

Re-Storying Aboriginal Adult Literacy: A Wholistic Approach

Eileen Antone
Tania Córdoba

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

Abstract

This paper is based on a collaborative, empirical research project that seeks to contribute to learning in the field of learner-centred literacy by articulating what literacy means to Aboriginal Peoples across Canada. This study develops and broadens the field of Aboriginal literacy and it also emphasizes the necessary inclusion and acknowledgement of Aboriginal Adult literacy as a distinct philosophy for learning.

...Culturally appropriate and sociologically relevant teaching and healing models must evolve and translate into practice and service delivery that will meet the needs of future generations. (Sinclair 2004)

Introduction

It is important to develop and broaden the field of Aboriginal literacy and in doing so, it is essential to emphasize the inclusion and acknowledgement of Aboriginal Adult literacy as a distinct philosophy for learning. Without this acknowledgement Aboriginal peoples will continue to be considered as second-rate citizens in a two-tiered system that couches Aboriginal literacy in stereotypical terms that do not value nor have a clear understanding of Aboriginal approaches to and expressions of literacy (Antone et al 2003). Acknowledging and owning this 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.

This paper will begin with a brief historical overview of the relationship of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people that resulted in the devaluing of Aboriginal knowledge through the educational systems. It will then illustrate how the research design fosters the extension of Aboriginal principles of inclusion, reciprocity and mutuality. It depends on collaborative cooperation and the sharing of information, experience and expertise by researchers, community organizations, institutions of higher learning, Aboriginal Elders, Aboriginal literacy and cultural practitioners as well as non-Aboriginal practitioners who are involved in literacy work with Aboriginal people. As such, this project provides for the fertilization of knowledge across disciplinary and cultural boundaries between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities.

Historical relationship of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people

The Canadian Education Association (2004) Policy Brief stated that Aboriginal people in Canada are one of the groups most vulnerable to low literacy. How did Aboriginal people reach this state?

According to the RCAP (1996) the relationship between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples progressed through four stages of development: Stage 1, Separate Worlds; Stage 2, Contact and Coexistence; Stage 3, Dysfunction and Assimilation; and Stage 4, Negotiation and Renewal. This relationship started in separate worlds. In these separate worlds, the non-Aboriginal peoples (Europeans) and the Aboriginal peoples each had their own way of life and governed their societies according to their laws (Dockstator, 1993). Eventually the Europeans began to arrive on the shore of Turtle Island (North America) and enlisted the assistance of the Aboriginal people to help them survive. In early contact, peace and friendship treaties enabled the people from the two different societies to coexist on this land (Alfred, 1995) based on respect for the cultural and political autonomy of each society (185). An early treaty of peace and friendship was the Kahswentha (Two Row Wampum) created in 1612 by the Mohawk and the Dutch (RCAP, 1996) and was used again two years later with the English (RCAP, 1996). These kinds of Nation-to-Nation treaties allowed the people to come together in fur trade and military alliances supplying each other with the needed commodity to accommodate their new way of life.

The Royal Proclamation of 1763 marked a dramatic change that would take place in this relationship. This was the beginning of the Dysfunction and Assimilation stage of the relationship. The Royal Proclamation came into existence, when land became a key issue between them. This proclamation documented the fine line between safeguarding the rights of Aboriginal peoples and establishing a process to permit British settlement (Highlights from the RCAP 1996 p.7 of 14). Although the Confederation of 1867 would allow for power sharing among diverse peoples and governments the first confederal understanding was with the Aboriginal peoples (Highlights, 1996 p.7 of 14).

Between the 1763, Royal Proclamation and the 1867 Confederation the settler population increased considerably thereby enabling four major modifying conditions to happen that allowed the European people to assume domination over the original inhabitants. By the 1812-14 USA-British war, the Aboriginal population decimated by disease and poverty became outnumbered ten to one by the new settlers. A new economy developed based on land resources such as timber, minerals and agriculture, and replaced the need for fur trade alliances making the Aboriginal peoples 'impediments to progress' (RCAP 1996). Because the wars were over, the Aboriginal people lost their position as military allies. Moreover, the fourth transforming condition was the developing ideology that Europeans were superior over all other peoples of the world. According to RCAP (1996), this superior attitude provided a rationale for policies of domination and assimilation.

Doctrine of Assimilation

Four dehumanizing ideas about Aboriginal people and their cultures stemming from Eurocentric ideology are:

- * That Aboriginal people were inferior peoples that they were unable to govern themselves and that colonial and Canadian authorities knew best how to protect their interests and well-being
- * That the special relationship of respect and sharing enshrined in the treaties was an historical anomaly with no more force or meaning
- * That wardship was appropriate for Aboriginal peoples, so that actions deemed for their benefit could be taken without their consent or their involvement in design or implementation
- * That European ideas about progress and development were self-evident correct and imposed on Aboriginal people without reference to any other values and opinions – let alone rights - they might possess. (Highlights from RCAP, 1996).

