“What is Native Literacy?”

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The historical pattern of education for Aboriginal people has been inundated with an educational system built on the goal of assimilation and designed for foreign economics. According to Imel (2001), Aboriginal adult education programs in the 1950’s were designed to improve English proficiency and provide vocational training. In more recent years, in resistance to such history, the goals of Aboriginal literacy programs are concerned with securing and revitalizing Aboriginal language and culture.

Aboriginal people have experienced great trauma in their educational journey, especially from the residential schools when children were removed from their homes, communities and nations and placed in a foreign environment with Eurocentric rules and expectations. The situation was not much better for the children who attended schools in their home community. These children were also exposed to the Eurocentric values of violence in the learning environment; many were strapped for speaking their own language. Therefore, factors such as healing, self-determination, and reclamation of identity, language, and cultures play a major role in the complex issue of Aboriginal literacy.

The Ontario Native Literacy Coalition states: “Native literacy is a tool which empowers the spirit of Native people… Native literacy fosters and promotes achievement and a sense of purpose, which are both central to self-determination” (George, ND: 6).

The authors for this paper examine Aboriginal literacy from various perspectives, focussing on factors impacting Aboriginal literacy in adult education practice.

Framing Aboriginal Literacy in a Culturally Appropriate Way

Dr. Eileen Antone

Historically the education of the Aboriginal people of Canada has been based on the governmental policy of assimilation. The assimilation process was implemented in both the residential and community day school systems. These systems were established to inculcate Aboriginal students with Euro western doctrine. The results of this situation was that Aboriginal people were not prepared with skills necessary to enter the mainstream workforce nor were they prepared with the skills necessary for life in the traditional Aboriginal community.

Ball (1996) quotes the 1992 National Anti-Poverty Organization:

"...Residential schools are gone now, but the legacy lives on among many Native people in the form of self-hatred, substance abuse and child abuse. The damage cannot be overstated. People lost their pride, their hope, and the chance to learn from the Elders. An entire generation of adults experienced the pain of losing their children to residential schools. Those who grew up in the schools often have frightful memories which may prevent them from getting involved today in their own [and their] children's schooling."

According to Scollon (ND) a new focus in literacy called ‘New Literacy Studies’ began in the late 70s and early 80s. This contemporary view indicates that there has been a paradigm
shift in the focus of “literacy as deficit or lack… to the many different ways that people engage with literacy, recognizing difference and diversity and challenging how these differences are valued with our society (Hamilton 2000).” Hamilton contends that when we move away from seeing literacy as simply a set of skills we can recognize that there are many different literacies and that people continue to develop new literacies all the time. As the New Literacy Studies developed in the non-Aboriginal society there were also changes taking place in various Aboriginal communities regarding literacy for Aboriginal learners.

Gaikzheyongai (2000:6) reports that in 1987 members of the Aboriginal community in Toronto began a literacy movement to improve the quality of education for their learners. They began to explore and build connections between Aboriginal literacy, healing, community development, and self-determination. Other Aboriginal groups have also been developing ways of incorporating traditional Aboriginal knowledge and methodologies into the learning situations of Aboriginal learners. First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) developed a Medicine Wheel Model of learning based on four stages: Awareness; Struggle; Building; and Preservation. This wholistic approach to learning centres on spiritual, emotional, mental and physical attributes.

In 1996 Pricilla George also developed a wholistic approach to literacy based on the Medicine Wheel. She called her wholistic theory the Rainbow Approach to Literacy. This approach incorporates the four stages of learning from the FNTI Medicine Wheel Model with the literacies of various colours. In this model red is the literacy of Aboriginal languages, orange-oral tradition, yellow-communication, green-multicultural multilingual society, blue-technology, indigo-”spiritual seeing” or intuition and violet-holistic base of Aboriginal literacy (spirit, heart, mind and body). These models developed by the Aboriginal scholars are raised up to combat the assimilation process that continues to be detrimental to Aboriginal societies.

This combative process involves a transformation from oppression to revitalization. Such transformation takes the form of revitalizing and sustaining Native spirituality, worldview, culture and literacy.

Transformation and Aboriginal Literacy

*Dr. Peter Gamlin*

Literacy is presented in the broadest sense in this paper. Being literate is about sustaining a particular worldview and about the survival of a distinct and vital culture. Being literate is about reymbolizing 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 you do.

The elders tell us that creativity is an intrinsic aspect of survival. Creativity leads to new thinking and new behavior. New thinking, new behavior and survival all follow from listening to traditional values and then finding ways to practice them. So we see that literacy begins with orality and the traditional values found in stories. When we follow these values, we are practicing Aboriginal ways in literacy and more generally, in every aspect of our lives.

