

Self-Management and Self-Direction in the Success of Native Literacy Learners

Christianna Jones

M'Chigeeng First Nation Literacy Program

The M'Chigeeng Literacy and Basic Skills full-time program, M'Chigeeng First Nations of Manitoulin Island, Ontario, began in February of 1994. It was determined and agreed that this was not just an academic program; its purpose was to help learners become more aware of themselves, their skills, family dynamics, and community involvement. An awareness of the Seven Grandfathers' Teachings of the Ojibway helped us to identify the philosophy we used to run our program. This article discusses these teachings and how we incorporated them into our program. It was not so much a conscious choice that we should use the Seven Grandfathers' teachings in the running of our program; it was rather a matter of conscience. This article describes the overall way our program works; the Seven Grandfathers' Teachings and how they influence our program; what self-direction and self-management mean; and a brief overview of the research that has been undertaken by the Ontario Literacy Coalition about the self-management and self-direction domain.

My Heart Soars

There is a longing in the heart of my people to reach out and grasp that which is needed for our survival. There is a longing among the young of my nation to secure for themselves and their people the skills that will provide them with a sense of worth and purpose. They will be our new warriors. Their training will be much longer and more demanding than in the olden days. The long years of study will demand more determination, separation from home and family and demand more endurance. But they will emerge with their hands held forward, not to receive welfare, but to grasp the place in society that is rightly ours. (Chief Dan George & Hirschall, 1974, p. 91)

There is much longing in the hearts of the Aboriginal people working in literacy to enable the learners to grasp the place in society that is rightly ours. This vision Chief Dan George shared helps practitioners carry out their jobs with much enthusiasm in the Aboriginal literacy programs here in Ontario. Learners in these Aboriginal literacy programs have many more opportunities to find out for themselves who they are as Aboriginal people of Canada than they did in the past.

The formal education system has not provided many Native people with the opportunity to learn the skills required for success. These are not just the academic skills, but the personal skills or as they are referred to in the literacy field, self-direction and self-management skills.

There are several definitions of self-direction and self-management. Literacy programs in the province of Ontario are most familiar with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (1998a) definition: "Become a self-directed learner capable of achieving the best possible results in work and personal life. Set, monitor, and revise long- and short-term goals" (p. 141).

Another definition developed by a Native focus group working on an on-line literacy project states "Self-Management and self-direction are the skills necessary for an individual to achieve the best possible success in their personal relationships and life choices" (AlphaRoute, 1999). The statement by Chief Dan George is a vision of what we want for Native learners who enter the M'Chigeeng Adult and Continuing Education Program. This adult education program was established to secure for the M'Chigeeng community members the skills that will provide them with a sense of worth and purpose. The definitions for self-management and self-direction help us to focus the delivery of the program.

The Beginning

In 1988 a needs survey was undertaken at M'Chigeeng First Nation on Manitoulin Island located in mid-northern Ontario. The survey determined that there was a need to establish a literacy program in the community. There was a high rate of people on social assistance, employment insurance, and without a grade 12 diploma. The results of the survey found that these individuals lacked the basic academic skills to continue in further education or to find and keep a job.

The literacy program linked with other agencies for funding and programming. In partnership with Cambrian College, skills enhancement and life skills programs became available. Funding for these projects came from Human Resources and Development Canada and the National Literacy Secretariat. The learners in the programs were successful, but for the success to continue many felt that an academic program in the community was necessary. Learners did not want to have to travel the 64 kilometers daily to attend the upgrading program offered elsewhere.

In 1994 the M'Chigeeng Adult and Continuing Education Program was established at M'Chigeeng First Nation. The program identified the importance of helping learners improve their numeracy and communication skills, but foremost was to improve their self-management and self-direction skills. The vision was to help the learners become active members of the community.

The learners established rules of conduct. These rules reflected the Seven Grandfathers' Teachings of the Ojibway. The teachings establish the goal of respect, honesty, truth, and love so that learners would gain wisdom, bravery, and humility. Although these teachings were part of the program's philosophy, the naming of them did not occur until after attending a workshop in 1999 on the Teachings of the Seven Grandfathers.

Further reading and research on these teachings showed us that the program, without realizing it, followed teachings that were hundreds of years old. The instructors' fundamental principles of how to treat people and facilitate healthy lifestyle choices reflected the Grandfather teachings.

