

# WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

## Indigenous Pedagogy **Aboriginal Pedagogy**

Excerpt from *Peoples and Cultural Change*

*Teacher Resource*

Government of Alberta ■



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## **ABORIGINAL PEDAGOGY**

### **Students already know.**

Your role as a teacher is to help your students discover their knowing by guiding them, helping to remove barriers from their paths, and helping them to realize what they know and the skills they have. This teacher resource views the teacher as a facilitator for student learning.

The textbook *Contemporary Issues* presents important understandings and reaches for the spirit

— the heart — of each topic. As you approach the task of exploring the material in the text with your students, realize that the stories, examples, quotations from Elders, and other pieces of information included in the text have only skimmed the surface of all that is Aboriginal tradition, philosophy, experience, and reality. Often a story or quotation about one issue is presented as an illustration that can apply to other situations. It is the underlying meanings and the various perspectives on the issues under study that you need to strive to understand. Impart to students an understanding of how perspectives on issues relate to what is sacred to each community, and the traditions and natural laws that form the heart of each culture. The Elders have the wisdom and experience to present background knowledge to the contemporary issues being studied.

There are many outward manifestations of elements that have deep cultural meanings. Worldviews grow out of those traditions and affect how people perceive and react to events. Elders and spokespersons have worked tirelessly over the years to reestablish the rights of self-determination and self-governance to their peoples. What are the underlying cultural values and beliefs that have supported them as they continued to deal with layers of government and institutions that often stood in the way of them achieving their goals?

Through discussion and exploration and calling upon resources available, you and your class will discover deeper understandings of Aboriginal history and culture as it is alive today and how it relates to current issues of Indigenous peoples in Canada and around the world.

Whether you have a class made up mainly of First Nations, Métis, or Inuit students, or one made up mainly of non-Aboriginal students, strive to teach this course with awareness and sensitivity to the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit worldviews, traditions, and ways of thinking, and to their experiences of transition and change since European contact. Strive to impart an understanding of the perspectives present in the text.

Perhaps the most important understanding is that spirituality continues to play a large role in the lives of many Aboriginal people and communities. Spirituality can form the basis of views on interactions and relationships with the world — with other people, with animals, with plants, with all of creation. From traditional spirituality arises all the protocols and ideas of reciprocity. Spirituality reaches through all of the following themes and concepts.





- **Teaching and learning must be seen as a holistic experience.**

Western philosophy favours linear and analytical thinking. Most of your students, immersed in the mainstream society, are probably most comfortable learning in this way. Traditional First Nations and Inuit perspectives, however, present holistic views. This brings up many considerations for the classroom. You need to know your students to understand the ways in which they function most effectively.

Teach the whole child, addressing all aspects of the person's being.

Use visual representations in addition to the verbal and written, and always look for connections in the material. Go beyond the mental thinking aspects of a learning task. Relate to experiences and emotions. Make the task have physical, active dimensions when possible. Keep the spiritual dimension present.

- **All things, living and non-living, are interconnected.**

Traditional First Nation and Inuit worldviews, also followed by many Métis and non-Aboriginal people, hold that absolutely everything in the world is interrelated. The actions of any one person affect all other things; therefore consideration of your actions must always be present. Balance in relationships must be maintained. Recognition of the importance of relationships must be present in instruction.

The student's relations with his or her family and community should be enhanced through the study of *Contemporary Issues*. Work to keep the family and community involved in all aspects of the student's education. They can contribute important insights and perspectives on current issues.

The material here offers many opportunities to strengthen important ties between students and Elders and other givers of knowledge. Whenever possible, these wise keepers of knowledge should be invited to the classroom to bring the reality of Aboriginal traditions and perspectives to the students. There are also opportunities in some activities for students to go out into the Aboriginal community. Important rules of protocol and reciprocity must be understood and used when inviting Elders and others to share their knowledge with the class; refer to the appropriate backgrounders in Appendix A. Become aware of the traditions and rules within the communities. Classroom strategies also should take into account ideas of interconnectedness. Create a community of trust and acceptance within your classroom. Facilitate the building of connections among all the individuals. Use tasks that foster cooperation and sharing. Collaborative efforts are more in keeping with traditional thinking than are individual competitive tasks.

