

Discussion Paper # 1

The Learner – a Whole Person

Ningwakwe

I have worked in adult literacy for more than twenty years. In that time practitioners – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – have consistently articulated one theme that is central to our work: “*The Learner is the most important person in the program.*”¹ This statement is the first guiding principle of the National Indigenous Literacy Association (NILA). Increasingly Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal practitioners are beginning to understand that we need to honour the whole person when we work with Learners.

What do we mean by the whole person? I love sharing the Medicine Wheel model. Essentially, it recognizes that we have four component parts – Spirit, Heart, Mind and Body. It means that we must recognize and nurture all four parts of ourselves in all aspects of our lives; that is, we must do our utmost to lead lives of balance. In my view, the imbalance that we see in society today is because institutional educational programming has not consistently done that.

I am aware that many teachers in the institutional educational system, and many literacy practitioners, follow their Hearts and do honour the whole person. Most likely if this website attracted you, you are one such practitioner. It could be that you are so busy delivering the programming that you have not had the opportunity to articulate what you’ve been doing. This discussion paper is an invitation for you to reflect on your experiences. Perhaps, together, we can find the words to encapsulate what you’ve been doing.

Why use the Whole Person Approach?

Historically, the educational system has recognized Mind by engaging the brain in learning facts and knowledge. In some cases schools recognized Body, through classes that taught a skill in which we use the body, like physical education, woodwork or domestic sciences. In this way the institutional educational system recognized and nurtured at least 25% of who we are (Mind), and perhaps as much as 50% (Mind and Body). My experience has been that the other 50% – Spirit and Heart – were not consistently recognized and nurtured. I believe that’s why the Learners who come to our programs respond best to the holistic approach, which attempts to recognize 100% of who they are.

¹ National Aboriginal Design Committee (2002). Position Paper on Aboriginal Literacy. Toronto, Ontario.

This led me to make the case for including Spirit and Heart in literacy programming. I found the work of the HeartMath Institute. In The HeartMath Solution they state:

*The heart's electromagnetic field is by far the most powerful produced by the body; it's approximately five thousand times greater in strength than the field produced by the brain for example. The heart's field not only permeates every cell in the body, but also radiates outside of us; it can be measured up to eight to ten feet away with sensitive detectors called **magnetometers**... when we focus attention on our hearts, the synchronization between our hearts and brains increases.²*

The book also says, “Because the heart is the strongest biological oscillator in the human system...the rest of the body's systems can be pulled into entrainment with the heart's rhythms.”³ When I discovered this gem I thought, “That is, it's the heart that entrains the brain!” Then I asked myself, “What entrains the heart?” Sometime later, I found an answer that satisfied me.

The full picture of human intelligence can be completed with a discussion of our spiritual intelligence – SQ for short...SQ is the necessary foundation for the effective functioning of both IQ and EQ... It is our ultimate intelligence...it integrates all our intelligences. SQ makes us the fully, intellectual, emotional and spiritual creatures that we are.⁴

How can we recognize all parts of Learners? One way is to draw on the Medicine Wheel model. The teaching team at First Nations Technical Institute have postulated a learning outcome for each component part:

1. Spirit – an attitude or insight (What my intuition tells me);
2. Heart – a feeling about self or others (What I feel);
3. Mind – knowledge (What I Know);
4. Body – skills (What I can Do, or What I have done)⁵.

As practitioners we need to be mindful of what the Learners bring with all four parts of who they are. We need to think about how we can help them to make changes, again in all four areas.

What do learners need?

What circumstances lead up to Learners walking through our doors? The reasons are

² Childre, Doc and Howard Martin (1999). *The HeartMath Solution*. New York: Harper (pp. 33-34).

³ Ibid, p. 38.

⁴ Zohar, Danah and Marshall, Ian (2000). *Spiritual Intelligence: The Ultimate Intelligence*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing (pp. 3 – 6).