The first principle of the program was *Respect*: to have respect is to honor all of Creation as sacred. To have respect is to respect others, their beliefs, and yourself. Respect must be shown to others before you can expect it for yourself. To honor all of Creation is to have *respect*.

The instructors and coordinator realized that as instructors in the program they had to establish many of the protocols and model how the program was going to work. Greeting each learner, guest, or co-worker pleasantly and in a respectful manner was easily established. These daily greetings and goodbyes help the learners to feel valued and cared about. They quickly learned to greet fellow learners, guests, and staff each day. Eventually, these skills became important when fundraising and community activities were organized or attended by the learners.

The second principle was *Honesty*: to be honest is to have the ability to look within yourself and recognize who and what you are. Once you can do this you can be honest in your relationships and how you deal with others. *Honesty* in facing a situation is to be brave.

Learners were encouraged to take an honest look at their past and present situations and how they might affect their future. It helped the learners to hear honest, sincere histories of the instructors. Learners realized that although these people appeared to have everything, they faced some of the same challenges that they themselves faced. The instructors were helped by being honest with themselves about how to overcome the challenges.

The instructors were able to give honest responses to the learners when asked for guidance. They provided the learners with an opportunity to express themselves honestly without judgment for their actions. The following is an example of how this worked in our program.

A young man who had been in the literacy and other programs on and off for many years believed that it was always someone else's fault that he could never get ahead in the community. People were judging him for who his family was and for things he had done in the past. In a conversation with him one day, I asked him what the problem was. He responded, "I'm trying to do better for myself, but these people in this community just won't let me get ahead." After some exploring and honest conversation about the things he had done, he began to realize that it would take time for people to believe that he really had changed. It had taken many years for people to form their opinions about him because of his actions and it would take many more years for them to accept the changes he was making.

This young man is now a good father to two beautiful children, a supportive partner and attempting to establish his own art business. When he took an honest look at his behavior he knew that he was responsible for how others perceived him and that by his actions he could change people's opinions about him.

Another principle of our program was *Truth*: to be truthful is to learn, live, walk, and speak what is true. *Truth* is to know all these things.

The instructors ensured that they not only spoke the truth, but lived it as they spoke. It was important to establish this in and outside the classroom; actions and words had to match. An example of this teaching was demonstrated when we spoke of budgeting or money management, and the learners could see that we did not spend money on frivolous things. Counseling learners about drug and alcohol use would only be effective if the instructors were responsible in their actions about these things. The instructors were there to model healthy life choices.

Keeping in line with the Grandfather teachings, the fourth principle we used was *Love*: to experience love you must give it unconditionally and to realize that those who are weak need love the most. Love brings peace to those who have it. To know *love* is to know peace.

The caring and support that everyone involved in the program had for each other came from a place deep within where unconditional acceptance grows. The instructors in the program too modeled this. The instructors in the program were all from outside the community, so they had no preconceived notions or ideas about the learners. It was quickly noted that each person was treated the same way. Learners in the program began to show this unconditional acceptance for each other. They began to speak with other learners they had not spoken to before and began to work together on projects. It was the unconditional acceptance by the instructors, of every learner, that helped nurture the learners.

When the above principles are in place and employed it is much easier to have *Wisdom*: to have wisdom is to know the difference between good and bad and to realize that your actions can have an effect on others. To cherish knowledge is to know *wisdom*.

The focus of the program was academics, but the learners needed more than academics. They needed knowledge about themselves, family, community, and beyond. Many events in the program were about giving the learners new skills.

Fundraising was a great way to provide them with opportunities to learn new skills. In the beginning most of the planning and organizing was done by the instructors. Learners were given tasks to complete, but as time went on they were given more responsibility. Eventually, some learners began to assume the role of organizing the fundraising and the instructors were given tasks to do.

Teaching learners how to make choices always made us realize some of the things that people take for granted and that we took for granted. It is a skill that must be learned, and many of the learners did not know how to make effective choices. Many were stuck in the perpetual circle of dysfunction: drinking until there is no money left, then waiting for the next cheque. It never occurred to them that they could choose to do something

different or that this cycle was having an effect on their families and communities. Through honest and truthful discussion based on unconditional love the learners began to seek drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs. They gained the wisdom necessary to see the difference between the good and bad effects of alcohol, and this helped them to change that behavior. An example of this using the four principles and gaining wisdom is given in the instance below.

