

Aboriginal Literacy: Raising Standards, Blazing Trails

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The field of education is where the Aboriginal community can make the most profound contribution to the world by its relentless efforts to survive and prosper and in so doing to eradicate the negative effects of colonization. The oldest prophecies tell us that the Aboriginal peoples of the Americas—in particular the Ojibwe of the North American region—have this task entrusted to them by the Creator. It is our duty to educate and illuminate the world by sharing the Sacred Fire that we have kept alive. As one of the last groups of people to experience colonization, First Nations peoples have managed to keep the fires of this sacred trust burning and thus have survived near cultural annihilation. The tools with which to do our work were spiritual ones that were given to us long before this struggle began. In the field of Aboriginal literacy we have the opportunity to become distinguished for developing a unique wholistic foundation for the healing and nurturing of minds, bodies, and spirits. Aboriginal literacy is not characterized by assimilation; it involves embracing and fulfilling our unique roles and responsibilities in the Sacred Circle of Life as Aboriginal Nations. In this field knowledgeable front-line practitioners are not only teachers, but also warriors—in the traditional sense of peacekeepers. They are capable of consciously modeling resilience and Aboriginal ways of life and in the process advancing the spiritual transformation of humanity.

Gathering together with so many good beings to share knowledge is a rare opportunity. It fills a teacher's heart with good energy. It is inspiring. It is self-affirming to see ourselves in each other. What brought me to this road is one of the best ways I know to explain *Native literacy*. In the early part of my own learning journey some 13 years ago, while searching for tools to assist in my own healing, a number of prophecies gave me hope and inspiration. It began quite unintentionally as I used my listening and reading skills. Some friends of mine shared news of a tablet foretelling a time to come when on this continent, "its original inhabitants would become so educated, and become so radiant, that they would illumine the world. Indeed, because of the children of the original inhabitants, the future of this land from a material or a spiritual standpoint would be very great." What a contrast that was to all I had ever heard about the place of First Nations' peoples in society as I was growing up.

I began exploring that spark of knowledge, that possibility, by seeking whatever confirmation I could from traditional teachers, Elders, and healers and by reaching out within the Aboriginal community itself. I did not dare ask such questions about knowledge and learning as directly as I am doing now. "After all, who am I?" I would ask myself. It takes time to

build relationships, purify motives, demonstrate trustworthiness, be of service to the community, and so on. As I undertook these tasks at ground zero, in the metaphorical battle for Aboriginal Literacy as Cultural Education, I began to hear not only confirmations of this prophecy, but also of other similar prophecies. By then, with the learning I had received in the context of the Aboriginal cultural and spiritual teachings, I also *believed* the prophecy to be a reality, more than a possibility. Then I started figuring out how I could begin part of the actions and happenings in the Aboriginal community toward this reality. After I listened to the Ojibway Prophecy of the Seven Fires from Jim Dumont, an Ojibway spiritual teacher, several times over a few years, the story became part of me, part of what I know. Following Jim Dumont's examples, I let it blossom outward and have adopted it as a framework for understanding the transformative learning aspects of Aboriginality.

Since the imposition of colonization on our Nations a little over 500 years ago, Aboriginal peoples have experienced a great deal of ongoing trauma and abuse. To this day we bear witness to how some in the Western dominant society cling tenaciously to its claims that they have "the only worthwhile standards by which progress can be measured" (Hampton, 1993, p. 301). That is, the Western promise of "liberty, justice, and freedom for all," meant to attract everyone else to this land, still burns in two ways. These words reflect the ideas of the historical teachings of the Six Nations Sachems who advised the early American government based on the Hotinosoni Great Law of Peace. This is a wonderful fact, but few who hear these words in the contemporary world know or follow the principles behind this law.

Although I have always known that I am Anishnabekwe, I can recall thinking and feeling at 8 years old that I was basically born at the bottom rung of the ladder of society. By the time I was 14, such thoughts and feelings remained internalized while enough of my peers killed themselves so that our reserve wound up with the highest rate of suicide and violent deaths among teens. My Catholic beliefs were too strong to permit me such an option. I did trash a high school classroom once and ran away from home at least five times. And, of course, from the recent suicide of my youngest daughter I know that these same effects continue with our young people today: they are not immune to despairing at the slow rate of change. What they know of their history reflects one stereotype of the Native, and they internalize this so that their despair makes itself felt in hopelessness and disempowerment.

