

Niitsitapi Relational and Experiential Theories in Education

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This paper provides an outline of an Indigenous educational theory based on Blackfoot, or Niitsitapi, pedagogy. It ascertains relational and experiential factors as essential components of Indigenous education. This is demonstrated by relating the theory to classroom practice, using the four elements provided by Blackfoot Elders: language, stories, ceremony, and land. Examples from the author's own practice and references from Elder transfers are utilized to support the proposed theory. Implications for student engagement, lifelong learning, and economic policies in First Nations communities, inherent in the theory, are also explored.

Introduction

There have been many educational theories conceived to address Indigenous pedagogy, all of which encompass a wide variety of components. University of Alaska Fairbanks professor Ray Barnhardt, for example, has examined the pedagogical significance of an Indigenous education model based on the concept of learning from *place*. The principle aspect of such learning is that it cannot be implemented in a secondhand manner. For students to benefit wholly from the knowledge inherent in their land, they must be connected fundamentally to the land. According to Barnhardt (2005), "What is learned cannot be acquired vicariously, because it is embedded in the environment and the learning experience itself" (Old Minto Cultural Camp section, para. 4). Pedagogy of place stresses the importance of teaching by means of the culture rather than on the subject of the culture, by instilling knowledge about the students' environment (Barnhardt, 2005, para. 1).

An additional proposition, found in a co-authored article by Ray Barnhardt and Yupiaq scholar Oscar Kawagley, is one of an integrated education system. This concept is centred on a convergence between the Western education system and Indigenous ways of knowing. "There is a growing appreciation of the contributions that indigenous knowledge can make to our contemporary understanding in areas such as medicine, resource management, meteorology, biology, and in basic human behavior and educational practices" (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005, *Intersecting World Views: The Alaska Experience* section, para. 1). This integrated educational system is one that would serve to bridge the gap that currently exists between the Western knowledge base and Indigenous ways of knowing, which are of absolute relevance to our students.

Oscar Kawagley (1999) proposed in his journal article, "Alaskan Native Education: History and Adaptation in the New Millennium", a holistic education model which focused on Yupiaq students reclaiming their Native identity through traditional Native environmental sciences. According to Kawagley (1999), "It is for the Yupiaq people to strive for an educational system which recognizes their language and their culture, including their methods of doing science, by which they have learned from their environment and have lived in harmony with it" (A Yupiaq Educational System section, para. 2). Kawagley also stipulated the crucial component of Indigenous language being used as the foundation upon which all learning should be built. Kawagley (1999) states that, "This is best done through the use of the Native language because it thrusts them into the thought world of their ancestors and their ways of apprehending and comprehending their world. In the use of the Native language, the students begin to appreciate the richness and complexity of their philosophical and spiritual worldviews" (A Yupiaq Educational System section, para. 4).

Additionally, Martin Nakata (2007) promotes in his book, "Disciplining the Savages: Savaging the Disciplines", an Indigenous standpoint theory regarding Indigenous education. He writes, "People's lived experience at the cultural interface is the point of entry for investigation, not the case under investigation. It is to find a way to explore the actualities of the everyday and discover how to express them conceptually from within that experience, rather than depend on or deploy predetermined concepts and categories for explaining experience. For Indigenous students this requires the development of complex analytical and writing skills" (Nakata, 2007, p. 215). Nakata's theory of Indigenous standpoint is centred on the idea that standpoint must be constructed; it does not already exist, waiting to be discovered. He emphasizes that such a theory is based on students not merely claiming veracity by way of their experiences, but rather by using their experiences as a point of departure, from where they can explore reasoning (Nakata, 2007). These theories inform my work; however, in this paper I will propose an additional theory of Indigenous education pedagogy.

I am going to present an Indigenous education theory based on relational and experiential concepts and strategies, with an emphasis on *Niitsitapi* ways of knowing. My theory asserts that for education to be meaningful, students and educators must form substantial relationships with one another as well as with the knowledge being transferred. Bastien (2004, p. 55), author of *Blackfoot Ways of Knowing*, asserts, "Knowledge arises in a context of alliances and reciprocal relationships. Implicit is the notion of partnerships that entail obligations or responsibilities on behalf of both parties." To facilitate these relationships, and thereby facilitate knowledge, the learning method must be founded on lived experiences, since "Indigenous peoples recognize that personal power, learning and

thinking are expressed through doing learning the doing is an essential process" (Cajete, 1994, p. 31). To connect my theory to practice, I am going to relate it to the four elements given to us by the Elders: (1) language; (2) stories; (3) ceremonies; and (4) land. I will illustrate ways in which to implement this theory into the classroom using these four elements, supplementing my theory with personal educational practices, along with *Pommotsiisinni*, or transfers of knowledge bestowed upon me by my Niitsitapi Elders. I will conclude by explaining how my theory connects with student engagement, lifelong learning, and economic policies of First Nations communities.