A young woman raised by a single mom drank a lot. In her teen years she was in and out of juvenile detention for crimes committed in an effort to get money to buy alcohol or drugs. She came to the program as a condition of her parole. It took her three years to realize that she did not have to continue the cycle. She could do something to make it different. She entered an alcohol recovery program and has been sober for three years. In this program, she learned many things about herself. Along with the skills, she gained Wisdom. It was hard for her to face the fact that she could not return and live in the community. Too many negative influences would drag her back into the downward spiral.

While in treatment this young woman met a nice guy. They were living together and both working. When she told me she was pregnant in 2001, I was both happy and concerned. These concerns were for the child and about her ability to parent. The birth of her son last December was another positive event in her life. She brought him to visit and gave me pictures. You could see the glow of new motherhood and the feeling that she had really done something positive and wonderful.

She hugged me, then said, "Thank you for believing that I could do better." Wisdom is what she had gained from the program. She now has the skills to make wise choices, choices she knows not only affect her life, but her family's life as well. It is my hope that for her and her family there will be a better life.

Another Grandfather teaching important in the lives of the learners is *Bravery*: to be brave is to face challenges and do the right things. It is done with integrity and for the betterment of self, family, and community. *Bravery* is to face problems with integrity.

Each learner who walks through the doors of our program is brave. Most of them come to the program because they have realized they needed something different in their lives. They came with their own set of challenges; for some it has taken years to slowly face the challenges and realize successes.

Leaving our program was another test of their bravery. Many gained the academic and personal skills to face the new challenges of further education or training, employment, rehabilitation, or community involvement.

The seventh Grandfather teaching applied to this situation is *Humility*: to be humble is to realize that no matter how much you think you know, there are still things to learn about. *Humility* is also to know that you are a sacred part of Creation.

The instructors' humility helped the learners to realize that although they were at the front of the classroom, there were things that they did not know. The instructors would sometimes make errors and a learner would point them out. The learners were proud that they recognized the error,

and the instructor's reaction helped the learner realize that it was all right not to know everything.

The Wholistic Approach

The Seven Grandfathers' teachings and the wholistic approach to literacy is to ensure that learners leave the program with the four aspects of themselves more balanced. They had to balance the spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional parts to become a whole person and be capable of meeting the goals they had identified. These four aspects are discussed below in respect to the M'Chigeeng literacy program.

Spiritual

The spirit is the part deep within you that makes you who you are; for many of our learners their spirit had been broken. Many factors such as the following contribute to a broken spirit: the loss of culture and language; alcohol; drugs; and abuse and trauma from the elementary and secondary school systems. To reach the spirit of a person and lighten the load they have carried for many years requires patience, perseverance, positive thinking, and unconditional caring.

In the 10 years the program has been running, no one has ever been denied access. Everyone who came in our doors was welcomed; for some we were the last place that would accept them. They had been expelled from the high school and not permitted to return; refused entry to the alternative school for noncompliance or noncompletion of courses; or were just preparing to be released from incarceration and no other program was available.

Some learners entered and left the program several times before they were finally able to begin seeing some success. They were always welcomed back into the program, and in all the years of the program we never had to ask a learner not to return. For many this was the first time that they had been accepted for who they were with all the various ups and downs in their lives.

It was wonderful for these people to be accepted, and they also knew that when they decided to make a change in their lives they would get plenty of support from the instructors.

Mental

Helping people improve their mental aspect was fundamental to this program. They entered the program to improve their numeracy and literacy skills, but everyone quickly realized that this was the catalyst for what the learners really needed to improve.

There was an attempt early in the program to offer formalized life skills courses. After a few weeks of record absenteeism on life skills days, the instructors realized that the learners were not particularly interested in a formal life skills program. Many had participated in these types of pro-

grams and were not interested in doing it again. Life skills simply became part of how the program was run rather than a course.

Physical

Many of the learners in the program were diabetics, but did not understand the implications of the disease. Guest speakers were brought in to give presentations about diet and exercise; conversations during coffee and lunch breaks involved talk about proper diet and self-care; pamphlets were stored in the bathroom, and assistance was given to help them understand the instructions provided by the doctors and nurses.

Emotional

The emotional aspect of self is another difficult area to deal with. The instructors would talk with the learners about how issues in the news or in the community made them feel. Counseling sessions helped learners identify their emotions or those of others.