In these words I am guided by Joe Couture (1987). Joe points out that: “Indian identity is redefined in terms of 20th-century conditions. And with this, fundamental traditional elements are re expressed and presented as fresh inspiration for a renewed action” (p.5).
In these words Joe is making a declaration for transformational practice and transformational attitudes. The key to creativity and transformational practice is found in taking a holistic perspective, which is a manifestation of traditional Aboriginal values. From Joe’s perspective and in his concluding statement he says: “It seems clear to me that a holistic philosophy and psychology of education rooted in traditional native values can improve the educational opportunities for native children.” (p.12)

Transformative Aboriginal literacy development is always about being creative (resymbolizing and reinterpreting past experience in our everyday activities), as we find ways to practice traditional values (presented as fresh inspiration for a renewed action).

Transformative Aboriginal literacy development is about listening to the elders who are experts on survival. “They will interpret for their own people the current meaning and direction of their history. It is the responsibility of younger generations to interpret and apply these directives as fundamental traditional elements ---and expressed and presented as fresh inspirations for a renewed action” (Couture, 1987, p.5).

When teachings are passed from the elders to the younger generations, literacy (orality) takes on the traditional form and is being lived out in contemporary society. Literacy is part of everyday lives of Native Peoples - reconnecting intergenerational ties and being infused into life long learning.

Aboriginal Literacy

Moneca Sinclair (Ed.D. Candidate)

Aboriginal literacy is more than reading, numeracy, and writing to gain access into mainstream employment. It is the beginning of life long process to affirm the worldview held by Aboriginal peoples and thus empowers the spirit of Aboriginal peoples. It is a tool that begins the process of critical thinking and the need to regain their languages. It is the understanding that their language holds the key to maintaining their culture. Aboriginal literacy is a tool that begins the process of self-achievement and sense of purpose.

Aboriginal people who attend literacy programs on reserve or rural/semi-urban areas are four times more likely to have learners who have been in residential school according to George, 2000. The focus in residential schools was the assimilation of Aboriginal students into mainstream society, rather than on academics. Thus many Aboriginal people did not have the basic skills of reading and writing. In fact many attendees of residential schools have painful memories of abuse (verbal, physical and sexual), that can be a severe block to learning and attaining/maintaining a good quality of life. Their experiences in residential school have turned them off institutions and/or Education as a whole according to George, 2000. Thus Aboriginal literacy is more than reading and writing it is a tool that gives Aboriginal peoples skills to live in a harmonious way within mainstream society of North America.

Part of the process of revitalizing Aboriginal literacy not only involves transformation from subjugation to empowerment but also reaching an harmonious relationship between Native and non-Native cultures, who live side by side and inter-act in reciprocal relationships. Culture, tradition, language and ways of knowing are all inter-connected in Aboriginal literacy and, as represented on the medicine wheel, these aspects become balanced in a person’s life when there is harmony.
Emerging approaches to literacy, as a relational way of learning, reflect historical Indigenous Ecologies for Learning or ‘ways of knowing’. Erdoes and Ortiz describe it as a “communal universe” (Erdoes and Ortiz 1984) and Cajete explains it in the traditional teaching “We are all related” which describes “mutual, reciprocal relationships between one’s social group and the natural world” (Cajete 1994). In these traditional Ecologies for Learning, teaching and learning are centered around common points of reference and changing perspectives dependent on the interplay between the abilities, propensities, circumstances and environments in which and with which we grow up. There are two basic human patterns for knowing, thinking and learning - Aural-Oral/Kinetic (AK) and Visual-Written/Kinetic (VK) - are distinct yet covalent and complementary ways of knowing. I use these terms here to avoid the stereotypical connotations of ‘oral’/‘written’ or ‘Indigenous’/‘Non-indigenous’ nomenclature.

AK is based on aural ways of knowing, VK on visual ways of knowing and both are kinetic for they involve living and moving in the world as a particular person (self), in a particular community (selves), circumstance (time) and environment (place). These different ways of knowing are cultures or Ecologies for Learning (Provost Turchetti 1998). The mainstream system of education in North America remains VK where there is a small international language component but no focus on Indigenous Ecologies for Learning.

