

# Aboriginal Learning and Healing in a Virtual World

**John Hodson**  
Brock University

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*Today Aboriginal peoples on Turtle Island are witnessing the leading edge of a new wave of colonialism propelled by the new religion of corporate globalism, and the Internet is the contemporary missionary of that new religion. If we do not extend the dialogue about this new colonialism and understand its potential outcomes, we risk repeating our pasts. Although this article was inspired by the events related to a research project, it is not intended to be an exhaustive discussion of the findings associated with the Learning and Healing Network research project, which investigated the suitability of Internet-delivered education for Aboriginal peoples. Instead I share some of our experiences and discuss the critical issues that arose during the completion of the Learning and Healing Network project. It is my hope that others will find this experience relevant as they break their own trails to Internet-delivered education.*

## *Who am I?*

First and foremost my experience is that of an Aboriginal person in Canada, and my vocation is in Aboriginal adult education. My understanding of Aboriginal adult education, my experience of distance and Internet-delivered education (IDE), and my thoughts and fears about the related effect on our communities has been shaped by what other Aboriginal educators and Elders have taught me.

I coordinate the Bachelor of Education in Aboriginal Adult Education program (ABADED) in the Centre for Aboriginal Studies and Teacher Education (CASTE) in the Faculty of Education at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada. The ABADED is a relatively new distance teacher education program that is site-facilitated, video-supported, community-based, and relies on a cohort model. The ABADED program is constructed around the fundamental relationship between Learning and Healing in Aboriginal education, and those teachers who ground their practice in this relationship increase the likelihood of a healing educational experience for their learners. Learning and Healing can be understood as a contemporary expression of our traditional forms of education and can be understood in this way. As we discover ourselves, our families, and our communities, we begin to understand the forces that have shaped us. With this new awareness, we can make various choices, develop new ways to move through our lives, and move further into wellness.

Over the last three years Brock has developed five core courses, which include approximately four hours of broadcast-quality video of

Aboriginal Elders, educators, and trainers discussing various issues related to the subject of Aboriginal adult education. Our learners come from a diverse cross-section of our communities and include literacy trainers, college or Aboriginal institute faculty, nurses, youth workers, counselors (i.e., guidance or therapeutic), and early-childhood educators to name a few, with an average age of 40. Our learners have in common that some aspect of their work with Aboriginal adult populations can be understood as educational. In three years we have enrolled over 100 learners in this program at a number of remote locations around the province of Ontario.

Although the cohort model, in which a group of learners meet face to face and complete the courses together, has been extremely successful, the program requires a minimum enrollment to make it financially viable. Unfortunately, on frequent occasions we do not have the requisite number of learners to warrant the creation of a new cohort in a given area. An alternative mode of delivery would seem a viable option in these circumstances. My interest in researching IDE as a viable delivery vehicle has been in response to this reality.

#### *Learning and Healing in a Virtual World*

My interest in IDE prompted a successful application to the Office of Learning Technology, Community Learning Network (OLT/CLN) fund. Armed with a small grant from OLT/CLN, the Learning and Healing Network (*The Network*) was born. The overall vision of *The Network* involved the use of technological means to link Aboriginal peoples actively engaged in education and to discover whether the complex and emotional subject of Learning and Healing could be meaningfully discussed and explored via the Internet. We deliberately rejected the idea of limiting the participants to ABADED learners, as their prior familiarity with Learning and Healing might have skewed the findings. Instead we began by asking a postsecondary colleague's introductory computer class to review *The Network* as a component of that course.

*The Network* was conceived as a safe, password-protected, "virtual community" wherein information and resources could be shared in a technically supported environment. Those who logged on to view the site were asked to complete an online evaluation of their experience. Participants in the research component were asked to evaluate four aspects of their experience, including hardware and software compatibility, content functionality (i.e., registration, e-mail, and chat), learning resource content, and overall Web site experience.

