

# Motivating Learners in Northern Communities

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The ideas presented in this article are based on insights and understandings that have evolved while teaching in the Literacy and Basic Skills program for the Moose Cree Education Authority in Moose Factory, Ontario. Moose Factory is located in the district of James Bay, and its nearest neighbor is Moosonee, which is about three miles away. Moose Factory is an island community approximately three miles by two miles and sits 18 feet above sea level, with a population of 2,500. These isolated communities are accessible by plane, train, boat, or snow machine depending on the season. To get to Moose Factory from Moosonee, you need to board a water taxi during the summer months. An ice road connects these two communities during the winter months, while during freeze-up and break-up community members use helicopters to travel back and forth. Although means of travel are unique to the area, the purpose of the Moose Factory literacy program is not unlike those in Southern communities.

The mandate of the literacy program in Moose Factory is to help learners attain the necessary skills to secure employment, enroll in further training or education, and/or achieve personal independence. The commitment of the program to the learners is to improve their literacy and numeracy skills, to provide a supportive learning environment, and to offer constructive ongoing feedback on the learners' achievements. The learners' commitment to the program is to take control of their learning, to set their own goals, and to participate in the development of their individual training plans.

Cooperation between practitioner and learner is essential in developing a successful literacy program. The learner must be motivated to be successful. Practitioners are responsible for contributing and developing motivation in the learner. Studies suggest that early motivation is essential for success, for without motivation, development will not take place. Early disillusionment and discouragement guarantee that an individual will be unsuccessful. Those who attend literacy programs are the same people who as children experienced disillusionment and discouragement. They had difficulty with the school system and were not motivated to learn. But as they matured, they realized that an education was essential to succeed in today's world, so they have made the decision to return to school. Some returned to upgrade their job search skills in order to obtain a job or to become competent enough for a promotion in their current job. Some

higher-level learners returned to upgrade and continue on to college. Others at the lower level want to be able to help their children with their homework and develop their own skills to perform everyday shopping, budgeting, and banking. Practitioners are challenged to find ways to entice the person to rekindle the fire to learn. With this perspective in mind, we can examine the factors that affect motivation in a literacy program.

Motivation is the most critical ingredient in a literacy learner's success, and the key factors that contribute to motivation in the Northern Ontario Aboriginal community of Moose Factory, ON are cultural awareness, culturally sensitive teaching processes, and a sense of community. The intent of this article is to focus on motivation and the effect it has on the success of an Aboriginal literacy learner residing in a remote Northern Ontario community and how these three factors affect the motivation of the Aboriginal literacy learner. For the purposes of developing a common basis for discussion, several key terms need to be defined. For the purpose of this article, *motivation* in the context of this thesis refers to the internal and external forces that influence individuals to control their personal success. A second term, *success*, refers to the definition of success held individually by each learner. For example, some adult literacy learners consider themselves successful when they have acquired the skills to read and write, whereas others strive to improve their skills to a level that will allow them to pursue a college or university education. Success for learners, then, is the development of an understanding of self and the realization of one's potential. The *Northern Ontario Aboriginal* community referred to is Moose Factory, Ontario, which is an island reservation located in the Moose River flowing into James Bay. *Aboriginal* and *First Nations* are used to describe the original inhabitants of North America. The term *Western* is used to describe Euro-Canadian cultures. The term *cultural awareness* implies having knowledge of the customs, traditions, and history of the Aboriginal Cree peoples. *Culturally sensitive teaching processes* means using instructional methods that conform to the Aboriginal literacy learners' ideas, customs, and traditions. Finally, *sense of community* means the sharing of the same opinions, attitudes, and interests by a group of people living together as a small social unit, and a *practitioner* of literacy refers to a person who delivers literacy programs for adult learners.

### *Learning Styles*

Cultural awareness is critical to influencing motivation and essential to delivering a successful literacy program in an Aboriginal community. In the following I discuss the importance of understanding the wholistic approach to learning, the steps the Moose Cree Education Authority has implemented in all levels of its education system to integrate traditional and Western culture, and the importance of including culturally relevant material in a literacy program.