⁵ Hill, Diane. (1995) *Aboriginal Access to Post-Secondary Education: Prior Learning Assessment and its Use Within Aboriginal Programs of Learning*. Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, Ont., and Belleville, Ont.: First Nations Technical Institute and Loyalist College.

often as varied as the number of Learners. It is reasonable to assume that violence or trauma have been a contributing factor for many people. In my view, violence and trauma and how they affect people's feelings about themselves have created blocks to learning. We could include some statistics about the prevalence of violence in Aboriginal communities. As one practitioners said in a focus group that contributed to Jenny Horsman's book Too Scared to Learn, she takes it as a given that the women in the program will have experienced some kind of violence. A program coordinator has told me that 100% of the Learners that come to her program have some form of residential school syndrome.

In my discussions with practitioners, and in workshops with Learners, I have observed how violence and trauma have affected Spirit, Heart, Mind and Body. To expand on the FNTI model introduced above, here are some of the things that Learners who have experienced violence seem to have learned:

1. Spirit – I seem to get the raw end of things in my dealings with people.
2. Heart – I sometimes feel like I deserve to be abused.
3. Mind – I have learned to anticipate feelings of the perpetrator and other people.
4. Body – After anticipating people's feelings, I try to "people please".

How do we help them to change? Practitioners know that it's best to start with the Learner, to gear activities to the Learners' strengths, interests and aspirations, then to see how their learning fits into the model that is being used to chart progress. In this way, we are living the premise that the Learner is the most important person in the program, and that he/she is a whole person, whose four component parts are being recognized and nurtured. With this approach we can move Learners to something like the following:

1. Spirit – I am a worthwhile person.
2. Heart – I feel connected to other people.
3. Mind – I continually learn new ways to deal with Life.
4. Body – I pass on my learnings to significant others in my Life, by example or in other ways.

Learners have different reasons for not having positive experiences in the institutional educational system. Whatever the reason for what brings them to a literacy program, practitioners hold in their Hearts that it takes a lot of courage for a Learner to take that step. If that Learner has experienced violence, such courage takes on the dimensions of heroism.

*I think heroes are people who do good or necessary things at great personal cost. Heroism must be judged by the courage and grit required to do what needs doing. That's why trauma – that great terrorizer – produces heroes. No one has to override fear the way a trauma survivor does.*⁶(p. XV)

⁶ Naparstek, Belleruth (2004). *Invisible Heroes: Survivors of Trauma and How They Heal*. New York: Bantam Books.

What can we do?

Once we've got them in the door, it is the Learner's strengths, experiences and aspirations that inform our next steps. For example, I recently spoke to the Executive Director of a downtown program for that provides health programs for Aboriginal Peoples. He told me that they use a computer-based Medicine Wheel for their intake and assessment. As each staff person interacts with the "client", they put what they observe and learn about that person into a Medicine Wheel chart for the individual. Many Aboriginal literacy practitioners have told me they something similar. They have told me that it's crucial to establish a relationship with the Learner first. They do not physically take notes during these times when they are establishing a relationship. Rather, they mentally make notes, which they later put into the Learner's file. More often than not those observations are related to the Learner's Spirit, Heart, Mind and Body.

**Think about your intake and assessment methods.
How do they speak to the whole person?**

What do we do with that information? If a Learner has a clear and immediate goal, like wanting to prepare for the GED, or to be able to make better choices in their daily lives (particularly if they are in an abusive relationship), the decision for which materials to use is already made for us. Many practitioners like to discuss the Learners' experiences with them, trying to point out what strengths the Learner has shown in each situation. This can help the Learners to see what they've been successful at, and to gain an insight into themselves. This is in agreement with the findings of Lloyd Hawkeye Robertson, who says:

A qualitative study in Vancouver's downtown eastside (van Uchelen et al. 1997) recorded that Urban Aboriginal participants felt that recognizing their existing strengths did more to promote wellness than did needs-based approaches. The study concluded that supporting existing strengths promotes wellness in holistic, culturally appropriate, and empowering ways.⁷

The practitioners might then ask the Learners what they would like to do better. This informs the methodologies and resources the practitioner will use. In many cases, the person's experiences and goals are not as clear. The Learner may not disclose that they've experienced violence. Practitioners have to intuit those experiences from the Learner's behaviour.