Based on the Doctrine of Assimilation principles, the Indian Act of 1876 became the most oppressive document used to control the Aboriginal people (Dickason, 1993; Antone 1997). Under the Indian Act, the federal government assumed complete control of Aboriginal children and their schooling (Antone, 2003). Marie Battiste, a Mi'kmaq educator, describes the objectives and outcomes of formal education for the Aboriginal peoples:

For a century or more, the DIAND [Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development] attempted to destroy the diversity of Aboriginal world-views, cultures, and languages. It defined education as transforming the mind of Aboriginal youth rather than educating it. Through ill-conceived government policies and plans, Aboriginal youths were subjected to a combination of powerful but profoundly distracting forces of cognitive imperialism and colonization. Various boarding schools, industrial schools, day schools, and Eurocentric educational practices ignored or rejected the world-views, languages and values of Aboriginal parents in the education of their children. The outcome was the gradual loss of these world-views, languages, and cultures and the creation of widespread social and psychological upheaval in Aboriginal communities (Battiste, 1995).

The consequence of this formal education and mind transformation had a crushing effect on Native communities. There was an abandoning of Aboriginal languages, Aboriginal family values, Aboriginal connections to the earth such as medicines, hunting, fishing and spiritual teachings (Antone, 2003). These oppressive measures continued until the late 1960s and early 1970s when there was another change in the relationship and thus began the stage of Negotiation and Renewal. The Aboriginal principles of inclusion, reciprocity and mutuality are the basis of the foundation of the research concerning Aboriginal adult literacy in this paper.

Collaborative Cooperation and the Sharing of Information

The research team for this study organized three Learning Circles with Aboriginal literacy practitioners including Elders and Teachers, Artist-Educators and those who teach literacy skills using different approaches from across Canada. In facilitating these Circles, we adhered to Aboriginal protocol; the Circles were conducted in a manner similar to a Sharing Circle. We opened in a traditional manner offering each participant a tobacco tie. Then we had a traditional smudge, an Opening prayer, hand-drumming and singing. 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 we shared 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. The Learning Circles were conducted in the Spring and Fall of 2003. We had 12 participants in Toronto, Ontario, 6 participants in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories and 8 participants in Edmonton, Alberta; as much as possible, we tried to include people from outside of these major cities. We asked participants to explore and articulate their practice of literacy and to share their experiences in literacy with and for Aboriginal people. The findings that we have collected to-date provide an introductory glimpse of current thoughts, difficulties and aspirations of Aboriginal literacy practitioners and emphasize the importance of embracing a wholistic approach to literacy for Aboriginal people, while encouraging continuing dialogue and research. This section will focus on re-storing and restoring Aboriginal cultural literacy as articulated by the Aboriginal literacy practitioners who participated in the Learning Circles. As a result of requests for anonymity, the participants will be referred to by letters A, B, C, etc. along with the location of the Learning Circle.

The history of colonialism has caused a disruption in the transmission of Aboriginal knowledge within our communities. The effects of residential school, adoption out of our communities, the loss of language, culture and tradition, all continue to have long-lasting effects on our Aboriginal communities. Participant F in Edmonton explains, "I think it all stems back to the parents and the families that were taken away, and you are dealing now with a generation of people that don't know how to parent." Historically Aboriginal literacy learning and philosophies for life (Participant G, Edmonton) were preserved and passed along through oral tradition, kept in the memories of the Elders of each community. Nowadays, television, video games and the computer often replace human interaction, resulting in the loss of intergenerational learning. Formal eurocentric colonial systems of education have resulted in the loss of respect for Aboriginal traditions and languages, and the loss of respect for our Elders. At the same time, Elders in our communities are trying to rediscover their roles within our communities. They have had different and varied experiences in our contemporary context due to the historical disruption in our ways of learning. One Elder participant explains "I feel very unprepared to be an Elder. I don't think I've had that kind of experience that Elders have, I've not had that experience of living off of the land...I have not spoken my language in a very long time," (Participant A, Yellowknife). When we

recognize these experiences as strengths, we value Aboriginal competencies and acknowledge our distinct identities and histories as Aboriginal people.

All of the Aboriginal practitioners spoke about the importance of finding viable and culturally appropriate approaches to literacy. Participant B in Yellowknife explains, “It is sad when the very characteristics of our race that we have been brought up with, are not respected in an educational setting.” In Edmonton, Participant E asserts, “We are still not having [Aboriginal] people succeed in the mainstream education system; that’s still not happening, the numbers have not changed so something is not right.” Literacy and language reflect worldview and as such, narrowly defined notions of literacy elevate certain competencies and while undervaluing others, resulting in feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem for the learner (Participant D, Edmonton). When we develop our own methods of measuring literacy as Aboriginal people, we reframe, re-story and revalidate learning and education within our own cultures and epistemology. In regards to environmental damage and the responsibilities that we have, and that are fundamental to Aboriginal identity, Participant A in Edmonton explains, “If we had literacy skills to be the keepers that traditionally we were, First Nations people wouldn’t have allowed any of that to happen.” This comment highlights the unique outlook that Aboriginal Peoples have in regards to literacy skills, and the connections or lack thereof between valued competencies in mainstream society and traditional epistemology. All Aboriginal participants in the Learning Circles insisted that Aboriginal languages, culture and tradition need to be forefront in literacy learning for Aboriginal people.