As numerous studies have pointed out, Aboriginal students require a more wholistic approach to education. By being aware of cultural differences and understanding the wholistic approach to learning, practitioners can motivate more effectively. In her thesis *Holistic Learning: A Model of Education Based on Aboriginal Cultural Philosophy*, Diane L. Hill (1999) writes,

Within this thesis, the use of the term *holistic*, except where otherwise noted, will denote an Aboriginal definition of the word that embraces the qualities and characteristics necessary "to become a whole person." A whole person denotes a human being who is capable of balancing his or her mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual human capabilities both internally within one's self and externally in societal interaction with all life forms present throughout Creation. (p. 19)

Understanding the wholistic approach is important for the practitioner. Applying the wholistic approach in delivering a literacy program will motivate the Aboriginal literacy learner toward growth and development.

In her thesis, Hill (1999) further illustrates this wholistic approach to learning by defining the whole person as follows:

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. (p. 100)

She illustrates in a circle the four elements involved in the learning process: to see, to feel, to know, and to do. The first step in this cycle involves the spirit and the ability to see. It begins with *awareness* in relation to self, family, community, nations, and the universe. The second step of the cycle involves the heart and the ability to feel. This step causes the learner to make a decision to *struggle* personally with the new information and problems that arise. Some of the new information received will contradict assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes that the individual holds, and this information causes an internal struggle. The third step in the cycle involves the mind and the ability to know. The individual must resolve the contradictions encountered and use these resolutions in the *building* of new knowledge. The final stage in the cycle involves the body and ability to do. This step is *preservation*, and the learner, once he or she has experienced the awareness, struggle, and building can preserve a new sense of himself or herself.

Understanding how one takes in information and processes it increases one's ability to take control of one's learning process. Each type of learner can be categorized within the circle. Depending on whether the individuals learn best by seeing, feeling, knowing, or doing indicates whether they are intuitive, emotional-relational, mental, or physically centered learners. In her thesis, Hill (1999) further points out that although it would appear that the normal cycle of learning would begin with aware-

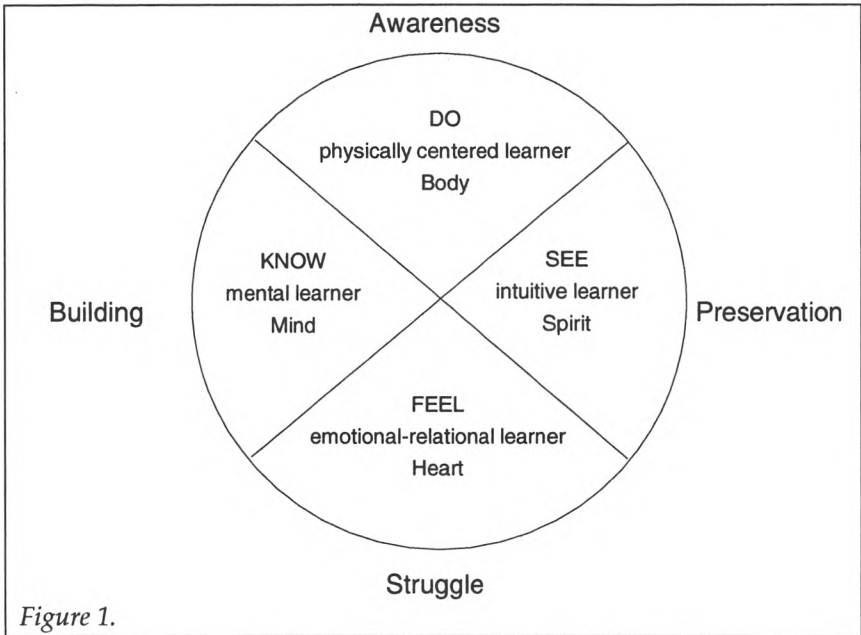


Figure 1.

ness and move toward action, it is possible for individuals to jump around in the circle and identify their preferred learning style. Being aware of this unique circle will help practitioners of Aboriginal literacy present their material in the best fashion to accommodate and motivate their learners.

I use this circle during my initial assessment of prospective learners. I explain to them that not everyone learns at the same speed, nor do they learn in the same way, and I use an appropriate questionnaire to help determine their individual learning style. Once their predominant learning style has been identified, it is used in setting up their individual training plan. I have found that when I demonstrate with the circle and explain the never-ending spiral of awareness, struggle, building, and preservation that an Aboriginal literacy learner experiences, the learners understand better their own learning capabilities. Sharing this information with them also helps to build their trust in me as a supportive and understanding practitioner.

