

WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

FNMI Worldviews Protocols

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

Teacher Resource

Government of Alberta ■





PROTOCOLS

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives Teacher Resource*

PROTOCOLS

Protocols are codes of etiquette that describe appropriate and respectful behaviour and ways of communicating when working with or visiting Aboriginal communities. Using proper protocols means following the customs of the people or community you are working with. Understanding and following protocols can bring about meaningful relationships that are relevant to those involved.

Each Aboriginal community has its own protocols. Protocols can change in a community without notification, for example when a new chief and council are elected. Protocols also change depending on whether the situation is informal or formal.

Why do protocols exist?

Protocols exist to

- build trusting, honest relationships
- show respect for Aboriginal culture, values, and beliefs
- allow others to speak in the voice and style of their cultural group
- create balance in the consultation and negotiation process
- open people's minds to different attitudes
- improve relationships with Aboriginal communities.

Examples of protocols

Some examples of protocols are

- giving tobacco, blankets, or gifts to an Elder when seeking knowledge or counsel
- contacting the council and explaining your intentions before visiting an Aboriginal community
- opening or closing a meeting with a prayer

Understanding protocols

When working with an Aboriginal community, it is important to understand what is valued by the people who live there.

Protocols reflect Aboriginal beliefs and values, such as the following.

Respect	Get to know community members and understand and honour their protocols, expectations, and unique qualities without stereotyping.
Diversity	Recognize that there are similarities and differences related to languages, culture and traditions within and between Aboriginal communities.
Oral Traditions	Be aware that personal contact and dialogue are extremely important.
Time	Remember that it takes time to learn about Aboriginal communities and their members.
History	Understand that Western cultures have played a role in shaping Aboriginal communities in the past and present
Family	Understand that family, extended family, and community obligations have a higher priority than business and other concerns.

ARRANGING A VISIT TO AN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY

When arranging to visit an Aboriginal community, follow these guidelines:

- Find someone who can guide you, such as an Aboriginal liaison worker, cultural advisor, or another member of the community. Consider whether you will be covering topics that are gender-specific during your visit. If so, choose a female guide for female topics and a male guide for male topics.
- If you do not know anyone who can help, go to the Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Affairs Canada (AANDC) website, www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca, for community profiles. Scan the community profile for the name of an organization that has a successful working relationship with the community, and contact them for advice and information about the community dynamics.
- Educate yourself on the structure, history, protocols, values and beliefs of the Aboriginal community you will be visiting. Fill out the organizer below. Your guide should be able to provide much of the information you need.
- Ask your guide to make arrangements for your visit to the community. Be prepared to share personal background information about yourself and the purpose of your visit.
- After several days, if you are still waiting to hear about your visit, phone the Aboriginal liaison worker to see how the arrangements are going. Be patient and as flexible as possible. Allow time for a response.
- If more time passes and you have not heard back, follow up with a letter to the chief and council.



- If more time passes and you have not heard back, contact the local governing body by phone to explain your needs. Discuss what you would like to do on your visit and get direction on how to proceed.

VISITING AN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY

While on your visit to the community, you may have an opportunity to visit with an Elder. When visiting with an Elder, be sure to treat him or her with respect and patience. Here are some basic ideas to keep in mind.

- Speak carefully, and use language that is respectful of the beliefs and values of the person you are speaking to.
- Be prepared to visit with many different Elders.
- Different community members may have different cultural values and beliefs.

VISIT ORGANIZER

Purpose of my visit

Name of my guide/advisor and his or her role in the community

People I will visit

1. _____
What I know about his or her beliefs, values, and protocol

2. _____
What I know about his or her beliefs, values, and protocol

3. _____
What I know about his or her beliefs, values, and protocol

4. _____
What I know about his or her beliefs, values, and protocol

Other things I should keep in mind during my visit



PROTOCOL WITH ELDERS

Elders are the spiritual librarians of their communities and the keepers and teachers of oral tradition and traditional cultural knowledge. They keep and share knowledge of traditional ceremonies, stories, and teachings from centuries past. Elders can be men or women of any age, but often they are older members of the community, individuals who are recognized as having spiritual and cultural wisdom.

Elders are considered vital to the survival of Aboriginal cultures. The transmission of cultural knowledge is an essential part of the preservation and promotion of cultural traditions and their protocols. Elders are always to be treated with great respect. It is an honour to have an Elder visit your classroom.