⁷ Hawkeye Robertson, Lloyd (2006). *The Residential School Experience: Syndrome or Historic Trauma*. Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health, 4(1), 1-28. Retrieved from http://www.pimatisiwin.com/Articles/4.1C_ResidentialSchool.pdf April 4, 2007.

Literacy practitioners have had to become adept at identifying then addressing barriers to learning and success. One such barrier is a mismatch between the teaching style of the educator and the learning style of the Learner. Literacy practitioners and educators are now sharing some of the work that they've done to address learning styles. I encourage people to think about a possible learning outcome for each of Spirit, Heart, Mind and Body.

Think about how you or the Learner decide on goals and plans to meet those goals.

How do you speak to the whole person?

After you and the Learner have decided on goals, and materials and methodologies to support those goals, what environment do you provide to help them to achieve those goals?

How do you work with Learners to amend their goals?

How does violence affect learning?

Violence and trauma are major barriers to learning. In my research I have found that trauma can cause blockages to learning. An emotion-filled incident can be encoded in the part of the brain known as the amygdala. The job of the amygdala is to protect us. It scans every experience to ascertain if there is any resemblance to an earlier traumatic experience. The amygdala makes sloppy associations. When it recognizes two or three factors that are similar to an earlier traumatic experience, it can command us to react to the present as we learned long ago. That is known as an emotional hijacking (Goleman, 1997). When this happens with Learners, they freeze or dissociate. Instructors who do not realize this will think the Learner is not interested or, worse yet, not trying hard enough – that they are daydreaming.

Candace Pert (1997), a neuroscientist who discovered the opiate receptor, has coined the phrase *body-mind*. She says that the body is the unconscious mind. Repressed traumas caused by overwhelming emotion can be stored in a body part. I believe that there are literacy-based and literacy-related ways we can help Learners deal with such issues. One way to reach the picture frozen in the amygdala is through art (Rose & Nicholl, 1997). The Learners can then talk about their picture or write about it. Alternately, they can write about the incident and give it a different, happier ending.⁸

Think about literacy-based and literacy-related ways in which you help Learners deal with the impacts of violence and trauma on their learning and their lives.

⁸ George, Priscilla (2003). The Rainbow/Holistic Approach to (Aboriginal) Literacy. *Canadian Journal of Native Education -- Advancing Aboriginal Languages and Literacy*, 27 (1).

What is the Whole Person Approach?

I'd like to share an approach I developed, the Rainbow Approach to Aboriginal Literacy. It is included as the last page to this document. In 1998, Parkland Regional College asked me to develop this approach. I've since discovered Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences. Gardner believes that everybody is a reader – it's just a matter of what we're best at reading – text, people, or situations.⁹ When I do workshops on the Rainbow approach, I include an comparison to the Multiple Intelligences. Learners come to understand that there are many ways in which people are smart or literate, and that facility with the written word is only one way. Learners ask me why nobody had ever told them about learning styles. As a result of my sharing this information with them, they begin to see themselves in a new light.

Gardner suggests that everybody has eight intelligences:

1. linguistic – the ability to read, write, communicate with words;
2. logical-mathematical – the ability to reason and calculate, to think things through in a logical, systematic manner;
3. visual-spatial – the ability to think in pictures, visualize a final result – recognizes our creative people, such as artists, as well as our dreams and visions;
4. musical – the ability to make or compose music, to sing well, or understand and appreciate music;
5. bodily-kinesthetic – the ability to use your body skilfully to solve problems, create products, or present ideas and emotions;
6. interpersonal – the ability to work effectively with others, to relate to other people and display empathy and understanding, to notice their motivations and goals;
7. intrapersonal – the ability for self-analysis and reflection – to be able to quietly contemplate and assess one's accomplishments, to review one's behaviour and innermost feelings, to make plans and set goals, to know oneself;
8. naturalist – the ability to recognize flora and fauna, to make other consequential distinctions in the natural world, and to use this ability productively.