#### *Aboriginal Teaching Styles*

The wholistic approach to teaching is usually not supported by the Western school system, which is often highly structured and dominated by the teacher. The Western school system tends to emphasize verbal over visual symbolic thinking and uses an analytical rather than a wholistic approach to situations. The residential school system did not support the wholistic approach to teaching. Instead, it tried to assimilate and teach by exercising total control, which meant isolating the learners from the family

and forcing them to discard their Native language. The detrimental effects of the residential school system are still being felt in Northern communities, particularly on reserves, where there is still frustration and resistance to attend school in the structured environment that the current Western education system provides.

The integration of Aboriginal people into the wage-earning economy of Western culture has virtually eliminated the interest in traditional teachings and ultimately done away with the need and respect once afforded the Elders. Traditional knowledge transmitted from one generation to the next through example and oral storytelling has declined, and today many Aboriginal people no longer know who they are or what makes them unique.

In the Moose Factory area the elementary schools have put into practice regular outdoor field trips with Elders and a modified school calendar to accommodate traditional hunt breaks in the spring and fall. An attempt is also being made to revive the language at the elementary school level. These are positive endeavors to educate future generations in their culture and help them to build confidence and self-esteem. If they know where they come from and have a better understanding of their culture, they can develop pride in their heritage. This sense of pride will instill in them a greater motivation to learn.

The Moose Cree Education Authority has also built the Delores D. Echum Composite High School on the reserve with the expectation of increasing motivation among the young adults who attend. This age group seems to rebel most against the structured learning environment provided by the Western school system. They are often identified as distracted and irresponsible, but in fact they are often exercising the courage to defy the regimented Western system. It is essential to be more positive and more respectful of Native culture and not always expect learning to be based on preconceived terms. The current Western education system dictates precise dates and times for attendance, allowing little or no deviation from this schedule, which demands that these youth obey a bell. If they don't, they will be denied an education. As one Elder told me, "Indian time does not mean being late all the time, but it means being in tune with Nature. When the geese are flying, it is time to hunt; when traveling on the Bay, it means depending on the tide." The structured school system tends not to accommodate this way of thinking.

At the postsecondary level the Moose Cree Education Authority has just instituted a transitional year for students graduating from high school and students who have recently graduated. The purpose of this program is to prepare these young people for the culture shock they will experience when they leave their community and reserve.

I believe these undertakings will have positive results in the future. However, the effect on the need for the Literacy and Basic Skill program

will be minimal because the adults who attend the literacy program are the "sandwich" generation who had to deal with attending a school that did not support their culture, particularly their language. All lessons were taught in English or French, and most of their parents spoke only Cree and were unable to support or help them with their lessons. As children, and again as adults, they experienced much frustration in the learning process; although they had basic English skills, they found they were unable to help their own children and were again discouraged and irritated. Many now enroll in a literacy program in an attempt to upgrade themselves to a level that will at least allow them to support and encourage their children to pursue higher education. This sense of purpose motivates the literacy learner.

Practitioners must be more respectful of the distinctive approach to the universe Aboriginal peoples have and need to be willing to allow for this in their teaching methods and course content to achieve success. Implementation of culturally suitable tasks and situations will have a positive effect on the learners' motivation. In the component for development of basic skills and personal growth, I include lessons from the Native literacy curriculum "Empowering the Spirit" and also from the United Native Friendship Centre Literacy Programme. These lessons usually incorporate basic math and English skills and are beneficial in promoting motivation in the learners because of their relevance to Aboriginal culture.

Learners are more likely to be motivated when they are engaged in tasks they find interesting. Teachers should strive to learn what students want to know and create learning situations based on their interests. An article on the World Wide Web from ERIC Digests (1994) states:

Native American students may not be motivated to participate in instructional conversations at school, because they are not interested in the materials they are supposed to be discussing. Often these materials are based on the experiences of the majority culture and may not seem relevant to the children's lives. Some Native American schools have attempted to introduce more culturally relevant materials in their curriculum.

Although I stress the need to include cultural aspects in the program to help increase motivation, I have found that some learners are uncomfortable with this approach, because in many small communities some members strongly identify with the values of Western culture whereas others are still strong in their own traditional Aboriginal cultural beliefs and practices. It is essential to overcome this conflict where it exists in the literacy group, because it is important for the learners to be aware of the cultural aspects and reasons they learn differently. An understanding of the wholistic approach to learning inspires confidence between the learners and the practitioner, and it motivates the learners. An understanding and acceptance of cultural differences will help motivate the learners because it develops their confidence and self-respect.



### *Learner-Practitioner Relationship*

In this section I discuss culturally sensitive teaching processes that support and encourage the learner in an Aboriginal literacy program. I focus on the relationship between learners and practitioner and the need to create learning tasks and situations that create curiosity and interest for the learners. Also the importance of the learning environment and the significance of assessing learners and setting learners' goals are discussed.