AK thinkers follow a 'homonymic' principle by listening for similar sounds and then for differences between the sounds heard in relation to different objects. VK thinkers follow the equivalent 'synonymic' principle by looking for differences in objects and then for similarities between the objects in relation to other objects. Ways of knowing from Indigenous perspectives require a common point of reference between a knower and a known to be achieved. The common point is language and the context is culture. Written 'literacy' is a concretization of an ambiguous sound as a thought, a word, a tongue, and a language. Language, the source and foundation of all learned knowing is made up of many thousands of 'stories'.

Storying is the point of reference for the common Foundations of Relational Knowledge of AK Indigenous peoples. This way of knowing has to do with the making of Mythstories, individually and communally, and with placing those stories in relation with “the myth that there is, the myth that is there”. It has to do with creating a communal Mythographic Universe around a shared Mythographic Centre, the Mythstory of a beginning, an end, and the search for patterning and meaning embedded in the human instinct to Storying as a Mythographic Language (Provost Turchetti 2001). It has to do with learning in the process of “centering, decentering and recentering” as we encounter the Ecologies of other selves.

AK ‘sees’ existing as many aspects of being, while VK ‘sees’ existing as the aspect of ‘not-having’. Let us enquire into these things more deeply by adventuring into Mythstory. On the left, "A Circle of Elders", was taken in the Humber Valley, Toronto, Ontario in spring. On the right, a "Circle of Elders" was taken looking skyward through the tree-tops. We seem to be looking at the same trees, isolated as the treetops are from their contexts. This second photo was taken the previous winter in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. In Storying, balancing and harmonizing what is known is not enough; AK thinking requires us to discern the meaning of mythstories in cultural context in the many different cultures our paths transect. Though our Ecologies are similar, each one must continue to be distinct in its own way if it is to have mindful, embodied content for Indigenous ‘literacy’ occurs in the spatio-temporal dialectic between the unique and
the similar as the two become ‘familiar’. In overcoming the differences in personal and communal space-time, knowers re-cognize 'family' relationships.

Each knower encounters a different aspect of the trees yet there is a common theme. We may recover a sphere of reference by which, in which and through which we are all related. This is Archaeoliteracy, the ancestral Indigenous and Aboriginal way of storying our Ecologies for Learning. Accordingly, learning is equated with acknowledging unknowingness for certain things should not be . . . cannot be captured in words.

Conceptualizing Native literacy is in the same moment both unattainable (as it is an intangible) and necessary to try to articulate (as a tangible) in order to affirm and attain Indigenous ways of knowing in contemporary society. Stories and ways of being are the birth right to Aboriginal Peoples and must be returned to the People. Some ways of returning this right are through recognizing Native languages and striving for healthy and harmonious ways of being at an individual level and in the community.

Three aspects of Native Literacy: Recognition of Native languages, helping others through community based programs and maintaining healthy Native communities

Julian Robbins (Ph.D Candidate)

Initially Native Literacy was much more focused on allowing Native people to find gainful employment through improving their English reading and writing skills. However, over time, Native Literacy has evolved to directly include Native cultural components and language retention (Williams, 1989).

Language and culture are inseparable from the struggle to keep Native [sic] languages alive is to the struggle to keep Native[sic] cultures alive (Hutchinson, 2002). Enmeshed within the medium of Native languages are the cultural tools and teachings necessary to move Native [sic] people forward in a positive way. Native Literacy is a unique phenomenon and it should be recognized that government means of evaluation which concentrate on “literacy” without the inclusion of Native languages will likely fall short of meeting their objectives. The subtleties of language beyond the mere translation of words encompasses expressions of concepts, feelings and even body language. Native languages hold the potential of providing the bridge between the oral tradition and English literacy (Leavitt, 1995).

With regard to helping others, Native literacy is primarily about the people who use these services. There is a balance that needs to be arrived at between what a Native literacy practitioner can do to help a client and what the clients themselves feel is beneficial for them to learn (Akiwenzi-Damm and Halonen, 1997). At least partially, the students should be given individual time and attention so that they can learn at their own pace. There are many different possibilities with regard to how one learns. These needs seem to be addressed best with community based programs and research because Native culture is not a generic entity that can be fully accounted for by an “overall plan”.

Lastly, Native literacy is holistic. It is connected to many other aspects of the health and well-being of Native [sic] communities (Hill, 2001). Knowing the complex natures of natural forces and how they relate to one another is an important context for the expression of Indigenous knowledges. There is not the same separation between science, medicine, art, religion, philosophy etc. that exists in the Euro-centric view and this needs to be acknowledged. For example if a Native herbal remedy is “extracted” by a Western trained botanist out of context (e.g.: without the inclusion of ceremonies, chants, relationships) the same effect will not be achieved (Battiste, Henderson, 2000).
One of the objectives of Native literacy should be to create awareness that allows Native peoples to gain an understanding and perhaps even some knowledge of how to improve their employability skills through means which reinforce the use of their own Native culture and/or language. Thus, formal Euro-centric standards should be enmeshed with the way that a community decides to design their program.

