine Wheel, become balanced in a person's life when there is harmony, both within each person and between them. The Medicine Wheel, a conceptual teaching tool that was first introduced by First Nations of the Plains (Black Elk, 1961; Lame Deer et al., 1994), symbolizes the Aboriginal belief that learning and education are lifelong experiences. These experiences represent challenges that occur at every stage of development (Hampton, 1995; RCAP, 1996, vol. 3), and the stages can be revisited throughout one's life span.

Further, in the perspective of Aboriginal peoples, literacy is not restricted to the written word; the true meaning of literacy is not confined to the page (Peltier in Paulsen, 1998; Powell, 1996). It is evident when one looks beyond the page and outside the limitations of words to see the wholistic vision of ways of knowing and being in the lifelong process of learning. It is evident when one lives one's culture. Literacy, then, is living language.

The traditional scholarship of Bourdieu and Passeron (1990, 1991), Berger (1993), and Giroux (1997) maintains that definitions and concepts of literacy are socially constructed and the means by which social roles are controlled and that language is the manifestation of consciousness that becomes evident in one's way of living. Aboriginal scholar and educator Marie Battiste (Battiste & Barman, 1995) concurs, promoting the ideology of meanings and experiences being connected to one's thoughts and communicated through dialogue or through what she refers to for her people, the Mi'kmaq, as "symbolic literacy."

Battiste (Battiste & Barman, 1995) defines literacy as symbolic of the unity of consciousness that bonds the people together in epistemology and world view. The written form of communication for the traditional Mi'kmaq took shape in pictographs, petroglyphs, and notched sticks that recorded and described the social, political, cultural, and spiritual needs of the society. Battiste maintains that in this way symbolic literacy tradition-

ally incorporated oral and written narratives and created a sharing of common ideals and a collective cognitive experience. Similarly, the Native people of Hawaii, the Kanaka Maoli, traditionally used forms of literacy beyond the written word such as the hula and oral traditions of storytelling and song (Kanahele, 1979; Kane, 1997; Liliuokalani, 1898). These methods of communication were embedded in the traditional social order and formed a collective experience and understanding for the people (Kamakau, 1961, 1976; Kane, 1997; Liliuokalani, 1898).

Literacy is the means through which people articulate the expression of their consciousness and experience, in either written or oral form. Hampton (1995) and Kirkness (1992) advocate for the need to maintain one's traditional concepts of literacy and one's language in order to secure the definition of one's culture: for without it, the strength of a defined identity and community weakens. Further, as Battiste (Battiste & Barman, 1995) cautions, when one culture's form of literacy is forced on another, it then becomes cultural and cognitive assimilation. The link between literacy, language, and identity is that literacy and language are the symbolic representation of concept, and thereby language becomes the verbal means of expressing one's beliefs, knowledge, and values. Language is also the method by which people live their culture; it is the connection between one's heritage and community. Therefore, language and literacy are prominent factors in the development of identity.

Literacy in this framework, as we see in the mainstream educational system in contemporary pluralistic society, becomes a constructed measurement tool by which one examines and assesses the level at which another is educated and can read and write (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1991; McLaren, 1994). Such a framework illustrates the positioning of Native peoples in a dominant-to-oppressed social order when Aboriginal perspectives of literacy are not recognized or valued (Demaine, 1996; James, 1994; Razack, 1998). When the dominant-to-oppressed order prevails within the walls of the school, the perpetuation of measuring Aboriginal concepts of literacy against Euro-Western definitions continues (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Cohen, 1995). The people are moving out of this position, and one of the principal means of doing so is through the revitalization of culture, tradition, language, and literacy.

Slowly Euro-Western educators are moving away from the restricted definition of literacy as being only empirically measurable against skills in reading, writing, and numeracy (Collins, 1998; Court, 1997). Although these aspects are also part of Native literacy, as discussed above the emphasis in Aboriginal epistemology is on the concept of literacy being synonymous with developing ways of knowing and ways of being (Beck et al., 1995; Black Elk, 1961; Common, 1994; Kane, 1994). This development is a process of lifelong learning through which one takes the learning outside the walls of the school and into everyday life.

Although Collins (in Scott, 1998) and Niemi (1998) find that although significant learning occurs beyond the school walls and is lifelong, the mainstream education system still promotes an emphasis on finishing. For example, Kendall (1996), Giroux (1997), and Seelye (1988) concur that in elementary, secondary, postsecondary, and graduate levels of schooling the emphasis is on defining the length of the term of study. Further, emphasis is on the rite of passage at the end of the study period (i.e., graduation ceremony), which celebrates an end, or finish, to the learning process. Conversely, in the traditional Aboriginal perspective, learning is never finished; it is a treasured part of everyday living and a lifelong process.

In traditional Native education, learning is passed down from generation to generation orally and through sharing experiences (Liliuokalani, 1898; Kane, 1997; Kulchyski et al., 1999). When teachings are passed from the Elders to the younger generations, literacy takes on the traditional form and is being lived out in contemporary society. Thereby literacy becomes the active form of learning, evident in one's development of knowledge, values, and way of being. Literacy is brought back into the everyday lives of Native peoples—reconnecting intergenerational ties and being infused into the lifelong process of affirming Aboriginality.

This transformative process of learning and literacy continues through one's life journey with no ending or finish. For example, one Ojibway Elder explains the intergenerational connection in traditional education and the participatory and experiential components of learning for Medicine people.

You know when they're born that that's their role, their function in life. Medicine people nurture. You start teaching them at a young age what the different barks and plants will do for them. The white doctors go to school for 8 or 9 years, but our People go to school their whole lives for it. That's traditional. (Paulsen, 1998)

Peltier, Director of Education for Aboriginal alternative schooling, Wik-wemikong First Nation, Canada, describes how these components of traditional education "begin in the home, it is mostly observational. Young children look at adults and learn about things through observation and doing things with adults ... there are some things in life you don't need a lesson plan for" (Paulsen). It is these components of education and teaching and learning methodologies that cannot be confined to an institutionalized system; it is these values that encompass Native literacy.

In multicultural and multilingual societies, there are representations of people from several cultures contributing their unique identities that are defined by world view, values, and language, into the public mosaic of the learning environment. Corson and Lemay (1996), Court (1997), and Demaine (1996) maintain that when one's culture, language, and sense of identity are not recognized or affirmed, one's personal and educational development are hindered. It is therefore crucial to the concepts of iden-

tity, self-esteem, and academic achievement—which Beane and Lipka (1986) and Seelye (1988) maintain are intrinsically connected—that traditional concepts of literacy are valued and represented.

Identity, culture, tradition, and world view are factors that for Aboriginal peoples permeate the use and form of language and literacy, contributing to harmonious living in a pluralistic society (Kirkness, 1992; Powell, 1996). Thus it is important to define and understand Native literacy in order to move away from the situation of Aboriginal students being measured by Euro-Western definitions and move into a balanced, non-competitive relationship between the cultures. It is in this process of revitalization of culture and language, lifelong learning, and engaging Aboriginal perspectives of literacy that the people are charting their own path for their own people.

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