Protocol

Many Aboriginal people believe that in order for the balance of all living things to continue, proper protocols must be followed. Protocol is a traditional set of rules or etiquette that helps maintain harmony and respect between individuals. Protocols ensure that ceremonies will be remembered from generation to generation and that the values of the culture will be upheld through time.

Before making any requests or attempting to communicate with Elders, familiarize yourself with proper and respectful protocol. Protocol always ensures that the Elder and his or her knowledge are shown respect. While similarities exist among First Nations, Métis, and Inuit groups, traditions vary from community to community. Not all Métis or Dene Elders, for example, would customarily be given a gift of tobacco, but in the Cree and Blackfoot cultures, that is a common form of invitation. Tobacco is also not part of protocol in the Inuit culture. In Inuvialuit customs, if an Elder is asked to say a prayer at a conference, nothing is given, but if an Elder is requested to attend the conference, usually he or she is given an honorarium. If travel is involved, all related costs are covered and a per diem allowance may be provided. With Elders from a Christian background, a gift of tobacco would not be appropriate. An Elder will not ask for payment or state an amount, but often an honorarium is the most appropriate gift.

Always ascertain the proper protocol before issuing an invitation. Demonstrate respect for teachings and traditions. Provide places of honour at school events. Know and respect that certain information, such as teachings about spiritual ceremonies, is considered private and will not be shared outside the community.

The Roles of Elders

The roles of Elders vary greatly from community to community, as do the protocols and traditions they teach. Elders can be spiritual guides, healers, medicine men and women, artists, seers, and councillors. Many Elders today are involved in community-owned business enterprises and economic development operations.

Elders often perform such services as

- saying prayers before meetings
- describing or performing traditional ceremonies
- sharing traditional knowledge
- giving spiritual advice to individuals



- demonstrating traditional crafts and practices
- teaching the community's protocols.

The wisdom of the Elders can be generally divided into two types: spiritual advice and traditional knowledge. According to Elders' teachings, spiritual advice is the teaching of prayers to the Creator for personal well-being or ceremonial activities. Traditional knowledge has to do with knowing how to live in a way that is respectful to Mother Earth.

Some Elders may subscribe to Christian beliefs rather than traditional spirituality, or to a combination of the two.

Requesting the Help of an Elder

When requesting the help of an Elder, follow these guidelines or the advice of someone in your community who works with the Elders.

- Ask an Aboriginal community leader who works with the Elders or an experienced fellow teacher which Elder would be best suited for your request. For example, depending on your area of study, you might wish to speak to an Elder who has specific knowledge of a ceremony or the history of the community or a traditional skill.
- With the help of the Aboriginal community leader and the permission of the governing body — perhaps a chief, band council, school authority or school board, settlement council, or friendship centre — arrange to meet with the Elder. To develop a trusting relationship, one or more home visits should be arranged with the Elder before making your request.
- Prior to your visit, find out if an offering of tobacco is appropriate or required. In many First Nations communities, tobacco is a traditional and sacred plant that is often offered before a consultation with an Elder. When offering tobacco, your mind must be clear, open, and honest.
- When the Elder indicates that he or she is ready and introductions have been made, state your request in a respectful way. For example:
"We would be honoured if you would speak to the Creator for us and. . . ."
(Specify what you hope for from the prayers; for example, "We would like to have a good meeting for the benefit of all schoolchildren.")
"I would be honoured to benefit from your advice and guidance."
"We would be honoured if you would visit our class to share your knowledge on. . . ."
 It is important that the Elder understand what kind of guidance you are requesting: spiritual advice or traditional knowledge.
- If the Elder accepts the tobacco, he or she is accepting your invitation or request. The tobacco is then offered to the Creator during a prayer for life and good health.
- If the Elder declines the tobacco, he or she is declining your invitation or request. The Elder may have prior commitments or be unable to help you. If he or she does not have the information you are requesting, usually you will be referred to another person who does know. Ask your community leader for clarification.

**Gift-giving**

Honorariums and gift-giving are honoured traditions founded on the principle of reciprocity: when you take, something must be given in return. Once the Elder has fulfilled your request, an honorarium and or a gift should be given to express your gratitude and appreciation. The Aboriginal community leader or guide will be able to give you some ideas on what is appropriate.

Hosting an Elder in the Classroom

When hosting an Elder in your classroom, follow these guidelines.