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). Emotional, physical, psychological and spiritual well-being all influence and are influenced by literacy learning (Participant E, Yellowknife). Participant A in Edmonton does some work in correctional institutions and she explains, “I suspect the reason why they are in difficulty is because of illiteracy, because it also effects your emotion, your intellect, being able to function and all of that.”

Learning is a life-long process and as Aboriginal people we have many sources for knowledge as well as many ways of teaching and learning. Storytelling is one 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 though 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.

Another traditional way of learning is through observation and performed knowledge; expectations of each community member were traditionally clearly laid out. Participant B in Yellowknife explains that when her family went hunting for seal or caribou different family members had different roles. The roles that members assumed did not require a great amount of discussion or planning but everyone had a specific task or contribution to fulfill. Dreams also traditionally provide a source of knowledge. Participant A in Yellowknife explains, "It's your dreams sometimes that come to expand your learning." These alternate ways of learning, living and being continue to be undervalued in mainstream Adult education. When we use traditional methods of teaching and learning by and for Aboriginal people, literacy can nurture a positive identity, and can provide us with connections to the land, our families, our communities, our languages and our ancestors. (Participant A, Yellowknife); "[Aboriginal literacy] empowers people, gives them a quality of life," (Participant D, Edmonton).

This research project has enabled us to speak with Aboriginal literacy practitioners about Aboriginal literacy by and for Aboriginal people. Re-storying Aboriginal Adult literacy encourages a wholistic approach to literacy and learning and embraces learning for life through body, mind, heart and spirit. The methodology for this research project sought to approach the research process in ways that reflect the principles of Aboriginal protocols and philosophy for literacy learning. The discussions reflect the reclamation and relocation of Aboriginal space, place and time throughout the present 'knowledge economy,' both in institutions of higher learning and in the popular education context, while demonstrating the knowledge and strength of Aboriginal approaches to Adult Education. These findings are in correlation with the previous study of Aboriginal literacy at a provincial level in Ontario, and have encouraged us to further analyze and discuss Aboriginal Adult literacy as a distinct philosophy for learning.

"Re-Storying Aboriginal Adult Literacy: A Wholistic Approach" suggests viable and culturally-appropriate approaches to Aboriginal literacy. It reflects the reclamation and relocation of Aboriginal space, place and time throughout the present 'knowledge economy,' both in institutions of higher learning and in the popular education context. This research project empowers Aboriginal Peoples to recover and reclaim their distinct cultural identities while offering the opportunity to demonstrate to other Canadians, the knowledge and strength of Aboriginal approaches to Adult Education.

References

- Alfred, G. R. (1995). *Heeding the Voices of Ancestors*. Don Mills: Oxford University Press.
- Antone, E. M. (2003) The Changing Face of Aboriginal Education in Rural and Northern Canada. *Education Canada*. 43(3), 25-27, 31.

L'Association Canadienne pour l'Étude de l'Éducation des Adultes (ACÉÉA)
Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE)
2005 National Conference On-Line Proceedings
University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario
May 28 to May 31

- Antone, E, Gamlin, P. and Provost- Turchetti, L. (2003). Literacy and Learning: Acknowledging Aboriginal Holistic Approaches to learning in Relation to 'Best Practices' literacy Training Programs Final Report. Toronto: Literacy and Learning.
- Antone, E. M., (1997). In Search of Voice: A Collaborative Investigation on Learning Experiences of all Onyota'a:ka. Unpublished Thesis, University of Toronto.
- Battiste, M. (1995). Introduction. In Marie Battiste and Jean Barman (Eds.) *First Nations Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Canadian Education Association (2004). *Policy Brief, The Promise and Problem of Literacy for Canada: An Agenda for Action*. Toronto: Canadian Education Association.
- Dickason, O.P. (1992) *Canada's First Nations: A history of founding peoples from earliest times*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc.
- Dockstator, M.S. (1993). *Towards an understanding of Aboriginal self-government: A proposed theoretical model and illustrative factual analysis*. Unpublished Thesis, North York: York University.
- Sinclair, R. (2004). Aboriginal social work education in Canada: Decolonizing pedagogy for the Seventh Generation. *First Peoples Child & Family Review Vol.1, No. 1 pp.49-61*.
- Canada (1996). *Highlights from the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*. Hull: Canada Communications Group-Publishing.