With regard to learner-teacher relationships, once learners are aware I am of Native origin a barrier is removed. I am of Ojicree ancestry but look white. Because the learners did not see themselves in me, they were hesitant to identify with what I was saying. This attitude indicates a continued resistance to Western influences. However, identification with the teacher promotes a sense of trust and confidence and enables learners to be more relaxed and open in their dialogue and interaction with me. There can often be culturally based communication difficulties in the classroom. The ERIC Digests (1994) states,

Conventions regarding conversational style vary across cultures. When a teacher and students from different cultural backgrounds attempt to communicate, confusion and misunderstanding can arise as their communicative styles interact. This problem is particularly acute when the parties involved have no prior understanding of one another's culturally based communicative conventions. For example, research has shown that "wait time"—the amount of time speakers are given to speak and respond—is substantially longer in Native American culture than in European-American culture.

Conventional classrooms are whole-class oriented, with a teacher who leads, instructs, and demonstrates to the whole group. This can be effective, but group participation must be encouraged, and the teacher must be willing to allow for that wait time when dealing with Aboriginal learners. Some Aboriginal people tend to be passive and unassuming; they may also avert their eyes to express politeness when addressing a teacher or peer group. Therefore, it is important to be patient and encourage participation by everyone. Practitioners need to elevate this passiveness to assertiveness, but at the same time avoid promoting aggressiveness. Once the learners become more assertive, they also become more motivated.

The classroom should provide a social environment where personal interaction takes place. The use of cooperative learning groups provides a supportive learning environment, and activities that allow cooperative work in the classroom do a good job of retaining interest in the program. I have found that utilizing and promoting individual students' strengths and abilities encourage other class members to participate. Other tactics are useful as well. For example, having more than one individual work at the board at the same time reduces the wariness and nervousness that some may feel. Also, group discussions on local issues and controversial current events, particularly those dealing with Native issues, promote participation. Employing humor throughout all exercises is also a useful and important tactic to build participation, confidence, and self-esteem.

When there is an increase in participation, confidence, and self-esteem, there is an increase in interest in the program. Increased participation and interest intensify the learners' need to succeed, and the desire to succeed motivates the learners to attend and to achieve success.

The following is a summary of ideas from an article on the Internet: *Exploring Adult Literacy, "Goal Orientations of Low-Literacy Learners in Adult Basic Education: Some Issues for Adult Literacy Instruction."* The article addresses person variables, task variables, and situation variables. Person variables include the perception of ability; the individuals' judgments about their capabilities to achieve goals are crucial to determining their behaviors. If they believe they are capable of succeeding, then they are more likely to approach learning with competence and a feeling of being in control of their own destiny. As to task variables, the article states, adult literacy learners must have sufficient motivation to acquire the basic skills of reading, writing, and numeracy. However, tasks that are too easy will not help the learners to develop feelings of competence. Conversely, tasks that are too difficult are not intrinsically motivating as repeated attempts without success discourage learners. Practitioners must match the challenge of tasks to the students' level of ability, and they must present a variety of tasks. When developing appropriate tasks to promote and increase motivation in the learners, practitioners can make use of situation variables by allowing students to make choices in their learning activities that respect their individual autonomy. Situation variables should also include cooperative learning groups, which provide support for learning from one another; and by mixing individual and cooperative learning activities, the practitioner promotes student autonomy and a sense of responsibility to others.

A journal entry from one of my students summarizes these points well.

Group learning helps students encourage each other. The style of teaching and instruction can be helpful when students are encouraged to assist in the lessons. Participation in open discussions about local issues and regional and national agendas are helpful to the students, because as a student I can learn the view of other students and the instructor, which makes the class more interesting. The lessons can be integrated with cultural curriculum. (February 2002, student's daily journal)

As part of the teaching process, practitioners must initially and regularly assess individual learners. The initial assessment determines their learning style, and regular assessments evaluate their progress. Learners who are made aware of their learning style and encouraged to set long-term goals tend to be more motivated than others. It is important to counsel them or have counselors meet with them early in the program to discuss their future plans and persuade them to set a long-term goal.

Setting short-term goals is also essential in helping motivate the learner. For example, completing one unit of English or math in a specified time allows the learner to experience a sense of accomplishment. Successful completion of these short-term goals also provides encouragement.