For the most part *The Network* content was an accumulation of streamed video<sup>1</sup> related to the ABADED program. Segments featured Aboriginal Elders, professors, writers, and members of the traditional Drum group *Wii Nimkiikaa* (Gathering Thunder), speaking of their understanding of and relationship to the primary theme of the site Learning and Healing. In an effort to direct visitors to the many Aboriginal educational

opportunities available, we included links to a number of Aboriginal institutions, including Kenjgewen Teg Educational Institute at M'Chigeeng First Nation in Ontario, First Nations University of Canada in Regina, Saskatchewan, and Six Nations Polytechnic at Six Nations of the Grand River Territory in Ontario. We had anticipated expanding these relationships and the involvement of these institutions when we moved to the next level of funding. Sadly, in spite of what we considered to be significant findings that overwhelmingly supported the concept among our diverse population, we were unable to access the next level. I discuss this funding failure below.

We had hoped for 150 responses to the formal online evaluation within four weeks. The actual response to *The Network* was nothing short of overwhelming. Within 10 days we had received over 500 evaluations from Aboriginal people living throughout Canada, and to manage the data we had to disable the evaluation component of the site well in advance of what was initially anticipated.

#### *Discussion of the Findings: Beginning With the Voices of Our Ancestors*

I have often wondered how fully our ancestors comprehended the effect that European technologies would have on their ways of life. Early European chroniclers (Parkman, 1997; Sioui, 1999; Trigger, 1969) would have us believe that our ancestors readily adopted and easily adapted these technologies into their lives, but there was a cost.

In her book *Reservations are for Indians*, Robertson (1970) records the conversion of the Slavey Nation in Alberta from a collection of independent and disciplined family groups living with the land to a "civilized" community. She observes,

the first link with civilization was established by the Hudson's Bay Company. The Slaveys began to move in diminishing circles around The Bay so they would be close enough to bring in their furs or get supplies when game ran low ...the circumference of the people's world became narrower, with The Bay in the centre. The family lost its self-sufficiency and the people became employees of The Bay. (p. 17)

According to Robertson, the eventual cost of that "civilizing" experience was unemployment, endemic levels of poor health and disease, third-world housing, and separation from their lands and culture, all in the space of two generations, leaving behind a culture of hopelessness and helplessness where abuse flourished. The origin of that reality was the gradual and seemingly innocent adoption of new technologies and a related lifestyle offered by The Bay.

Numerous ancestral voices have recalled their understanding of the relationships between the adoption of European technology and the social collapse that inevitably followed. These ancestors looked to cast off related social dysfunctions by returning to the roots of tradition and culture. One of those voices is the Haudenosaunee Holy Man Handsome Lake, who recalled in 1799 how "four heavenly messengers had come to him from the

Creator with a great teaching that he called Gaiwiio, the Good Message" (Wright, 1992).

Then said the being, addressing me, "He who created the world at the beginning employed us to come to earth. We will uncover the evil upon the earth and show how men spoil the laws that Great Ruler has made ... Four words tell a great story of wrong, and the Creator is sad ... The first word is *One'ga* [alcohol]. It seems that you never have known that this word stands for a great and monstrous evil and has reared a high mound of bones." (p. 234)

These Sacred Beings revealed and urged the denunciation of the other evils that filled the Haudenosaunee cultural void that was a result of and response to the adoption of European technologies. If we choose to hear and consider the voices of our ancestors as they relate their experience, we may glimpse similar patterns related to our indiscriminate adoption of Internet technologies in our communities. These voices from our pasts were always in the forefront of our minds as we negotiated the many nuances of this project.

Our learning came from our experiences and our discussions as we created *The Network*, interacting with the OLT/CLN and other funding organizations, and from the voices of the participants who visited the Web site and completed the online evaluation. We experienced the power of the medium and how easily it can be misused by the unscrupulous. We experienced the poignancy and the relevance of the idea of Learning and Healing to young and old alike. We found that Aboriginal people could access technology even if this access has to be mediated by a grandchild and that there is an Internet equivalent to the moccasin telegraph.