The Seven Fires Prophecy tells the history of the Anishnabe as a people of peace, hope, and purpose. It portrays the hope in a steadfast vision of life instead of despair. Stories of the Great Sacred Megis Shell have been told for many thousands of years. As the Anishnabe followed the predictions given to seven prophets by the Great Spirit, and as the Sacred Megis

Shell appeared to the people on these seven occasions to confirm that they were on the right path, the people's vision and hope were renewed and strengthened. To reclaim some of this history, I have made a video and written a workbook on this prophecy as a contribution to Native literacy.

My experiences in the field of Native literacy are similar to the experience of other practitioners. We can each identify our own best practices from actual teaching and learning experiences. This tells us that regardless of our distinct origins, because we are traveling the same long and challenging road in Aboriginal literacy and learning, we can relate to each other through the process of our travels.

I for one never realized what I was getting into when I started out on this journey. All I wanted to do was to find some answers to a few questions my children raised. Of course, since then even more questions of my own have come up, and I am still in pursuit of answers. Learning, literacy, and education are fuelled by a desire for transformation. If nothing changes, then nothing has been learned. Fortunately, many people are working in the field, and they are bringing about change and creating possibilities for others, not for themselves alone. By this we recognize each other. As we move through what has been articulated as one way of describing the cycle of learning—increasing our awareness, understanding, knowledge, and wisdom—we are in fact shifting the shape of the future. In the quest to make some meaning out of our past experiences and present lives, we are achieving more than we know at this moment, maybe more than we may ever know.

As literacy practitioners, we need to understand and not underestimate the potential of our work as a whole. Together we shall perhaps see what is happening more clearly; commit ourselves more fully to building helpful relationships together in the process already under way; know more intimately the *how* and *why* of our reasons; and move more certainly toward our goals. Patience is important. It is inherent in our languages. I try not to grow too impatient at the rate at which things are changing, for I understand that I can only hope to be in the right place at the right time and to do my part. Prayers and ceremonies keep me mindful of the need to let the seeds of knowledge grow naturally.

As First Nations peoples, one of the gifts we have been given is that of vision. We see the bigger picture. This helps us to stay centered and not be overwhelmed by oppressive or otherwise harmful forces and influences. Our Elders and teachers remind us of our relationship to all our relations. This instills in us a sense of accountability to all our relations: this also includes ourselves, our families, clans and communities, the next seven generations, and the Creator. We are called to remember that we are also given the significant role of assisting with the spiritual transformation of humanity.

The literacy practitioner as a community worker keeps hope alive. To our programs and classrooms come those few who dare to hope for positive change. None of us can promise that the changes they hope for will come about as quickly as tomorrow, but each of us can do our best to fan the flame with the healing medicines she or he has been given. The fire that is lit within all of us is that spirit, that vitality of Aboriginal rebirth that we must fan. We have been doing it with our best methods and practices passed down to us in the traditions. These are the offering of life skills, sharing circles, speaking and writing in language classes, accessing traditional teachings and ceremonies, reflecting on learning experiences, actualizing social and recreational practices; and we are now including the teaching of literacy and numeracy.

Our work addresses as many aspects of being human as there are, and it does so by designing and delivering wholistic teaching processes and by creating or adapting curriculum so that it speaks to each learner. We foster safe learning environments where the learner is at ease. We incorporate the principles and values of our *best* into what we offer. We forge tools and create paths that have not been used before in the dominant education system. We do all this on limited or decreasing financial budgets, usually with a total staff of one, and with the continually increasing demands of administrative accountability. Then we must find time to attend conferences and training sessions. These demands take a lot of commitment. I am proud of our accomplishments. Let us be proud of ourselves and our achievements.

As Aboriginal literacy practitioners, we now face many questions. Some of these are: When and how we will make time to articulate the standards for which we strive? Who will document the learning outcomes we aim to enable the learners to demonstrate? And where will we champion our cause? Another challenge is how to gain acceptance for the traditional teachings as a source of reference without having to measure the veracity of these by measuring them against works published for and in the mainstream. In this regard it is important to use models of literacy and learning that involve self-determination and that are "structured by Indian cultures" (Hampton, 2001). There are but a few of us in the field of Native literacy and learning who have blazed some trails in these areas. Although we are thankful and grateful for the efforts made and the achievements gained so far, much remains to be done. Now, though, the weight is lightened, for we have gathered to carry it together.

References

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