Smaller expectations and achievements lead to greater expectations and accomplishments and continued motivation. As the learner attains better skills and more knowledge, motivation increases, leading in turn to better skills and more knowledge. Learners who do not reach this point have usually left the program because of family or community commitments.

A sense of community has a strong influence on the motivation of the learners. Family and commitment to family is a priority among First Nations communities. Members work together to complete tasks. Thus often a sense of community determines the attitude and attendance of the learners. The literacy program offered by the Moose Cree Education Authority in Moose Factory is unique because the Band sponsors it; no similar band-sponsored program that I am aware of exists in communities further north in the James Bay region. The following discussion is based on the literacy program in Moose Factory and addresses the effects of the closeness of the family unit, the dysfunctional family unit, the location and isolation of the community, and outside influences.

### *Barriers*

One of the barriers to the success of a literacy program in this small Northern community is the stigma attached to the label *literacy*; it is associated with low-level learners or uneducated individuals. This negative impression of literacy deters individuals from enrolling in a literacy program. Attending a literacy program should be recognized as a progressive step toward greater accomplishments, and this must be communicated in the community so that individuals are encouraged to attend. Community members need to be made aware that the literacy program will integrate cultural literacy as well as upgrading communication and numeracy skills. Word of mouth and the living evidence of successful learners have proven to be the best advertisement to encourage enrollment in the program. In the first year of the program I assessed over 40 prospective attenders and at year-end had eight regular learners; in the second year of the program I assessed over 20 prospective attenders and had five regular learners. Full assessments were done only after a person attended three sessions. The learners who persisted in the program did meet their goals; most are pursuing a college education. But this drop in numbers is what inspired me to choose this topic, and in the process of researching, I hope, offer some solutions. I found that most did not return because they had the opportunity to become gainfully employed or because there were family needs and situations that presented other challenges.

A barrier to the success of a literacy program is the sense of closeness, community caring, and the priority of family. Parents tend to respect their child as a mature person early in life. There is no nagging, and there is minimal supervision or discipline. The children are allowed to do things on their own early in life; consequently, they mature and achieve independence early. This also leads to a sense of self-nurturing that is less

prevalent in the non-Native community. For example, if individuals of the Western culture are ill or injured, they usually make an attempt to continue with their duties, whether it is work or school. A Native person may feel it is more important to take care of his or her particular ailment than attend work or school. This same attitude extends to family members, particularly if an offspring is ill. The immediate welfare of the child often has priority over attendance or completion of an assignment. This nurturing outlook tends to impede motivation in the individual learner. Including units on family management—and maybe also a more flexible approach that acknowledges the importance of family as some corporate workplace programs now do—could have a positive effect on continuity in the literacy program for future generations of learners.

There are a number of single parents in this small Northern community, and the duties and responsibilities of being a single parents causes problems with attendance and completion of the program. Families also tend to be large, which requires more time for caregiving at home and less time available for learning and upgrading. These family issues tend to hinder motivation in the individual. In an attempt to alleviate this burden and to help motivate individuals, the Moose Cree Education Authority Literacy Program provides a small cash incentive based on attendance, and it also provides a small child-care subsidy. Originally, it was felt that money should not be used as motivation, but the cash incentive became part of the literacy program because other programs offered it. Perhaps a better solution would be to offer term placements and further opportunity to learn at the end of the program.

### *The Role of the Practitioner*

Practitioners in these small communities must be sensitive to the importance of family and also be aware that many of these families could suffer problems ranging from unemployment to abuse. In her thesis on holistic learning, Hill (1999) writes the following.

Dysfunctional Aboriginal communities are the result of many years of oppressive experience. High rates of suicide, alcoholism, family violence, sexual abuse, unemployment and other social ills are still a large part of Aboriginal life today. The residential boarding school system no longer exists, but its impact lingers on in the psychological and social make-up of Aboriginal people. Although the social situation has changed somewhat in recent years, the cycles of abuse continue to be transferred to succeeding generations of people through a variety of dysfunctional relating patterns. (p. 6)

Practitioners need to be understanding, supportive, and patient with learners who are experiencing difficult issues. Practitioners can encourage motivation by assisting these learners to set priorities in balancing commitment to family and self and by allowing more flexibility in program content and hours.

To support the concept of the importance of family and community, I include some quotes from surveys completed by adult students attending

courses at the Moose Cree Education Authority. Several responses to the question, "What motivated you to attend the course?" follow.

I wanted to do things with my life, go places, and see and do new things. So I have to work for my education.