The results of the evaluation indicated that what we did right was to ground *The Network* in the fundamentals of our cultures and the assumption that Aboriginal people would readily engage a substantive issue like Learning and Healing. Further, we were right to appeal to a diverse group of Aboriginal people by telling their stories and reflecting the spiritual depth of Aboriginal cultures. Reading and contemplating the words of the participants in *The Network* propelled us along new paths, sometimes validating our intuitive responses and frequently clarifying a number of issues related to the use of IDE. We called, and over 1,000 Aboriginal people responded by the time we closed down the site, and many mornings we wept as we read their stories. We share some excerpts to situate their response to our efforts in a context of personal experience and to clarify the human issues involved.

### *The Wii Nimkiikaa Factor: The Power of Our Stories*

I liked the video of the drum the best. It is like my fellow Indian brothers talking directly to me about being a student of life. It is very good.

I liked the drum and it should be at the start of things because it is students like me.

I see myself in the drum group. It is good to see students taking about learning as Indians. It is important for all of us to see this.

The drum group is very good and I wish that I could have stuff like that in my course because it speaks to my heart and my healing.

I need a teacher to understand it better and the drummers talk really good and make me want to study more.

I can not read but I could listen and the drum group men are very good men. (Various visitors to *The Network*)

Special mention must be made of the contribution made by the members of the Drum group *Wii Nimkiikaa* (Gathering Thunder). No single component of *The Network* seemed to touch more hearts or elicit deeper emotional response across a wider cross-section of the participants than did the personal stories of the members of Drum *Wii Nimkiikaa*. The men of that Grandfather Drum spoke simply and intimately of the power of that ancient tradition to promote healing in their lives and how this healing sustained them during their university studies. Their successful integration of ancient tradition into a contemporary educational setting was at the heart of most responses, but there was another thread to the discussion. Many participants revealed an underlying longing in their lives to be connected to a similar traditional experience in the context of their studies.

For us it was a humbling experience to witness the power of the stories told by these men and to understand the positive influence they had on others.

### *Understanding the Issues, Recognizing the Threats*

The content made me very happy. It is everything I tell my granddaughter every day. The content was created by Indians for Indians. I can not read but I could listen.

I am very old and I am very happy my granddaughter learns this at the college she goes to. It is good to know that these machines will help to save our culture and not to ruin it. (Written by an Aboriginal student on behalf of her Grandmother)

The words of our Elders bring the main issue into sharpest focus. How can Aboriginal peoples be assured that these "machines will help to save our cultures and not to ruin them?" There are conflicts between the promises of Internet technology and the reality that have a direct effect on Aboriginal peoples considering IDE. I share with you four pressing IDE issues based on our findings about promoting culture, funding, costs of development and implementation, and educational impact.

#### *Issue No. 1: Can Internet-delivered education effectively promote culture to young people?*

I liked the content and I liked how it talked about tradition and life today because I am just finding my clan.

I liked it a lot but I do not know if it is good culturally because I do not know very much about my culture.

I do not know much about my culture ... but this stuff makes me want to learn more.

I do not knows [sic] much about being Indian ... I just stopped my drinkin [sic] and this is good video for me to see.

Where do I get more ...? (Various visitors to *The Network*)

The words of the visitors to *The Network* clearly demonstrate a thirst for culture and identity that is partly a result of the Aboriginal renaissance of rediscovery and reintegration of values, beliefs, culture, and language in our lives. Again and again participants of all ages expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to learn from *The Network*, but their commentaries also expressed a hunger for other opportunities to help make sense of what they saw and heard, including access to Elders and others like themselves.

Our deliberations about what cultural inclusions would become part of *The Network* were extensive, and we consciously made the decision not to include any ceremonies on video or references to ceremonial content in deference to the sacredness of these activities. Although we spoke to the men of the Drum *Wii Nimkiikaa*, we asked them to speak of their relationship to the Grandfather and their own perceptions of the associated traditions, with particular reference to how this informed their own healing.