- Have an Aboriginal leader who works with Elders assist you in approaching an Elder and making your request. See above “Requesting the Help of an Elder.”
- Prepare the students for the visit by reviewing good listening practices and discussing suitable manners. Behaviour expectations include the usual, such as demonstrating respect and not asking inappropriate questions, but also culturally specific actions, such as not passing in front of where the Elder is sitting. In some more traditional communities, avoiding eye contact with the Elder shows respect. Again, expectations and traditions vary, so find out what is appropriate in your situation.
- Ensure students are aware that they should not touch or handle without permission any items that the Elder might bring to the school, especially sacred objects associated with ceremonies, such as a drum.
- Explain to students the importance of the role of Elders in the community and the value of their knowledge.
- Invite the Elder to meet informally with students and staff before he or she visits the class, so that the Elder can become familiar with and comfortable in the school environment.
- While the Elder is visiting the class, remember to
 - ensure that students listen politely and are helpful and welcoming
 - have one student show the Elder around the classroom and the sitting area, and where to find the washroom
 - have breaks during which the Elder can relax in another room (if the visit is long)
 - supervise students’ interaction with the Elder to ensure that he or she is treated with respect and courtesy
 - provide a light lunch or snack for the Elder, such as tea with bannock and jam
 - at the end of the visit, thank the Elder formally. A handshake is appropriate in some but not all circumstances.
 - have the students express their appreciation. Present a gift, such as a blanket, towel set, or slippers and socks, and encourage students to present a class gift, such as a food basket containing preserves, cheese crackers, fruit, bannock, and cans of soup.



Tobacco and Print

In many Cree nations, Elders are traditionally given gifts of tobacco (usually a package of pipe tobacco) and print (flag) — a cotton broadcloth material of two metres in length. The traditional colours of a print are white, yellow, red, blue and green. Be aware of the significance of the colours and the preferences of the Elder, and choose accordingly.

The practice of offering tobacco in exchange for stories and information goes back hundreds of years. Whether the Elder smokes is irrelevant. Respect that in First Nations cultures, tobacco is traditionally a sacred plant. For many First Nations cultures, tobacco represents honesty that is carried in one’s heart when words are spoken between people. Elders use the tobacco as an offering in seeking guidance from the spirit world. The pipe is the sacred way to pray for good things in spirit and respect, honesty, getting along with people, and all things positive.

A young person approaching an Elder for cultural information or for prayers might say something similar to “I am giving you a smoke for your pipe, and I [make specific request], Speak for us.”

However, though the offering of tobacco is a longstanding cultural protocol, the practice may not be appropriate with all Elders today. Attempt to determine this before any interactions. In decisions for or against offering tobacco, be guided by the Elder’s preference rather than your own cultural or personal beliefs.

RECIPROCITY

Reciprocity • a state or relationship in which there is mutual action, influence, giving and taking, correspondence, etc., between two parties

—*Oxford English Dictionary*

What we do to everything, we do to ourselves.

—Black Elk

Respect for all life is the foundation.

—The Great Law of Peace

Relationships and the proper balance between them are the focus of traditional First Nations and Inuit worldviews. One of the underlying principles common to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit culture is the belief that all parts of creation are interconnected and that people must live in respectful, balanced relationships with nature and each other. Enacting this principle involves reciprocity.

The concept of reciprocity is enshrined in many cultures and various religions around the world. Christians call it the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.



According to the Cree culture, the energy that you send out — whether negative or positive — is the energy that you get back, and a balance exists at all times. Hindu people have a similar belief called *karma*. Isaac Newton refers to reciprocity in his third law: For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. People often refer to reciprocity in everyday speech: You get what you give; what goes around, comes around.

Retaining balance in the cycle of give-and-take is an essential part of Aboriginal culture. For example, under the belief that the spirits of respectfully treated animals or plants return to replenish the earth, Aboriginal people traditionally conduct certain rituals in an attempt to ensure an ongoing food supply. A First Nations or Inuit hunter would offer part of an animal back to the natural world — an act symbolizing respect, honour, and thanks for the animal's gift of life to the human community. Many First Nations and Inuit peoples continue to honour such ceremonial practices today.

Under the principle of reciprocity, when you take anything, something must be given in return. For example, in First Nations cultures, the practice of offering tobacco in exchange for information has been customary for thousands of years. Tobacco is a sacred plant that represents honesty carried in one's heart when words are spoken between people. Today the offering of tobacco remains an important cultural protocol in spiritual ceremonies and interactions with Elders.

In the school, prior to an Elder sharing knowledge, it is essential that you and your students complete the cycle of giving and receiving through an appropriate offering. This offering symbolizes respect and appreciation for knowledge shared by an Elder. Before the Elder's visit, determine what would be appropriate as an offering; traditions vary throughout Aboriginal communities, especially from north to south.