My friend pushed me into going back to school, and I'm very grateful that she got me back in school.

To get a job in the future, and to help my family too. And to help other people. I'd like to see myself doing my own thing, having my own office, and my own computer.

My wife motivated me and I also motivated myself.

My children motivated me ... to find a great life for me and my children.

I felt it was time to better myself and the community, so later I can help other people.

The same indication of sense of community and the importance of learner-teacher relationship is evident in response to the question, "What motivated you to complete the course?"

The help of my teacher, teaching me, and to feel proud of myself. Parents, husband, kids, and siblings pushed me to finish these courses.

The thought of starting my own business in the future.

Found that it was fun, good classroom setting, knew all the classmates. Good teacher.

To have a goal so that my children can reach for their goals.

Interesting work, fun teacher, students you can get along with, and something to work towards.

These statements show how family, community ties, and learner-teacher relationships influence an individual's decisions to set higher goals for himself or herself.

One might assume that the isolation of the community would promote attendance, but in fact it has the opposite affect. Because of isolation, community members are easily distracted, and when it is winter the cold, white surroundings promote a stay-at-home-with-the-family attitude. An interesting paradox is the fact that the frozen river provides winter roads to other communities and allows families to visit relatives who are not normally accessible. Besides being a link to other family members, winter road access also allows easy transportation of items to and from spring and fall campsites. This reflects and emphasizes the family value of Aboriginal peoples, but proves a distraction to the learners. As a result, learners also take advantage of warmer winter weather to use snow machines to prepare their campsites for the spring goose hunt. In addition, learners harvest wood for home for the next winter season. In spring and summer, learners prefer to be outdoors fishing or in the bush hunting. These important cultural traditions practiced in this small Northern community are priorities for the learner and negatively affect attendance, success, and in turn motivation. Although it will mean the learner's progress is slower, practitioners must be willing to be flexible and organize learning schedules to accommodate the traditions practiced. A

practitioner implementing a flexible schedule must also exercise a sense of personal caring and take time to call the learners at home and encourage them to return and continue with the program.

The sense of community and the keen and inherent love of the outdoors are important to the individuals in this small island community. Most of those who enroll in the literacy program want to remain in the North, so goals need to reflect local realities. Although learners want to improve their family's lifestyle, have set a long-term goal, and aspire to pursue their goal, there are few professional jobs available in the area. Therefore, realization of the goal presents a challenge and a dilemma, yet reinforces motivation.

The First Nations peoples in the North also aspire to control the rich resources still untapped in the area, for example, the discovery of diamonds in Attawapaskat. Realization of future development of resources and potential job opportunities prove a positive influence on motivation. People in the community are aware of the need to be better educated so that they can be involved in the administration of resource development and take advantage of the new jobs that result. They are motivated to register, attend, and complete literacy programs with the intent of pursuing improved job skills and higher education. Current studies and negotiations that the Mushkegowuk Regional Council is pursuing to accomplish self-governance highlight the need for educated Aboriginal people. The desire to be involved in the development of their resources and the quest for self-governance for First Nations people are motivating factors for education.

These adults, as parents, must be prepared to maintain control of educating the new generation in a manner that will incorporate traditional ways as well as the Western style of education. The integration of both cultures in the education system will ensure that the new generation will be more knowledgeable and better prepared to make decisions that will guarantee progressive development for future generations.

In summary, the practitioner's relationship with the learner may be the single most influential factor for the learner to achieve success. Although some traditions have been lost, culture still plays a major role in being able to motivate the learner. By focusing on cultural awareness, cultural teaching practices, and a sense of community, practitioners can help learners be successful. Although past factors like the attempt of the Canadian government to assimilate the First Nations peoples through residential schools has had a negative effect on how Aboriginal people view education, when given the opportunity to attend a culturally based literacy program, individuals will attend because they realize that improved literacy skills promote beneficial changes in the future for themselves, their families, and the community.

In conclusion, yes, there are differences in motivating learners in Northern communities. Yes, Aboriginal peoples, particularly those residing in remote Northern communities, do live and function under a different set of circumstances than the average Canadian. Yes, there is definitely a distinct set of intangibles associated with getting started and achieving success. There may be other factors that influence the motivation of individuals to succeed in a literacy program, but it has been my experience that the most effective methods to motivate all relate to culture and community location. The fact that more First Nations people are returning to upgrade their knowledge and skills is an indication that they realize the importance of education and that an Aboriginal perspective on literacy is more important now than ever before.

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