Additional factors are involved in this renaissance that must be discussed. First, it is normal for those engaged in a journey of cultural reclamation to turn to any available authority to fill a cultural void. Second, it is also common for such travelers while in the early stages of that journey to adopt certain traditions, beliefs, and values that originate with other Nations. Reclaiming one's cultural identity is a painstaking, ongoing process that is constructed over time. During my 10 years as a Traditional Dancer on the Pow-wow Trail, I have observed this process at both the individual and community level. Often the cultural identity of many dancers, as expressed through their outfits or regalia, begins with a generic Plains style and evolves over time more closely to reflect one's own nation or clan. Communities hosting Pow-wows go through a similar process. As they gain confidence in expressing their traditional knowledge, beliefs, and values, there is a corresponding reintegration of those ways into their endeavors.

As our populations continue to migrate from traditional communities and territories into urban centers, the connection between our traditional institutions of learning and our young people is disrupted. Castellano (2000) captures the reality when she writes,

Young people no longer have daily access to experiential learning on the land; they have decreasing levels of fluency in aboriginal languages that would keep them in communication with elders; and they spend much of their time in educational institutions that socialize them into dependence on the written word. (p. 32)

So what will fill that void in the lives of our young people? The dilemma for Aboriginal educators considering IDE that includes Aboriginal culture



or knowledge is twofold. First, Castellano (2000) asks us to consider three questions: "Can the integrity of aboriginal knowledge survive the transition to literate form? And what are the tests of authenticity? Who has the authority to represent Aboriginal knowledge?" (p. 31). Our experience spawned a fourth question that demands consideration: Can the integrity of Aboriginal knowledge survive the transition to the Internet? Second, what might partly fill this void is cultural education that is inappropriate or just incorrect. A rudimentary net search using any key words related to Aboriginal peoples reveals myriad Web sites that are clear appropriations of Aboriginal cultures and spiritual traditions. Most are a mishmash of new age nonsense that may speak to the spiritual bankruptcy of the west, but they may also pose a serious threat to Aboriginal peoples, especially our young people as they access the technology. Zimmerman, Zimmerman, and Bruguier (2000) recall an example.

America OnLine (AOL), a private computer network, set up a chat room called Blue Snake's Lodge. Blue Snake was an online "chief," supposedly Eastern Shawnee, who devoted his time to teaching non-Indians Native American spirituality and healing. (p. 73).

By the time Aboriginal peoples began to express their objections to this stereotyped and embarrassing material, Blue Snake's Lodge enjoyed a considerable following, and AOL ignored the objections to cultural content and resisted attempts to shut down the site until three Shawnee Nations intervened and forced Blue Snake to pack up his lodge.

Our findings demonstrate an interest and acceptance of cultural information on the Internet among a diverse population. However, the colonial appropriation of Aboriginal cultures is a continual problem on the Internet and therefore should be a key concern to any Aboriginal educators engaging in new technologies as an educational resource or designing IDE. Perhaps more important is the discussion that must take place about what cultural knowledge is included, how it is presented, and who will answer the inevitable questions that will arise. Like it or not, anything on the Internet has a certain degree of authority and perceived authenticity by the mere fact of being online. At this point there are no seals of approval to ensure cultural authenticity.

#### *Issue No. 2: Limited funding exists to create and maintain Internet-delivered education*

The most cursory survey of the available literature reveals a propensity for authors (Voyageur, 2001; Zimmerman et al., 2000) to focus on the technical issues of IDE. Many of the available government programs reflect a similar focus, with less attention to pedagogy and content. A recent example of this phenomenon can be observed in the joint press release (2002) from Industry Canada and the Secretary of State, which announced the \$105 million *Broadband for Rural and Northern Development Pilot Program* (BRNDPP) with a specific focus on First Nations communities. The press release contends that "broadband connectivity supports innovation at the

local level, empowering Canadians to become more skilled and their communities to become more competitive" and that the program, "will demonstrate the benefits of broadband access to areas such as health care and education" (emphasis added, p. 1).

Connecting communities to the Internet is only one of three governmental strategies designed to promote Internet use. The other two include funding that would create content to develop skills that will lead to employment, and finally, funding that uses the Internet to mount existing film, photographs, and video collections for research purposes. Little funding is directed to developing curriculum or programming. As always, the available substantive programs are directly connected or related to federal government initiatives (Heritage Canada, Human Resource Development Canada, Office of Learning Technologies, Industry Canada, and the Inukshuk Fund), which establish the funding criteria and control the purse strings. It should come as no surprise to any Aboriginal person that we found the criteria of these programs did little to meet the real social needs of our communities, and the deeper issues intertwined in the concept of *The Network* were recognized as of little value in the goals of those programs. This forced us to make an endless series of compromises to suit the needs of the funding criteria and not the needs of our communities. This mirrors what Davis (2000) observed.