Summary

Dr. Rhonda L. Paulsen

Literacy has been explained as being synonymous with culture, tradition, worldview, languages, and ways of knowing. In the perspective of Aboriginal Peoples, literacy is not restricted to the written word; the true meaning of literacy is not confined to the page. Rather, it is evident when one looks beyond the page and outside the limitations of words to see the holistic vision of ways of knowing and becoming in the life-long process of learning.

Slowly, non-Native people are realizing the concept of life-long learning being a process through which one takes the learning outside the walls of the school and into everyday life. Although Collins (in Scott, 1998) and Niemi (1998) find that while significant learning occurs beyond the school walls and is lifelong, the education system still promote an obsession with finishing. However, in the traditional Aboriginal perspective, learning is never finished, it is a treasured part of every-day living and a life-long process.

In traditional education, learning is passed down from generation to generation orally and through sharing experiences, thereby literacy becomes the active form of learning, evident in a person’s development of knowledge, their values, and way of being. This transformative process of learning and literacy continues through our life journey with no ending or “finish”. For example, one Ojibway elder explains the intergenerational connection in traditional education and the participatory and experiential components of learning for Medicine people. “You know when they’re born that that’s their role, their function in life. Medicine people nurture. You start teaching them at a young age what the different barks and plants will do for them. The white doctors go to school for 8 or 9 years, but our People go to school their whole lives for it. That’s traditional” (in Paulsen, 1998). Peltier, Director of Education for Aboriginal alternative schooling, describes how these components of traditional education “begin in the home, it is mostly observational. Young children look at adults and learn about things through observation and doing things with adults…there are some things in life you don’t need a lesson plan for” (Ibid.). It is these components of education and methodologies that can not be confined to an institutionalized system; it is these values that encompass Native literacy.

Battiste (1995) promotes the ideology of meanings and experiences as being connected to one’s thoughts and communicated through dialogue, or through what she refers to for her People, the Mi’kmaq, as “symbolic literacy”. Symbolic literacy is defined as a unity of consciousness that bonded the People together in epistemology and worldview. The written form of communication for the traditional Mi’kmaq took shape in pictographs, petroglyphs, and notched sticks, which recorded and described the social, political, cultural and spiritual needs of the society. Battiste maintains that in this way, symbolic literacy incorporated oral and written narratives, and created a sharing of common ideals and a collective cognitive experience.

The means through which people articulate the expression of their experience, in either written or oral form, is the place for literacy within the context of language and culture. Kirkness (1992) supports the need to maintain one’s language in order to secure the definition of one’s culture – for without it, the strength of a defined identity and community weakens.
Further, as Battiste (1995) cautions, when one culture’s form of literacy is forced upon another, it then becomes cultural and cognitive assimilation. Literacy in this framework, as we can see in contemporary mainstream society, becomes a constructed measurement tool by which one examines and analyzes the level at which another is educated and can read and write. Such a framework illustrates the positioning of Native Peoples in a dominant-to-oppressed social order when Aboriginal perspectives of literacy are not recognized or valued. This is the position that the People are moving out of and one of the principal means of doing so is through the revitalization of culture, tradition and language/literacy.

In multi-cultural and multi-lingual societies, there are representations of people from several cultures contributing their unique identities that are defined by worldview, values and language, into the public mosaic of the learning environment. Identity, culture, tradition, and worldview are factors that, for Aboriginal Peoples, permeate the use and form of language and literacy contributing to harmonious living within a pluralistic society. It is in this process of revitalization, life-long learning and engaging Aboriginal perspectives of literacy that the People are charting their own path for their own People.

Endnotes: Provost Turchetti

1. Elsewhere, I have done a detailed comparison of Aural-Oral/Kinetic and Visual-Written/Kinetic patterns for learning. These are not ‘learning styles’ which implies that they are inherent or bounded by genetics but rather ‘learned styles’ for thinking and knowing.
2. Piaget points out that a child’s knowledge of the world begins with movement (see references).
3. ‘Storying’ is an active noun, or gerund, like as ‘story’ is a passive noun form. Storying through AK patterns for learning, though found primarily amongst Indigenous and Aboriginal peoples, are also found in other communities of knowers who acknowledge the certainty of unknowing and of the unknown. There are also Indigenous peoples who think in VK ways.

References


