

## Foundations for Aboriginal Adult Literacy

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**Abstract:** Aboriginal adult literacy must be firmly rooted in the traditions of Aboriginal people, which continue to be applicable today in the twenty-first century. Aboriginal literacy facilitates the development of self-determination, affirmation, achievement and sense of purpose. In terms of foundational Aboriginal literacy we found that we must first understand the meaning of Aboriginal literacy in its broadest sense. Consequently Aboriginal literacy programs must reflect a broad approach that recognizes the unique ways that Aboriginal people represent their experience and knowledge. The medicine wheel is an organizing tool used to conceptualize, reframe and revitalize Aboriginal adult education.

*Exemplary indigenous education today requires words thoughtfully spoken/written. Sacred teachings of Our Ancestors, Our Elders, once deeply sung in to our souls in Ceremony now are being spoken from our academic lips flowing from our ever critical mind entering anonymous eyes from the pages of a book (Graveline 2002).*

In terms of this paper it is necessary for us to define our respective roles as collaborators in presenting our perspective as view pertaining to foundations of Aboriginal adult literacy. This will be based on the concept of the "Two Row Wampum," which promotes equality of relationship. The work and interest of myself, Eileen Antone an Aboriginal educator working as an Assistant Professor at OISE/UT centres around the education of Aboriginal People in Canada. It is within this context that I have become interested in the field of Adult Literacy as it concerns Aboriginal People. Peter Gamlin, who is not Aboriginal, is professor emeritus in the same institution and department, and has 34 years of specialization in educational psychology, child development and adult education. In this position he has had the opportunity to work closely with Aboriginal communities, to help deliver culturally appropriate services to families and children. He continues to inquire into Aboriginal literacy programs to determine to what extent they are culturally appropriate. It is the common concern of culturally appropriate literacy programs that draw us together as colleagues in our commitment to expound the need to promote traditions that ground Aboriginal adult literacy.

As co authors we firmly believe that it is necessary to begin this paper with an important foundational tradition of the Onkwehonwe (real people). This foundation in the cultural traditions of the Hotinoshoni (People of the Longhouse) is the ~**Kanuhelatuksla** ~ Words that come before all else. These words are called **Tetwanuhelat** , the Thanksgiving Address.

*As we draw our minds together*

*the Elders tell us that we give thanks to and for the people who*

*have been able to join us in this particular activity. So we give thanks to and for you.*

*We give thanks to and for Mother Earth our sustainer of life.*

*We give thanks to and for all the plants that grow on Mother Earth with special thanks for the medicines of the four directions: Tobacco, Cedar, Sage and Sweetgrass.*

*We give thanks to and for all the water that flows on Mother Earth as well as the water animals.*

*We give thanks to and for all of the animals that walk or crawl on Mother Earth.*

*We give thanks to and for the birds that fly overhead and we give a special thanks to the Eagle who flies high and gives us the gift of vision.*

*We give thanks to and for the Thunders that come from the west bring warm winds and rain to replenish the water system.*

*We give thanks to and for our elder brother the sun, for the light and warmth that we have.*

*We give thanks to and for our grandmother the moon who regulates the water and coming of children.*

*We give thanks to and for our ancestors the stars who continue to tell us the time to carry out our cycles and ceremonies.*

*We give thanks to and for the four guardians who continue to give us guidance and direction.*

*We give thanks to and for the prophets that brought the message of the good mind from Sonkwayatison.*

*We give thanks to Sonkwayatison the Creator for all of these things.*

*Ta ne tho n ya wa*

This paper stresses the importance of literacy as expressed from an Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> perspective as a "way of life" based on a 'wholistic' worldview. In this paper 'Wholistic' refers to the spiritual, emotional, mental and physical aspect of human beings and our relationship to Creator and the environment. It is this 'Wholistic' perspective that provides a foundation on which to construct Aboriginal adult literacy. Aboriginal adult literacy must be firmly rooted in the traditions of Aboriginal people, which continue to be applicable today in the twenty-first century. Our research findings (Antone et al 2003) indicate that being literate in terms of Aboriginal Literacy is more than reading, numeracy and writing which is typically directed towards gaining access to mainstream employment. Rather, it is the beginning of the life-long process of affirming the worldview, and thus empowering the spirit of, Aboriginal Peoples. It is an approach to learning and languaging that begins the process of reflective and reflexive 'critical' thinking, thinking that sees problems in terms of their potential solutions, and the necessity of reclaiming one's original language. The understanding is that Aboriginal languages reflect and hold the key to maintaining Aboriginal culture and identity in Canadian cultural context. Aboriginal literacy facilitates the development of self-determination, affirmation, achievement and sense of purpose. It gives Aboriginal Peoples, whomever and wherever they may be, the skills to effectively participate in and to contribute effectively and "in a good way" to society as whole.