The greatest strides in the development of culturally and community-based curricula have been made by Aboriginally controlled programs and institutions ... there is a constant struggle to get Aboriginal curriculum accredited and recognized by mainstream educational institutions. (p. 245)

Our experience echoed Davis' contention. Even armed with substantial supportive data from the online evaluation associated to *The Network*, we were unable to move to the next level of funding.

Addressing technical concerns alone will not solve the problems associated with or answer questions about the viability of IDE in Aboriginal adult education. The Conference Board of Canada's study *Aboriginal Digital Opportunities: Addressing Aboriginal Learning Needs Through the Use of Learning Technologies* (Greenall & Liozides, 2001) admits that, "Learning technologies alone cannot address the serious social and economic challenges that many Aboriginal communities face" (p. 1). We concluded that little funding is available to create and maintain Aboriginal educational Web sites and the core issues that are at the heart of our contemporary realities.

### *Issue No. 3: Creating Internet-delivered education content is expensive*

In the book *Dollars, Distance and Online Education*, Boettcher (cited in Taylor, 2002) concludes,

A complete webcourse with all course material and interaction on-line would cost \$184,000 to develop. This includes 360 hours of staff time in a course team consisting of a project



manager, academic experts, instructional designers, technical support people, graphical designers, editors and clerical staff. (p. A12)

Boettcher goes on to explain that to develop a course that is half Web-delivered and half face to face would cost \$74,000 and represent 142 hours of development time.

Our experience of creating broadcast-quality video for the ABADED program suggests a baseline budget of \$3,000 per minute: all pre- and post-production costs, talent, scriptwriting, and subject specialists are included. If our strength is in our stories, it is difficult to conceive of a successful Aboriginal IDE that does not use quality video, which is expensive to create and maintain. Cheaper alternatives include audiostreaming and low-resolution video, for example, but our research suggests that text-heavy sites do not have the preferred effect. IDE is an expensive investment with a dubious history of returns. Taylor (2002) reports, "1,400 annual course enrollments are necessary to achieve cost efficiencies, but even this number may be too low because it does not account for the fact that regular and ongoing revisions are required to keep course material current" (p. A 12).

It is difficult to contemplate an Aboriginal school board, institute, college, or university taking on this kind of financial investment to create and maintain a single course, let alone a full secondary school or college diploma or university degree. One of the few that does is the Salish Kootenai College (2003) in Pablo, Montana, which offers, "125 asynchronous courses with another 52 courses under development" leading to three degrees. It must be noted that this prodigious level of curriculum creation would not have occurred without generous financial support from both the Kellogg and Alfred P. Sloan Foundations.

*Issue No. 4: Internet-delivered education alone will not improve access and success in Aboriginal adult education*

It [*The Network*] needs a teacher to help with it but it is good content and I like the links to the schools.

I think it needs an instructor somehow or a way to get help to understand the material and some on to discuss it with because it is very personal to think about.

It is very spiritual content and it needs an elder or someone to discuss it with, but it is very very good.

I think an elder is some one I want to talk to in person and not on a machine but maybe I am enough experienced with the machine. But the content made us all talk to each other about it and it was good and a teacher to ask questions to would be good too.

Great content but would be better with a place to discuss it online and ask questions to the experts in the videos. (Various visitors to *The Network*)

We receive regular inquiries from Aboriginal adults living in remote areas who wish to enroll in the ABADED program, but because we require a certain number of learners in a given geographic area to form a cohort,

we are unable to help them. At one level this makes IDE an attractive delivery methodology, but does that method of delivery address the learning needs of the Aboriginal learner? At this point I must say I do not think so, and here is why.