My own teaching and learning experiences have taken place in the schools, reserves, and post-secondary institutions of southern Alberta. I have studied First Nations education issues at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, and my teaching experiences have been primarily in Blackfoot schools. My undergraduate degree was completed at the University of Lethbridge, where I participated in the Niitsitapi Teacher Education Program, resulting in a Bachelor of Education degree with a major in Fine Arts. I am currently enrolled in the same university as a graduate student, and am presently working towards a Master of Education degree, with a First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) focus.

It was through the Niitsitapi Teacher Education Program that I first encountered the dilemma that is First Nations education. As a new teacher, I felt torn between abiding by the provincial curriculum and providing my students with a culturally relevant education. My first year teaching high school music on the Siksika reserve was very difficult. My students, most of whom participated in traditional Blackfoot singing and dancing outside of school, found my lessons not relatable. The General Music curriculum allowed for one unit in World Music per semester, whereas the history and theory in the rest of the course was based on Western music. I found that I was making my students write reports on topics such as the Baroque period and Mozart's compositions while wishing that I could have them study the history of music at the Sundance or the derivation of our traditional pow-wow songs. The wealth of traditional Blackfoot musical knowledge that awaited my students could not be compartmentalized into a single unit; nevertheless, I fit as much Blackfoot music as I could into that one unit of World Music. I then continued teaching the Western-based music curriculum, more aware than ever that our ways of knowing were not relevant to the curriculum. As a new teacher, I also was not yet prepared to question the curriculum's relevance to my students. However, through experience and by attending to the wisdom of my Elders, I came to understand how our ways of knowing could be transferred to our students in a school setting using the four elements.

Language

Bastien (1994) has discussed the importance of language and understanding. She notes, "Language reflects the meaning and purpose that humans ascribe to their existence. Language contains the assumptions and relationships of people. In other words, language links the self to the universe" (Bastien, 1994, p. 129). I believe, therefore, that the instruction of Blackfoot language in the classroom has been misguided. Blackfoot language is being taught in our schools in the same manner as one teaches the English language. Therein lays the folly. Instruction is based on translating Western concepts into the Blackfoot language. In doing this, we make the assumption that the Western knowledge archetype is superior to our own ways of knowing. For example, we teach our students Blackfoot words to describe Western understandings of familial connections. Terms such as *first cousin*, *second cousin twice removed*, or *great-great uncle* are alien concepts to our students. Our cousins are our brothers and sisters, and our aunts and uncles are our mothers and fathers; yet, for some reason, we have chosen to translate these words into the Blackfoot language and teach them to our students. Whose notion of family are we trying to impart? Doige (2003, p. 148) explains, "For years Aboriginal students were asked to know what the Westerner knows and to come to know in the same way as the Westerner does. This is an obvious imposition of a foreign knowledge paradigm, epistemology, and associated pedagogy."

Language should be incorporated into the classroom in a more organic way. Indigenous language must be applied to the lived experiences of our students. It is all well and good for students to recite the days of the week and the months of the year in Blackfoot, but that manner of rote learning will not prevent the eventual eradication of our language because it does not result in the students forming connections with the language. Our language needs to be woven throughout the everyday experiences of our students for them to internalize it. For instance, repetitive statements such as, "The bell has rung; it is time to go to class", "I'm hungry, it is time for lunch", "I need to call my mom, I don't feel well", and others similar to these should be stated in Blackfoot instead of English. Asking students why they are late, telling them to take their seats, or to report to detention are all examples of statements that occur every day in schools that have personal implications for students.