- **Foster connections to the community and the land.**

Connections to the community and to the land remain important. Work to instill within each student a feeling of belonging and connection to the class, the community, and, in the larger picture, to the land. Students developing sacred relationships with nature, the land, community, classmates, and family will feel supported and understand their identities more fully.

In the classroom, create a sense of welcoming and caring. Invite the family and community into the classroom and devise ways to get the students out into the community doing meaningful tasks.



Help students recognize the flows of natural cycles on the land and in nature. Celebrate the seasons. Examine the circles in the lives of plants and animals, such as the greening-up of plants and trees, the ripening of berries, the migrations of birds, the hibernation of bears. Recognize the birth-life-death cycles that students experience within their families and communities.

Focus on the meaningful connections in students' lives. Recognize that for the student, family and community connections may at times be more important than the classroom.

- **The world is dynamic and everchanging.**

Despite its ordered rules and balance, the world and everything in it are always changing. Help students develop mechanisms to deal with change in their lives. There is power when students feel they are supported by the group, where they can work together to complete tasks and overcome challenges.

In the classroom, use activities that explore multiple perspectives through dialogue and collaboration. Show relationships among concepts, not as "right or wrong," but as equally valid and "this and that."

- **Use oral tradition and consensus decision making.**

Oral tradition has an important role to play in the classroom. Learning orally is personal; there is a relationship that is created between the speaker and the listener. Oral learning engages the student in the here and now.

Listen to the words of Elder Jim Kanapotatao, from Onion Lake, Saskatchewan, as related by Wally Isbisterk as Isbisterk was planning to record a discussion:

*Grandchild, you should have more confidence in the faculties and senses bestowed upon you by the Creator. The mind, eyes, and ears, when used to capacity, facilitate the learning process. Machine learning, on the other hand, dulls our capacity to learn and takes away the essence of the moment. This very moment is crucial; therein lies the truth. Truth is yesterday's problem and tomorrow's lie. Learn, then, my grandchild, by use of your faculties and senses, and you will discover the beauty and essence of the moment.*

— from *As We See . . . Aboriginal Pedagogy*, edited by Lenore A. Stiffarm, 1998, University Extension Press, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, p. 36

The classroom should provide the opportunity for oral work whenever possible. This is the traditional way. Tell and read stories and present much of the text orally. Have students read pieces aloud. Make room for oral discussion. Have talking circles. Use peer mentors. Allow for pairs or group work where students can discuss and share ideas and reach consensus. Be aware, though, that many students will also be comfortable using linear thinking and learning through reading and writing tasks.

Recognize traditional First Nations discussion patterns. Some students may leave a much longer gap before responding, so allow for this wait time. They may also be less aggressive than other students in providing answers within a group setting. Consider this if assessing participation. Recognize each student's individual ways of receiving and expressing information.

Listen to your students. Develop classroom rules through consensus. Ask students which



of the topics they are interested in. Ask them how they learn best. Develop learning agreements through discussion. Involvement is key.

- **Assessment may require different approaches.**

In traditional First Nation and Inuit cultures, and in Métis families following traditional ways, students learned within the family and kinship unit by observing, practising, and mastering a skill. Give students a chance to practise and improve their performance. Providing sample tasks and practice runs helps.

Emphasize content and performance rather than timing. Varying student situations might affect the ability to get assignments in on time. Use time limits when they are appropriate to the task.

Allow for expressive outputs in a variety of ways. As much as possible, use authentic performance tasks.

Through consensus, develop study plans and learning agreements. Be as clear and open about assessment criteria as possible. Facilitate this by using tools such as rubrics.

### **Summing Up**

If you approach the students and the ideas in the textbook with respect and dignity and an awareness of key cultural understandings, you and your students should meet with success.