In terms of foundational Aboriginal literacy we found that we must first understand the meaning of Aboriginal literacy in its broadest sense. In its broadest sense being literate is about sustaining a particular worldview and about the survival of a distinct and vital culture. Being literate is about resymbolizing and reinterpreting past experience, while at the same time honouring traditional values. Being literate is about *living* these values in contemporary times. Being literate is about *visioning* a future in which an Aboriginal *way of being* will continue to thrive. Meaningful Aboriginal literacy will develop and find expression in everything that is done. Consequently Aboriginal literacy programs must reflect a broad approach that recognizes the unique ways that Aboriginal people represent their experience and knowledge. Literacy programs must reflect a cultural perspective that allows Aboriginal People to develop their literacy skills broadly as in developing skills related to narrative skills, artistic skills and to hold to traditional values as they go about doing these things.

In early research Antone (1997) recognized the value of finding and promoting voice as a way of affirming the "wholistic" worldview of the Onyota'a:ka people at Oneida of the Thames. She explains that in giving voice to the Onyota'a:ka people, she had to heed the warning given by Chrisjohn (1986), a Native psychologist. He states, "The fundamental problem with theory,

whether Bannatyne's, Horn's or Jensen's, is that it is external to Indian thought on the problem. Theory of Indian intelligence must eventually be constructed from within Indian ranks, with Indian perspectives and concerns reflected in its development. Otherwise, we continue to run the risk of producing trivial research with post-hoc constructions and recommendations being based on models and concerns insensitive to Indian people (p.54).” With this warning in mind Antone was able to reclaim her voice and lift up the voice of the Onyota’a:ka people in terms of teaching and learning. In reflection concerning this experience of finding voice, Antone relates to the Hotin shoni Creation story heard many times as a child.

*This story begins in another world, a sky world. It is a story of a woman who fell from the sky world. As she was falling the beings that lived in the water below marvelled at this strange being that was floating down to their world. Upon further inspection they determined that she would not be able to survive in their world, as she did not possess the appropriate appendages, body covering or breathing capabilities for water survival. They deliberated among themselves as to the best course of action. They decided that they must help her survive. So as they discussed the situation it became apparent that this being would need a place to land. The giant Turtle offered to let her land on its hard shell back. With this decision, several of the waterfowl flew up to meet her to carry her gently down to the Turtle’s back. The water beings were very curious about this new being in their world. They clamoured around asking her all about herself and where she came from. As she related her story to them she said she would need some land to put on the turtle’s back so that it would grow and she would be able to move about. The water beings again congregated to deliberate on how to obtain the earth. As they were discussing one of them remembered hearing that there was earth beneath the water but it was way down very deep under the water. The water animals consisted of many of the animals we know today: Beaver, otter, muskrat as well as the waterfowl ducks geese, loons, seagulls, etc. They all volunteered to go for the earth. The beaver as we know builds his house underwater so he decided since he was so big and strong that he should go and get the earth. He tried but was unsuccessful. One by one the water beings tried to get the earth but the earth was too far down. At last it came time for the tiny little muskrat to make his dive for the earth. Would he do it? The others thought not. But this did not stop him. He dove under the water. The beings on the water waited, and they waited. He did not surface. Just as they gave up hope of seeing the little muskrat again he shot up out of the water and in his little paw was a little bit of earth. And the story continues so that we are here today.*

In this epic, Skywoman comes from another place and has to construct a place for herself in this world of water. In the reconstruction of this world she needs something that cannot be obtained without great struggle. This struggle is what Aboriginal academics and literacy practitioners have been doing for these last several years. They have had to go deep into the oppression of the educational struggles of the Aboriginal peoples. Why? To look for and raise up traditional knowledge and ways of being so that our people can create a place within this world where we can validate our own right within this present society.

This is in keeping with the foundations advocated by Gaikezhayongai (2000:11) when she asserts, “Stepping onto the healing path or discovering the ‘good red road’ entails developing the willingness to explore one's social reality and accepting self/identity to assert one’s rightful place and purpose in a society that still aims to assimilate First Nations people. The lifelong healing/learning journey must begin without the imposition of mainstream culture.”

Couture's (1987) article identifies a number of primary traditional values he believes lead to good application for Aboriginal educational needs, and by extension to a broad understanding of Aboriginal literacy. In examining the work of Couture (1987), Gamlin (2003:17) postulates that the relation between values or principles or laws and their [Aboriginal] practice is critical.