Directed instruction should be given in Blackfoot as much as possible. When students are shown how to hold a pencil in order to spell their name, how to hit a baseball, or how to knead dough in Home Economics, these instructions all constitute opportunities for the use of Blackfoot language. Students will internalize the language when it is applied to experiences that have personal meaning for them. When I first began teaching music, I thought one way to circumvent the curriculum would be to incorporate Blackfoot language into my lessons; however, I am not a fluent language

speaker by any stretch of the imagination, so I was left to look up translations for musical terms. I then attempted to formulate lesson plans that involved the students taking quizzes on music terminology in Blackfoot; I realized that these were little more than spelling tests and that the students would not have been able to internalize the language. Furthermore, these rote lesson plans had nothing to do with Blackfoot music culture. All I was doing was teaching Western music using a few choice Blackfoot phrases. Dejected, I gave up on the idea of incorporating any Blackfoot language into my lessons and then realized that several of the fluent language speakers on staff were using Blackfoot terms when speaking to students in the halls, and that I understood many of the words from my childhood. I realized that these terms had nothing to do with any curriculum but had more to do with simply connecting with the students. I began to use the few Blackfoot words and phrases that I remembered my mother using with my sisters and me when we were young. I began with short phrases such as “hold on”, “come here”, “hurry up”, “sit down”, and “listen”. Remarkably, I began to notice students responding positively to me. Previously, when I would stand outside my classroom after lunch, yelling at students to hurry up and come inside, students rarely, if ever, paid me any heed. However, once I began using phrases such as *niitakit* (hurry up), I noticed students smiling at me instead of grimacing and they would actually quicken their pace. If a student was not paying attention in class, I would say *iistsiiyit* (listen) and pull on my ear lobe, and the student would obey my request respectfully rather than giving me a sulky pout. My use of the Blackfoot language with my students, however limited, also served as a bonding device. When I made the attempt to use our Blackfoot language, I was communicating to them not only on a linguistic level but also on a relational level. I was speaking to them in a way that no other person, outside of our culture, would likely try to communicate with them. This forged an association between us that was more than just teacher and student. Sharing the language with my students, however modestly, was a declaration between us that “We are Niitsitapi!”

For this process to be successful, school boards need to require specific language acquisition goals for all their teachers, education assistants, and supplemental staff. The specifics of these goals must be incorporated into all employment contracts, with language assessments conducted as part of annual performance reviews. It is not essential for a teacher to be able to translate Pythagoras’ theorem into Blackfoot. It is essential for a teacher to be able to ask students how they are doing, how their family is doing, or if they need help in the Blackfoot language. At the beginning of this process, students might be exposed to only a few Aboriginal statements a day, but over the course of several years, the students and staff will become immersed in the experiential aspects of the language. Bastien (2011) states that, “language taught through experience generates a relationship with

the words" (personal communication, July 18, 2011). Therefore, implementing the "socialization of language and knowledge, ways of knowing, nonverbal and verbal communication" (Battiste, 1998, p. 25) in this way creates a process of the internalization of language.

Stories

Indigenous cultures have used stories to transfer existential knowledge since the beginning of time. As King (2003, p. 2) has stated, "The truth about stories is that that's all we are." The basis for the preservation of our ways of knowing is in our sacred stories, as "Our theory of knowledge is found in the sacred stories that are the living knowledge of the people" (Bastien, p. 104). The Siksikaitsitapi term *Kakyosin* refers to the concept of observation. Due to the cultural responsibility involved in the telling and retelling of stories from generation to generation, our observational abilities have been honed. It is through *Kakyosin* that we are able to internalize the sacred stories and apply the knowledge to the present. For instance, many of our stories pertain to the origins of land formations and animals which are native to the Blackfoot reserves situated in southern Alberta and northern Montana. Our stories also impart lessons which reflect the cultural and spiritual practices that still inform our way of life today. The application of stories in the classroom is vital to Indigenous students' conceptualization of knowledge. Community Elders possess the capacity for telling our ancient stories. These Elders must be incorporated into the daily academic and personal lives of the students and teachers. Students, teachers, and Elders will form bonds through the process of telling and listening to stories. Once a connection is made, significant transfers of knowledge can take place.