**Think about an approach to learning that was successful with Learners.
How does it align with either the Rainbow Approach or Multiple
Intelligences?
How did it address the whole person?**

How balanced is your life?

An overarching theme that I've observed in my interactions with practitioners over the last two decades is that we need to live the concept of balance ourselves. At a meeting last year, one practitioner said that the Learners had spoken up at their Annual General

⁹ My notes from the Metropolitan Toronto Movement for Literacy workshop on Multiple Intelligences, facilitated by Leslie Shelton. Spring 2002.

Meeting, admonishing the practitioners to take care of themselves. They saw the practitioners running themselves ragged juggling the responsibilities of administration and delivery of the program. This was not meant as a criticism. Often many competing demands on our time and energy contribute to stress. We must meet funding requirements (without which we could not continue to have a program for the Learners), deal with the expectations of our host agency, handle developments in our own personal lives or in the lives of Learner(s).

Think about what you are teaching the Learner(s) by your own example.

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The Rainbow/Holistic Approach to Aboriginal Literacy

adapted from "Reaching the Rainbow", A Literacy Kit by Parkland Regional College and incorporated into the National Indigenous Literacy Association (NILA) logo

Red – the first colour of the rainbow, and the colour understood by some Aboriginal cultures to mean confidence, which has within it the knowing, the ability to plan, to start a process. Red represents **the language of origin of First Nations individuals and/or communities.**

Orange – the second colour of the rainbow, and the colour understood by some Aboriginal cultures to mean balance, the place of choice where we are taught to exercise self-confidence, self-assuredness, self-control and self-esteem, in order to keep emotions, such as fear, in balance. Orange is often used to denote fire. The first source of fire is the Sun, which is the centre of the universe. People are like the universe in that they also have a centre, a fire within. For Aboriginal Peoples, that centre is the teachings. Aboriginal teachings have been passed from generation to generation orally. Orange symbolizes **the skills required for oral literacy (speaking, listening...)**

Yellow – the third colour of the rainbow, and the colour often used in reference to the moon, and the gathering of food. In Aboriginal tradition, crops are planted and harvested according to the phases of the moon. Some Aboriginal cultures understand yellow to mean creativity. Yellow refers to the **creative means by which Aboriginal Peoples had to learn to communicate with others who spoke another language or through other than the written word, by using symbols (pictographs, and in contemporary times, artwork, music) and/or sign language.**

Green – the fourth colour of the rainbow, is often interpreted to mean growth, going beyond what is familiar, yet remaining true to the teachings. This allows us to live with respect and humbleness. It is used to represent grass and growing things on Mother Earth. Treaties and understandings with the newcomers often included the phrase, "*as long as the grasses grow and the rivers flow*". Green refers to **literacy in the languages of the European newcomers to this land several hundred years ago, English and/or French, and which have also been given the status of official languages.**

Blue – the fifth colour of the rainbow, which some Aboriginal cultures understand to mean truth. Knowing the truth means staying true to your vision, where commitment is most important. Blue is also used to symbolize the colour of the sky. With the coming of the Europeans, the skyline changed, and now contains the tools of technology, such as towers and satellite dishes, that send and receive signals. Blue refers to **the skills required to communicate using technology.**

Indigo – the sixth colour of the rainbow, is often referred to as the colour of the night-time sky, the dream time, when Aboriginal Peoples are more open to receiving messages from the Spirit World. This colour also refers to the "third eye chakra", which means "spiritual seeing". Indigo refers to **the skills required for spiritual or cultural literacy – the ability to interpret natural events, which are seen to be messages from the Spirit World – the sighting of an animal, the shape of a cloud, seeing a certain person at a particular point in time, etc.**

Violet – the seventh colour of the rainbow, is often thought to be a healing colour. Some Aboriginal cultures understand people to mean wisdom, the ability to understand things, to have true power (inner and spiritual), to respect, and to know in a holistic way. Violet refers to **the holistic base to Aboriginal literacy – facilitating spiritual, emotional, mental and physical learning outcomes – striving for balance**