Gamlin (2003) writes that, "The Nishnaabe worldview with its assumption of spirituality and relationships takes precedence over curricular details and in the case of literacy program over the specific mechanics of basic literacy skills at least when basic literacy skills are understood from a Western perspective" (17). Corbiere (2000) a Nishnaabe scholar points to the foundation of Aboriginal worldview in terms of how Aboriginal education will be transformed when traditional values are brought forward and attitudes transformed---when *aansookaan* (legends) and *dbaajmowinan* (narratives) and the centrality of *Nishnaabemwin* (language) are taken seriously. Many Aboriginal people use the medicine wheel as an organizing tool to conceptualize and reframe and revitalize Aboriginal adult education (Calliou, 1995, Graveline, 1998, Hampton, 1995). The medicine wheel is used to express the four aspects of human development: spiritual, emotional, physical and mental. Hill (1995) reminds us that central to the knowledge process is the need to balance the four dimensions rather than focussing on one form of knowing. This concept was demonstrated at the 2002 Symposium on Literacy and Aboriginal Peoples 'Best Practices' Native 'Literacy' and Learning when participant Dawn Antone ended her presentation by stating " In order to articulate what it means to live literacy it is important to actually participate. I will first sing the Unity Stomp. Then I would like you to sing it in addition to actually dancing the Unity Stomp. This Unity Stomp will get you to understand what it means to live life and what it means to practice what you talk about. It will also get everyone's blood circulating since we have been sitting all morning"(Antone, 2002a: 38)." In this brief activity she accessed the spiritual dimension by using the Unity Stomp song and dance. This activity is inclusive in that it brings everyone together spiritually in that the song is about the "good mind" and the "good path" that we must travel in this physical world. It reminds us of our connection to the land and to everything and everyone that is around us. It developed the mental capacity by having the participants learn a new song in a traditional Onkwehonwe language. By actually getting up to dance the physical aspect of development was exercised and it was emotionally energizing to be brought together in a fun way in order to continue with the rest of the day. As Graveline (1998) indicated the medicine wheel is another way of visualizing the world that is both ancient and global. As indicated by Corbiere (2000), narratives are central to promoting Aboriginal world view. The following excerpt is an example of a story from a literacy practitioner's perspective of the need for "Making Kinnection". Boyer (2000: 36) tells us:

"Making the Kinnection" is a process of internalizing knowledge such as the learning 'tools' of our natural habitat while learning to improve literacy skills. This can be rewarding when "Con-nection" becomes "Kin-nection" such as when the change in their experience gets translated into meaningful culturally relevant information. This would include integrating cradleboards, maple syrup harvesting, quill box making, repairing nets and talking sticks, to name a few of these 'tools'. For Aboriginal [people], the place of learning is the natural habitat. When students were "day-dreaming" they were working through their traumatic experiences on the reserve; the students were streamed into special education and now in adult education are unsure as to where they fit. In our program we let the students decide where they want to start. Many Aboriginal individuals grew up with the oral traditions and values that acknowledged and respected our culture via hunting, fishing, trapping and other practices. The natural environment was their classroom. Upon 'going to school', they became 'schooled' and their natural environment was lost from their learning process. Unable to make that "kinnection", they experienced a sense of failure. Today we see many of these learners returning to the mainstream where educators provide them with the same materials that once failed them on account of irrelevant content. This time, instead of trying to engage them in 'schooling' which is alien to

their culture, we need to enable learners to relive their early successful experiences so they can remember the strength(s) that can help them in the learning process. This will demonstrate a movement towards a cultural curriculum that is capable of utilizing the natural environment classroom instead of making the classroom the natural environment.

Some ways we try to help make the kinnection is to help adults communicate with their children, by using the talking stick. In the fall people will learn to tan hides, which is using the environment. We will take students outside and strip birch bark to make picture frames and the students will write a story about themselves on the bark in their own language. They will then teach this story to others. No matter what the activity students are involved in it. How can learners contribute to the learning? By sharing their own skills, such as basket making, quill work and so on. In the process of teaching others the students are learning about the environment, sharing, English, story telling, learning how to start their own business. The learners become the teachers. We need to make that distinctive "Kinnection". Through story telling, the program uses old words in the language. The classroom is not four walls, the bush is the classroom.

In this narrative Boyer changes the language "connection" to "kinnection" to bring the spirit of learning "meaningful culturally relevant information" to her audience whether they are academics, practitioners or learners. She stimulates the mental, the spiritual, the emotional and the physical dynamic's of learning in her practice of Aboriginal literacy. Both Antone (2000a) and Boyer (2000) present examples of what it means to sustain a particular worldview. There are also examples showing how distinct and vital cultures can be revised and sustained. These two Aboriginal literacy advocates indicate that being literate is about resymbolizing and reinterpreting past experience, while at the same time honouring traditional values. They also illustrate how these values can be used in contemporary times and how they envision a future in which an Aboriginal way of being will continue to thrive. By continuing to bring forward and practice these foundational, wholistic perspectives Aboriginal adult literacy will be firmly rooted in the traditions of Aboriginal people that can be applied today. We conclude by suggesting that it is by holding to traditional values in everyday practice in everything we do that will make it possible for Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals to work together in partnership. Many questions are raised in this assertion and much discussion will follow but for now we suggest that it is the wholistic Aboriginal worldview with its emphasis on inclusion across all our relations and all of creation that will enable us as members of this human species to cooperate in partnership while coming to grips with the larger issues and problems that concern us all.

#### **Endnotes:**

In this paper, the term "Aboriginal" refers to First Nations, Inuit and Métis persons and collectivities. The terms "Indian," "Native or Indigenous" may also be used, depending on the context and the usage current in the regions, or work environments. Where experience in a particular territory is under discussion, the Nation name (e.g., Odawa, or Oneida) is usually preferred.

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