When I was a student-teacher at the University of Lethbridge, I was assigned the creation of a Blackfoot 10-lesson plan. I thought that teaching one of our traditional stories would be a good way to incorporate culture and language into my lesson. I tried to think of an appropriate story, but I could not remember any clearly enough to retell. I then decided to ask my mother for a suggestion and she recommended the story of Katoyis (Blood Clot). She told me to go seek out my aunt Tsinaki (Rosie Red Crow) and ask her to tell me the story. My aunt was a well-respected Elder on our reserve and she held a great deal of our sacred knowledge. At the time, I was unfamiliar with how to approach an Elder, although I knew there was a protocol involved. I had spent a lot of time with my aunt and I was comfortable around her, but I knew that asking her to transfer knowledge to me was a special request and I wanted to follow the proper procedure. My mother told me to go to Tsinaki's house with an offering of tobacco and ask her to tell me the story of Katoyis. I did so, and I also asked her if I could videotape her telling of the story for use in my lesson. I thought the story would be more meaningful coming from her rather than from me. She

agreed to be recorded. A few days later, I returned to her home with more tobacco and some sweet grass as an additional offering. My mother had informed me that the protocol for a transfer of knowledge was to approach the Elder with an offering when asking for a transfer, and then again at the time of the transfer. Once I had made my offering to Tsinaki, we were able to begin recording her telling of the story of *Katoyis*, the story of a boy who is rescued as a baby by an old couple, and then grows up to fight evil-doers while protecting the weak and elderly. Tsinaki told me the story in Blackfoot, although she used English translations for my understanding. The experience of being transferred a story was very meaningful to me, more so than I had anticipated. I knew that the video of Tsinaki, though important for posterity, would be a poor substitute for having Tsinaki as part of my lesson; it could not recreate the intimacy or the connection that I experienced with my aunt while she told me a story that has been part of our culture for ages.

From an instructional position, Elders should be consulted regarding unit planning. Traditional stories told by the Elders can be incorporated into lesson plans in order to reinforce subject matter where applicable. For example, the story of *Napi and the Rock* could be told as part of a geography lesson. The story is set in the area outside of what is now Okotoks, Alberta. Napi the trickster has angered an enormous boulder by reclaiming the animal hide that he had previously given to him. The boulder chases Napi across the prairies, all the way to Alberta, where he is saved by some birds that take pity on him and come to his aid by pecking off pieces of the rock until the boulder breaks in two and can no longer roll after Napi. The site of the split rock is commemorated today with a marker which discloses both the Blackfoot story and the Western theory (glaciation) of the rock's advent. Not only do Napi stories have practical academic implications, but they also contain essential moral and ethical connotations that assist students in understanding themselves and how they relate to one another and to the universe (Bastien, 2004). Additionally, the story *Why the Blackfoot Never Kill Mice* would be appropriate to use in a social studies lesson on government structures. The story tells of the origin of the first Chief, and could be utilized to introduce the topic of traditional forms of government. Stories must be told not only in English but also in Blackfoot. This is crucial to establishing the students' relationship with the language, as "The child experiences the stories in a language that embodies the connections with a cosmic universe" (Bastien, p. 121).

Ceremonies

Deloria (1973, p. 248) presents the following question: "An old man has been found who has preserved the tribal religion. He is old, and unless he can train the young men, the religion will be lost. What can be done?" The answer is for Indigenous educators to provide an educational environment

where such training can take place. As a result of colonial government policies and the residential school experience, many Aboriginal families have lost their knowledge of ceremonial practices; because of this, "All across Canada, traditional sacred and ceremonial practices were rendered criminal offences by white law" (Fournier & Crey, 1997, p. 25). It was the strategy of residential schools to eliminate Native languages, customs, and in particular, Native spiritual practices (Grande, 2004). Consequently, the existing generation of Blackfoot parents is not equipped to transfer our ceremonial traditions to the next generation. Our schools must now become the surrogate epicentre for student cultural socialization, and, as Barnhardt explains, "A form of education grounded in the heritage language and culture Indigenous to a particular place is a fundamental prerequisite for the development of culturally-healthy students and communities" (2005, Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools section, para. 6).

Participation in ceremonies is the epitome of the lived experience. Ceremony should be ubiquitously integrated into First Nations schools, not simply relegated to scholarly study in Aboriginal culture classes. Ceremony should be experienced by every student, every day. The school day should begin with prayer; students should be able to smudge (a practice of purification using the smoke from sweet grass and sage) before class begins. Traditional dance instruction should be part of the physical education curriculum, which could be an advantageous application of peer mentoring, as many Niitsitapi students are proficient in our traditional forms of dance. The cultivation of plants used in ceremonies (such as those used for smudging) should be part of the science curriculum. The building of a sweat lodge or the erection of a tipi could be taught as part of an Industrial Studies course. The creation of ceremonial clothing and foods should be included in the home economics program; students could learn traditional Blackfoot beading patterns for outfits, or they could learn to prepare berry soup, bannock, flank steak, and mint tea for traditional feasts. There are ways to incorporate ceremonial knowledge throughout the entire program of study.