The experiences of Aboriginal educators (Battiste & Barman, 1995; Castellano, 2000; Deloria, 1994; Hampton, 1995; Hill & George, 1996; Tofoya, 1995) have demonstrated that Aboriginal peoples engaged in education succeed best in a learning environment and a pattern of doing that is significantly different from the prevailing mainstream model. It is not a pattern that can be understood by isolating and considering its constituent components. It is the combination of these constituent components that creates a synergy that is greater than the sum of the parts. It is in such a synergistic environment that our most profound Learning and Healing occurs, because we are engaged spiritually. In his seminal work *Redefinition of Indian Education*, Hampton (1995) tells us, "the first standard of Indian education is spirituality" (p. 19). The natural outcome of engaging this synergy is a spiritual learning environment that reflects the communal nature of our cultures and the natural compulsion of Aboriginal learners to make sense of their learning in a group context where knowledge and understanding are co-created. We require human contact to create the support, the feedback, the respect, the kindness, as well as the experience of others in any learning situation.

It is this direct human contact that was missing from *The Network*, and this omission is clearly evident in the words of those who visited and evaluated their experience. *The Network* exposed them to the idea of Learning and Healing, but this experience, no matter how satisfying, only prompted new questions, and they instinctively yearned for contact with an Elder or a teacher or another learner to explore these questions, and we failed to include a mechanism to address this need. In retrospect, I realize that we missed a valuable learning moment. Chat rooms will never be a substitute for the Aboriginal learning experience. I am not sure that we can create the same type of learning environment through the Internet and also wonder how the spiritual would be addressed in IDE. I have disturbing visions of "virtual ceremonies and circles."

Current approaches to IDE alone will not improve educational access or success for Aboriginal learners because it does not create the synergistic learning environment that is so related to culture, values, and beliefs. Unless Aboriginal educators fully understand the needs of Aboriginal adult learners and then act to fulfill those needs in the designs and delivery of education, we will set our own people up for failure as we engage IDE. This process begins with Aboriginal peoples who are engaged in education transforming their practice by breaking from an imposed way of knowing how to teach and returning to their traditions of knowing.

Hampton (1995) tells a story of his personal transformation when he moved beyond the limitations of mainstream research methodologies and returned to his traditional teachings of the Six Directions. Hampton recalls, "even though I initially resisted this way of thinking as too deep, too private, too Indian, I finally could not deny the six directions" (p. 16). Like Hampton, Aboriginal educators must have the courage to step outside the box and into the circle by engaging our traditional ways of being before we engage with IDE. If we struggle in our classrooms to engage the synergistic power of our traditional teachings, our values, or beliefs, or our cultures, how will we engage them on the Internet?

### *Conclusion*

In spite of massive advocacy and promotion by the federal government, Aboriginal peoples in Canada have yet to integrate Internet connectivity to the same degree as the rest of Canada. At the same time, the various funding initiatives spearheaded by the federal government designed to alter this reality are unable or unwilling to consider Aboriginal needs as expressed by Aboriginal communities, preferring a cookie-cutter approach that is culturally inappropriate, and too little of this funding is allocated to the creation and maintenance of Aboriginal education or training content.

Aboriginal peoples are under pressure to close the technological gap, notably in the delivery of education and training programs, but without the opportunity to consider the potential results fully. Those of us who are privileged to work in education in our communities have the additional responsibility of protecting our peoples from this next wave of colonial expansion by engaging IDE in ways that both reflect and promote our diverse cultures and are grounded in the values, beliefs, and needs of our communities.

If we choose to do otherwise, we risk experiencing High Pines' (Hampton, 1995) prophetic words, "It is not important to preserve our traditions, it is important to allow our traditions to preserve us" (p. 35).

### *Note*

<sup>1</sup>The term streaming has become fairly broad in definition and now generally refers to media, such as video and audio, that is delivered over a network." Terran Interactive (1995). *Introduction to Cleaner 5*, 32.

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Any correspondence related to this article should be directed to the author, John Hodson, Aboriginal Coordinator, Centre for Adult Studies and Distance Learning, Faculty of Education, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada L2S 3A1.

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