

Reconciling Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives in Aboriginal literacy practice

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...before Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can get on with the work of reconciliation, a great cleansing of the wounds of the past must take place. The government of Canada, on behalf of the Canadian people, must acknowledge and express deep regret for the spiritual, cultural, economic and physical violence visited upon Aboriginal people, as individuals and as nations, in the past. And they must make a public commitment that such violence will never again be permitted or supported (RCAP, 1996).

From Aboriginal perspectives, literacy is equivalent to learning in the broadest sense as an endeavour that spans a lifetime (Antone, Gamlin, & Provost-Turchetti 2003) and as such is more than reading, numeracy and writing towards gaining access to employment. Antone and et al (2003) state:

Meaningful Aboriginal literacy will develop and find expression in everything that is done. Consequently, literacy-training 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 do 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.

To understand the contemporary aspect of Aboriginal literacy, one must begin with an understanding of the history of European and Aboriginal relations in terms of colonization and residential schools. Aboriginal literacy has to be articulated in its own distinct ways and it needs to be included as a unique perspective on Adult literacy. Without this acknowledgement Aboriginal people continue to be considered as second-rate citizens in a two-tiered system that couches Aboriginal literacy in stereotypical terms and that does not value nor have a clear understanding of Aboriginal approaches to and expressions of literacy.

In the *Policy Brief, The promise and problem of literacy for Canada, An agenda for action* the authors state:

For Canada's First Nations, Inuit and Métis¹, literacy has a double significance. Literacy in Aboriginal languages helps Aboriginal Peoples maintain their own traditional languages and cultures – essential to maintaining cultural identity and preventing linguistic and cultural assimilation. At the same time, access to literacy in one of Canada's official languages translates into jobs, educational opportunities, government services and, ultimately, power. Thus, low literacy levels in their own languages increases Aboriginal [Peoples of Canada]'s risk of linguistic and cultural assimilation, while below average literacy levels in the official languages increases their risk of social and economic exclusion, poverty and poor health (Canadian Education Association, 2004).

By acknowledging and owning Aboriginal literacy as a valid, valued and valuable alternate perspective will affirm and strengthen the contribution of Aboriginal Peoples to their own literacy and to broader Canadian society.

Historical context of Aboriginal Literacy in Canada

In the early years of contact, the Aboriginal non-Aboriginal relationship was constructed on Nation-to-Nation alliances. This alliance of 'Peace and Friendship' was accounted for in the essence of the Two Row Wampum belt made of white and purple rows of beads. Onondaga scholar Oren Lyons reported in the 1996 *Royal Commission on Aboriginal People* that the Two Row Wampum belt recorded a treaty between the Mohawk and Dutch colonists in 1612, as well as subsequent agreements made with the French and the British. The bed of white wampum symbolizes the purity of the agreement. The two rows of purple symbolize the spirit of the Aboriginal people and the spirit of the European people as they travel on the same river together each in their own vessel carrying their laws, their customs and their ways. The three beads of white wampum separating the two rows of purple signify peace, friendship and respect. The two row wampum belt signified the parallel and equal arrangement of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies. The initial Nation-to-Nation treaties allowed the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to come together in fur trade and military alliances supplying each other with the needed

¹ Because this is in a quote it will remain but when referring to the First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples please designate that they are First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Canada as Canada does not own these people.

commodity to accommodate their new way of life. Overtime this 'symbiotic and allied' relationship (Sinclair 2004, p50) declined as the settlers strove to acquire land and resources. Hence, the Royal Proclamation of 1763 which marked major changes in the relationship and colonialism became more pronounced.