Beyond the academic applications, ceremony is a way to gain knowledge about and renew relationships. The incorporation of ceremony into the schools would require collaboration with community ceremonialists. There are cultural protocols that pervade traditional ceremonies, which each participant must be made aware of before taking part. For example, according to Blackfoot Elder Bruce Wolfchild, our sweat lodge was traditionally used by men as a form of cleansing, and though women are not forbidden from participating, it is not acceptable for a menstruating woman to take part in a sweat. Another gender-based protocol prohibits females from handling the drum in sacred ceremonies; during these ceremonies the women may sing but the use of a drum is relegated to the men (B. Wolfchild, personal communication, March 5, 2012). There is also a

great deal of sacred knowledge that cannot be disclosed to those outside the sacred societies; therefore, the performance of society-specific ceremonies in the schools would be inappropriate. In order to avoid breaching any protocols, Elders who have been transferred the rights to perform our traditional ceremonies must be involved in their performance at the school level. The shared endeavour of reconstructing ceremonial tribal practices for the next generation would perpetuate further alliances between students, teachers, and Elders. Ceremony "creates and strengthens the connections between people, fostering relationships of mutual support and caring ... its rituals reiterate that the underlying force of the universe is love" (Alfred, 2005, p. 249). Active youth societies, such as the *Kak'oiksi* (Mourning Doves), could also utilize the school environment to make students aware that they do not have to wait until they, themselves, are Elders to belong to the societies. Participating in ceremonies at school can be the foundation for teaching our students what it means to be Niitsitapi. In this way, "Traditions, ceremonies and daily observations are all integral parts of the learning process" (Battiste, 2002, p. 14).

Land

Learning from place is an integral feature of Indigenous education, since "Nature was the essential frame of reality that formed the learning experiences of all indigenous people" (Cajete, p. 174). The reciprocal relationships that my theory is based on also imply a relationship to the land and all it entails. Indigenous students can form these relationships to the land by engaging in experiences that incorporate the study of traditional and sacred tribal sites. Cajete (1994, p. 193) suggests, "For Indian people, this primary context of relationship and meaning was found in the natural environment. In a sense, all traditional Indian education can be called environmental education because it touches on the spiritual ecology of a place." Niitsitapi ways of knowing are intrinsically attached to the land. This is not to say it is tied to the actual land, but rather to specific landforms and landscapes. It is tied to the places where ceremonies are held, plants are grown and gathered, and stories are told. The proper transfer of knowledge and authority through the generations are dependent on the maintenance of ceremonies, as well as the maintenance of the integrity of the land (Battiste, 2002).

Learning from the land should consist of lived educational experiences. For instance, I once took part in a graduate course in Blackfoot research methods which focused on learning from place. Our primary assignment was to venture out into nature and observe the evolution of particular place over a period of time. This method of learning from place could easily be applied to the K-12 curriculum, with assigned locations and observation procedures based on division levels. Assessment could be based on students' written observations and personal reflections; a photo

journal could be used as documentation of the site; a PowerPoint® presentation could be assigned which would incorporate all of these assessment options. As well, younger students could make artistic representations of their observations, or they could give oral presentations during sharing circles to demonstrate learning. Students could also conduct research on specific sacred tribal sites by visiting them with community Elders, praying and making offerings, as is the protocol. They could listen to and/or read the stories associated with each site and write or present a KWL (Know/Want to know/Learned) chart to assess learning. Students could also be required to go out into the community and seek out Elders for transfers of knowledge about our sacred sites and, in turn, share their knowledge with their fellow students in the classroom. This would be a culturally appropriate and significant form of knowledge acquisition and transfer. The essential feature of learning from place is that the knowledge is internalized as a result of the experiential lesson format. Through the lived experience, students are able to make connections between knowing and doing. This reflective practice raises students' consciousness to a higher level.