The instructors have been given the opportunity to support some learners through some emotional times, and at times the learners have supported the instructors. In 10 years there have been births, weddings, hospitalizations, family upsets, Children's Aid Society (CAS) cases, rehabilitation attempts and successes, new jobs, divorces, graduations, moving-away parties, housewarming gatherings, incarceration and releases, so many things that we have all been able to help each other through.

The supports that many learners built while in the program continue even though some have been gone from the program for years. They know that when something comes up in their lives the instructors are more than willing to lend an ear or a shoulder.

In the process of establishing curriculum for the M'Chigeeng Adult and Continuing Education Program another area of development was taking place through the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (1998b) program reform. The following is description of that process.

Development of the Learning Outcomes: Self-Management and Self-Direction
The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (1998b) was involved in program reform. The *Learning Outcomes Matrix* is a document that would provide guidelines for assessing learner progress. In 1998-1999 a project to test the effectiveness of the matrix in assessing learners and guiding the process of learning was piloted. M'Chigeeng Adult and Continuing Education Program was chosen as one of four test sites in Ontario.

The work in the area of self-management and self-direction by the M'Chigeeng Program was well known by the project supervisor. The M'Chigeeng program was asked to concentrate on this area, an area that did not even exist in the matrix.

Findings of the Learning Outcomes Pilot Project

Native literacy programs agreed that a wholistic approach to learning would ensure learner success by nurturing and building the mind, body, spirit, and emotions.

The final report:

1. identified skills that were essential for learners;
2. resulted in the addition of two pages to the 137-page *Learning Outcomes Matrix* document;
3. a ministry definition of the essentials skills.

Until this point the name for these skills was unknown. In the final *Learning Outcomes* document, the skills are self-management and self-direction.

Areas of Self-Management and Self-Direction

These were the skills identified during the pilot project:

Time Management

1. attendance skills;
2. assignment completion;
3. at-home time management;
4. in-class time management.

Social Skills

1. participation;
2. organization;
3. interaction;
4. conflict resolution;
5. tolerance.

Self-directed Learning

1. communication;
2. criticism;
3. thinking and reasoning;
4. decision-making;
5. goal-setting.

The work on the pilot project and identification of self-management and self direction domains would lead us into a new project being developed by the AlphaPlus Centre and funded by the National Literacy Secretariat and Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities. This new project became known as the Native AlphaRoute.

Native AlphaRoute

In 1999 M'Chigeeng Adult and Continuing Education Program was chosen to develop the learning activities for an online literacy project. The project was already in the third year of development by the Anglo and Francophone streams. Their online learning projects were concentrating on providing learning activities to improve literacy and numeracy skills.

M'Chigeeng was asked to develop activities to help learners improve their self-management and self-direction skills. Improvement of the skills would result in the learner moving closer to a more balanced life, as reflected in the Medicine Wheel.

The Vision

The vision was to develop an online literacy program that would provide learners with activities that help develop mind, body, spirit, and emotions.

The Medicine Wheel concept is the basis for the development of the activities. The activities fit into each of the four quadrants of the teaching Medicine Wheel, the quadrants being awareness, relating, building, and doing.

Native teachings introduce a skill. The learners are then provided with activities that help them improve self-management and self-direction skills, as well as literacy skills. Learners supported by mentors can access a talking circle for learners on the site to share ideas and discuss activities.

Another project under development by the Ontario Literacy Coalition is a research project on self-management and self-direction. The research will take place from March 2002 to November 2002, and the researcher is Katrina Grieve. The project statement is: Self-management and self-direction are important factors that affect learning and that need further attention. The project goal is: To conduct research that demonstrates the importance of self-management and self-direction and their relationship to the learning process.

The project plan:

1. Defining self-management and self-direction, which will include comparing this area to life, employability, and soft skills.
2. Discussion with learners about what self-management and self-direction mean to learners and practitioners in the literacy field.
3. Identifying the existence of a link between self-management and self-direction skills and learner success.
4. Describing delivery models.
5. Identifying assessment tools for self-management and self-direction.
6. Developing recommendations for further projects in this area.

Final Comments

Self-management and self-direction are essential skills in the success not only of Native literacy learners, but all learners. This is evident in the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities' willingness to fund the Ontario Literacy Coalition's project on these skills. Native literacy programs have run their programs using a wholistic model. Wholistic program delivery incorporates self-management and self-direction within its framework naturally. We are aware that the balancing of the four aspects of self provides a learner with all the necessary skills to succeed in personal, education, employment, and community activities.

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