Oracy was the traditional form of communication for the Aboriginal people on Turtle Island (North America) therefore the cultural life histories were passed from one generation to the next generation through storytelling, ceremony, songs and teachings, as well as rituals and sharing (Absolon & Willet 2004 p 8). Absolon and Willet (2004) also state:

Each nation retained, recorded and recounted its own cultural histories. These histories reflect in the names of places, people and elements of creation, a spirit that is alive in the land. The names are imbued with meaning, teachings and spirit. These histories were then relevant and meaningful to the lives, culture and survival of each Indigenous nation. They were then and remain today etched in the memories of their people and the land (p8).

Colonization of the Americas brought with it "a reverence for the written word as the most valid representation of fact" (Absolon & Willet 2004 p.8). The ways of the Aboriginal people were negated and dismissed as invalid. The development of the printing press in the 1500s and 1600s brought with it travel books with printed distortions of Aboriginal people. Miles (1989) explains that the travel books misrepresented Native people as "less than excellent people of the earth." In the 17th and 18th centuries Newspaper reporters vilified Aboriginal people and their cultures by writing "negative reports about Indians to sell newspapers" (Fixico 1998). Fixico 1998 also explains:

Eager novelists picked up their poisoned pens to embellish on any Indian resistance to intrigue readers with horrific atrocities. In the 1800's Ethnographers' recorded notes, wrote articles, and drafted manuscripts describing Indians and their cultures. More ethnographers and anthropologists followed in the late 1800s in desperate efforts to study Native American cultures... Careless historians followed ethnographers and anthropologists as a part of the academic community that wrote imbalanced articles and books about American Indians (p. 87-88).

Gilchrist (1992) and Smith (1999) as quoted in Absolon & Willet (2004, 08) indicate

While the role of Indigenous oral traditions were to remember authentic realities, the role of research and written text was to propagate the superior intelligence and strength of Europeans (Gilchrist, 1997; Smith, 1999).

These negative written accounts overshadowed the oral traditions of Aboriginal people and became the basis of dysfunction and assimilation through the imposition of colonial legislation, the reserve system, residential schools, as well as the day school system - that became mandatory to Aboriginal people.

Imposition of Colonial Legislation

The Indian Act of 1876 became the most racist and discriminating document produced by the government of Canada. According to Dickason (2002, p263) the lives of the Amerindians would be interfered with at every turn, down to, and including, the personal level.” She says:

As the power of the agents [people employed by the Department of Indian Affairs to make sure the Indian people followed the rule of the government policy in regards to Indian people in Canada] grew, it became steadily more arbitrary. Their duties accrued until they were expected to direct farming operations; administer relief in times of necessity; inspect schools and health conditions on reserves; ensure that department rules and provisions were complied with; and preside over band council meetings and in effect, direct the political life of the band (Dickason 1992, p319).

She explains that although there have been many amendments to the Indian Act the “fundamental purpose – to assimilate Amerindians – has remained constant” (Dickason 2002, p.263). The enfranchise provision in the Indian Act offered: Indian people who got a university degree qualifying him as a minister, lawyer, teacher or doctor could become enfranchised and get a location ticket without going through the mandatory three year probation. Native women lost their status when they married non Native men. It regulated who could be registered as an Indian. These are but a few of the oppressive situations that the Aboriginal people found themselves in.

The Reserve System

Regulations were drawn up to control the reserve land designated for Indian people. According to the Indian Act, a reserve is a tract of land, the legal title of which is vested in the Crown and has been set aside for the use and benefit of a band (Dickason 2002 p 264). This in turn impacted the traditional governance system of the Aboriginal people because the government then set up the elective system which was designed to hasten assimilation by eliminating traditional systems (Dickason 2002 p. 264). There were many provisions made by the Indian Act and one of the most assimilative was the call for mandatory education.