Discussion

This theory addresses implications for student engagement, lifelong learning, and economic policies in First Nations communities. Niitsitapi relational and experiential education strategies address student motivation, attendance, and engagement by creating a secure learning environment that fosters student feelings of self-esteem. Cajete (1994, p. 223) insists, "Remember that learning is a natural instinct and that success in learning something new is tied to human feelings of self-worth. Create a learning environment that flows with this natural current of human-ness. Enabling successful learning is an essential step in cultivating motivation and enhancing self-confidence in learning." When students feel loved and accepted by their peers and their teachers, they are excited to be in their learning environment. They want to be surrounded by those positive feelings and be an active member of the reciprocal dynamic. By incorporating authentic experiences with Niitsitapi language, stories, ceremonies, and land, students will internalize Niitsitapi ways of knowing.

Once meaningful experiences and relationships are achieved in an educational setting, students will begin a paradigm shift which will lend itself to a necessity for continued learning. Knowledge has a sacred function. It is intrinsically connected to nature, its creatures, and the existence of humanity (Battiste, 2002). Battiste (2002, p. 14) notes, "Learning is viewed as a life-long responsibility that people assume to understand the world around them and to animate their personal abilities." Indigenous epistemology dictates that, for each individual, learning has to be connected to the life process. Lifelong learning is therefore an inherent notion (Cajete, 1994).

Economic policies in First Nations communities can be introduced and strengthened; previously, "Our traditional political and religious systems were attacked because they regulated and celebrated a certain kind of economic structure which the European powers in Canada wanted to destroy" (Manuel & Posluns, 1974, p. 55). From an Indigenous standpoint, economic development was meant to further self-sufficiency, thus preserving Indigenous cultures and promoting the achievement of the objectives set out by said cultures (Alfred, 1999). As it stands, our First Nations economic policies are based less on our traditional ways of knowing and more on Western principles. Those principles do not support cooperative accomplishments; rather, they endorse social Darwinism, or *survival of the fittest*. With the adoption of an experience via relationship-based education theory, Indigenous philosophies of communal welfare will be internalized by the next generation of tribal members. This will have crucial implications for the imminent economic policies of First Nations Communities, because "When one is an integral part of the Indian world view, ones values are oriented according to the social values inherent in the culture itself. Social relations become not merely patterns of behavior so that the culture becomes self-perpetuating" (Deloria, 1988, p. 185). When our students begin to associate their educational and cultural experiences with their relationships, they are assuring that the future generation of Niitsitapi will be cultivated in a climate of interconnectedness that will lend itself to collective prosperity and achievement.

Conclusion

The education theory I have proposed requires a fundamental shift in how educators interpret the role that culture plays in knowledge acquisition. Niitsitapi ways of knowing are centred on the four elements given to us by the Elders: language, stories, ceremony, and land. By teaching through the elements, educators will be able to facilitate our students' understanding of what it means to be Niitsitapi, thereby reinforcing the sense of identity which, for many of our students, has already been compromised. Using a relational and experiential model for learning, educators will be able to foster associations with their students that will perpetuate the students' drive for knowledge. These significant relationships must include community Elders for *Pommotsiisinni* (transfer) to take place, thus resulting in the attainment of culturally relevant knowledge. By including Elders in the lesson planning process, educators will ensure culturally accurate and appropriate experiences for the students. Furthermore, connections between the participants will be formed and strengthened. Creating opportunities for lived experiences will lend themselves organically to the generation of relationships.

Opportunities for lived experiences abound when teaching through the four elements. The Blackfoot language, when applied relationally, will form a strong foundation for internalization, for both students and the

teachers. Students will make connections to the language when they can relate to it on a personal level. Traditional stories told to students by the Elders will further associations through the telling and listening process, especially if the stories are told in their original Blackfoot. Our stories reflect our history and traditions, and they can be experienced through the land. Our sacred sites are related to us through stories and they are still available to us today. Bringing our students to our sacred sites will emphasize the knowledge that has been transferred to them through the stories and the language. Experiencing our ways of knowing via the land will perpetuate profound cultural understandings for students. In addition, the use of ceremony in the learning process, which is woven throughout all the other elements, will serve to reinforce our students' sense of identity. The language is integral to the performance of our ceremonies, which have been told to us for generations through story, and the land has reflected the sites of our ceremonies for ages. Furthermore, by applying *Niitsitapi* ways of knowing using relational and experiential strategies, a tremendous impact on student engagement, lifelong learning, and the economic policies of First Nations communities will result.

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