School Systems

During treaty negotiations, the Native people asked for schools hoping that the schools would prepare the children for the new way of life brought by the Eurocentric ideology. Dickason (2002 p.315) explains that the Native people “saw education facilities as a right guaranteed by treaty, by which the government authority had promised to preserve Indian life, values, and Indian government authority”. This did not happen as officials decided to use education for their purpose of assimilation (2002 p. 315). In 1920, Duncan Campbell Scott, deputy superintendent of the Indian department, again amended the Indian Act to strengthen compulsory school attendance to make sure that all Native children between the ages of seven and fifteen attended school. It was in 1920 that Scott told a House of Commons committee,

I want to get rid of the Indian problem. ...Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question. (Smith 1993 p.38)

Smith (1993) stated that the official national policy was *no more Indians* (emphasis mine). Missionary branches of various churches and the government teamed up to create residential schools where the children were taken to from the influence of their parents and communities. Although residential schools were not very effective in the assimilation process, neither were day schools. These facilities became agents of punishment and abuse where the children suffered mental, physical, emotional and spiritual violence for speaking their language. For the most part the student who left these schools was prepared neither for their own community participation nor for participation in the non-Native society. As Sinclair (2004) reiterates, “contact resulted in

colonial chaos for [A]boriginal people, the destruction of a relatively harmonious way of life.” Driedger (1980) uses a metaphor of a ‘sacred canopy’ to demonstrate the devastating impact of colonization. She points out that the ‘sacred canopy’ a place free from terrorists held up by four poles representing ideology, community, culture and land (p. 343) was nearly destroyed through the impact of colonialism. In her work, Stiffarm (1998) has also found that:

Aboriginal knowledge was invalidated by Western ways of knowing. This unconscious, subconscious and conscious means of invalidating Aboriginal knowledge served to perpetrate a superior / inferior relationship around knowledge and how this knowledge is passed on. Systemic racism was clearly perpetrated in this way (Stiffarm, 1998, p. xi).

Colonization has long played havoc with the Aboriginal people attempting to separate them from the traditional language, teachings, spirituality, land, family and community and the medicines. Kirkness (2002) asserts that:

We must ensure that every Aboriginal man, woman and child knows of their oppression. They must know how the oppressors “stole” their language and culture through schooling in residential schools and day schools, how the Indian Act has destroyed their identity, and how all this has contributed to the weakening of Our people and their communities: Only through knowing can the oppressed recognize the ideological distortions that influence and shape their understanding of social and political reality” (Freire, 1978).

She says, “The impact of years of brainwashing must be revealed and understood.” The oppressive measures continued until the late 1960s and early 1970s when there was another change in the relationship of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal people and thus began the fourth stage the relationship: Negotiation and Renewal. In order to work in the Negotiation and Renewal stage Smith (1999) cautions that we need to have an analysis of the colonization and our cultural past to decolonize our mind, heart, body and spirit. As Absolon & Willet (2004) state, “Without this critical knowledge, we are operating in a vacuum” (p.9). They also explain that, “Colonization of Aboriginal peoples could not have been perpetuated and maintained without the role of knowledge extraction and propagation of false consciousness.”

In working with Aboriginal literacy it is important to be aware of context. Henderson (2000) contends that if a context is artificial it does not allow one to move in their world and discover as much about themselves as they can. In the present study of “Aboriginal Literacy in Cultural Context: An Alternate Perspective” our methodology involved facilitating Sharing Circles which included both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In these circles we adhered to Aboriginal protocol; the Circles were conducted similar to the learning circle. Nabigon et al, (1998) used a “learning circle” in their research data collection as it is a process which enables information sharing, connections, and seeks balance and harmony. The circle was opened with a traditional offering of a tobacco tie to each participant. These circles also used the traditional way of teaching and learning through performed knowledge. A traditional smudge using sage, an Opening prayer, hand-drumming and singing were part of the performed knowledge of the opening ceremony. Each person had the opportunity to speak and to be listened to without interruption. Upon closing the Circle, gifts were offered to each participant and then there was a sharing of food. As Aboriginal people engaged in academic research, the research team sought to challenge the boundaries of formal academic research and re-validate traditional Aboriginal research methodologies throughout the research process. We provided a context that was more in keeping with the gathering that we are familiar with. Participants were also given the opportunity not to participate in the ceremony if they choose not to do so. Using the sharing circle allowed the participants to share their story pertaining to literacy.

In her study on Aboriginal research, Smith (1999) explains the necessity of reclaiming the authority of the oral tradition:

Every issue has been approached by indigenous peoples with a view of rewriting and reighting our position in history. Indigenous peoples want to tell our own stories, write our own versions in our own ways, for our own purposes. It is not simply about giving an oral account or a genealogical naming of the land and the events which raged over it, but a very powerful need to give testimony to and restore a spirit, to bring back into existence a world fragmented and dying ... (pp.28-29).

Aboriginal Peoples’ literacy and learning historically employs stories as a methodology, therefore if we are to understand Aboriginal literacy we must listen to Aboriginal Peoples as they

share their stories about what Aboriginal literacy means to them. Participant A in Edmonton explains:

That's how we do the teachings through storytelling and legends, and that was our way our kids learned; that was teaching. The right way and the wrong way you could learn through the legends for thousands of years. You didn't have to have degrees or anything. So we learned a whole lot about life through storytelling and legends and it's important that we still continue that process because, more so now, kids are having tremendous difficulties in school (Antone & Cordoba 2005).

Where does knowledge come from? Absolon and Willet (2004) contend that:

For the Western-minded thinker, knowledge exists in an ethereal realm outside of the self. In Western society, there are generally accepted rules of order, principles of accounting, teaching pedagogies, rules of law, medical treatments, etc., which one simply learns without necessarily making a personal connection to. Yet for Indigenous people, knowledge comes from within (Ermine, 1995); knowledge is being, living, and doing.

By adopting a wholistic approach to literacy we reflect Aboriginal knowledge. In exploring and articulating their own definitions, practitioners emphasized the overarching influence that literacy has on learner's lives: "Literacy is who we are," (Participant E, Yellowknife); "Literacy is life," (Participant A, Yellowknife); "To me literacy means everything. Everything is literacy. You learn from everything. Literacy is learning" (Participant C, Edmonton). In each of these responses the participants claimed literacy in a personal way.

At the beginning of this paper there was mention that the Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal people at contact began a life on Turtle Island in peace and friendship. There was a severe change in that relationship when the settler society developed an ideology of superiority and oppressed the Aboriginal people into poverty and dysfunction. Absolon & Willet (2004) describe the situation today. They say:

"the game has changed. We Indigenous people own our own knowledge. We make up the rules. We set our own goals. We know who we are and what we need

to do for our own sake. Aboriginal researchers are challenged with making transformative changes in research processes and practices.”

Former Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Jane Stewart, states in the Response to RCAP: Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan, "renewal-- our chance now in this generation to correct past wrongs and move forward in cooperative relationships once again." This is in keeping with Onondaga Chief Oren Lyons' (1994), address to the United Nations on December 10, 1992 when he stated that, "Even though you and I are in different boats- you in your boat and we in our canoe- we share the same river of life. What befalls me befalls you; and downstream, downstream in this river of life our children will pay for our ...lack of vision" (p35). He goes on to say "It is not too late. We still have options. We need the courage to change our values for the regeneration of families, the life that surrounds us. Given this opportunity, we can raise ourselves. We must join hands with the rest of creation and speak of common sense, responsibility, brotherhood and peace" (Lyons 1994).

In conclusion, both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal literacy practitioners had the opportunity to experience another way of collecting data. Both were given the same opportunity for input into how Aboriginal literacy could be made into more equitable space for Aboriginal learners. At times in the sharing circle a stone (grandfather) is passed around to signify whom has the time to share their story. Aboriginal Adult literacy practitioners have shared their thoughts. Now the stone (grandfather) is being passed to you, come in and join us in the circle, share your story, and together we can continue improving literacy for our coming generations. Ta neh tho ni yoh tu hak. (Let our words go to Creator).

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