



Aboriginal Students: Who are they? How do they learn?

The information and stories in this chapter will help teachers to:

- recognize Aboriginal students as individual learners within a cultural context
- become more aware of how the influences of family, culture and language affect the learning strengths and needs of each student
- use a strength-seeking approach to assess students' needs
- collaborate in an ongoing relationship with each student to meet the student's learning needs and support the student's learning strengths.

In Aboriginal worldviews, each individual is unique and has the ability to fully actualize or to become whole. This understanding accepts that each student can learn—the question is how does each student learn best?

The teacher's role is to facilitate this learning process, to unlock each student's potential. The best way for the teacher to help students do this is to come to know them as individual learners within their cultural context. It is important for teachers to:

- learn about the ways that students reflect the Aboriginal worldviews and cultures of their families and communities
- learn about how students learn so that teachers can adjust classroom practices to facilitate learning
- promote mastery learning by teaching students to learn about how they learn (metacognition) and to use their unique learning processes to master the curriculum.

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Shared

Importance of relationship

“Teachers need to learn how to unpack the nature of the relationship between themselves and their students so that both know how the patterns they are used to are either complementary or may be in conflict with each other's patterns ... Only when both feel they have an investment in the outcome of the relationship can gains be made towards meeting each other's desire for success.”

– Wilson 2001

It is difficult to fully understand how worldviews and cultures influence students, because they thread through every aspect of the learning process. There is a great deal for teachers to learn.

It is worthwhile to be patient. Elders place much hope in the education system and in teachers' abilities to help Aboriginal children. Aboriginal communities have high standards for their children's education. They not only want their children to do well, they want quality learning opportunities for their community. The time teachers spend getting to know the students and their patterns of learning provides the foundation for a strong learning relationship.

Learning About Students: Family, Cultural Identity and Language

In the holistic worldviews of Aboriginal communities, a teacher is teaching not only the child who comes to school but also the child who is a member of a family, a community and a culture. It is important to learn about each student as an individual. In this way, teachers begin to find out about the cultural uniqueness of their Aboriginal students rather than relying on preconceived notions about students, their families and their communities.

Although the need to establish a relationship may seem self-evident, with Aboriginal students this is a vital step that connects to culture, where all learning is based, first of all, on relationship. Offering kindness, trust and a positive awareness of family and culture sets the stage for students to feel welcome and to want to attend school every day.

Some Aboriginal students enter the classroom looking and acting very much like other students—wearing the same clothes, using similar language and displaying similar attitudes. Some Aboriginal students may even be blonde, blue-eyed and fair in complexion. Other Aboriginal students may look and/or act differently than other students.

Despite outward appearances, the strongest influences on both groups of students are likely to be those influences that cannot be seen—the influences of their histories, families and cultures. To understand this is to understand the context of the classroom within the community. These influences may run so deep that even the students themselves are not fully aware of them and may not be able to explain how they affect them.

The more teachers know about each of these elements in their students' lives, the more information they have to create an understanding of their students' lives.

Family

Family is the place where children begin their learning. Like all students, Aboriginal students' experiences of school will be significantly affected by their family life. Though each family is unique and family contexts may range from highly traditional to virtually assimilated, the following threads may run through the family experiences of many students.

- Many Aboriginal students have a large extended family. Their “close” relatives may include people who in other cultures may be considered “distant” relatives.
- It is common practice for adults other than the students' parents—grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, older siblings—to take on the role of the adults involved with the school.
- Sixty-five percent of Aboriginal children on reserve and 50 percent of children in urban settings live with two parents. In comparison, 83 percent of non-Aboriginal children live with two parents (Statistics Canada, 2001 Census).
- Because of cultural disruption and misunderstanding between cultures, about 5 percent of Aboriginal children living in urban areas no longer live with their parents, but live with other relatives or nonrelatives, compared to 0.6 percent of non-Aboriginal children (Statistics Canada, 2001 Census). Many of these children are in foster care.
- A growing number of Aboriginal families live in urban settings. Many parents and older students move from a reserve or small community to an urban centre for work or education, leaving their extended families behind. Moving often means leaving behind the friends and family that support them and adapting to a different way of life.
- Family events and gatherings are very important—students may be out of school for several days at a time to attend them.
- Aboriginal families often use a nondirective approach to guiding their children. This arises out of worldviews that respect everyone's right to make his or her own decisions. This noninterference may sometimes be mistaken for a lack of concern or permissiveness. However, it is quite the opposite—it is a deliberate parenting approach that expects children to mature and determine their own actions from an early age. Noninterference also reflects a preference for experiential learning.

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On noninterference

“Spiritual being essentially requires only that individuals seek their place in the universe; everything else will follow in good time ... Because everything was created with a specific purpose to fulfill, no one should have the power to interfere or to impose upon others which path is the best to follow.”

– Garrett et al. 2003, p. 229

- Older siblings may be required to help out at home and often take care of younger children. This may affect their ability to take part in extracurricular activities, and to complete homework and assignments on time.
- The heart of traditional Aboriginal learning is experiential. Aboriginal cultures were built on oral traditions. As a result of the influence of these oral traditions, many students’ parents and grandparents have little reading material in their homes. Because of this, some Aboriginal students may have had less early experience with reading than students from other cultures and may view reading as being less important.

Learning about family and culture helps teachers to:

- recognize the cultural influences that affect learning
- draw attention to positive values in the students’ cultures
- make meaningful connections between Aboriginal cultures and the curriculum
- detect and counter stereotypes
- build on students’ strengths.

Cultural identity

In a mainstream setting, when people meet for the first time, they will probably ask each other who they are and what they do. In Aboriginal communities, people tend to ask people who they are, who their family is and where they are from. The answers to these questions say much about each person’s languages, traditions and customs, and help to create relationship.

How will a teacher know which students in the class are Aboriginal? Skin, hair and eye colour will not establish identity and in many cases, neither will family names. The best way for teachers to learn about students’ backgrounds is to share stories and information about themselves first. This provides a model for the student. Then, when opportunities arise, the teacher can invite students to share information about themselves and their cultures. Often students will be more

comfortable doing this in a one-to-one situation, rather than in a large group. Consider the following kinds of questions to explore with students.

- Are they First Nations, Métis, Inuit? How do they identify themselves?
- Do they speak an Aboriginal language? Do their parents or grandparents?
- What are the special events in their community—for example, rodeos, pow-wows or fiddling competitions?
- What do they know about their histories and cultures, and are they interested in learning more?
- How do they describe their families?

Respect that not all students want to be identified as Aboriginal in front of their peers. Through the process of colonization, many Aboriginal people learned to be ashamed of their cultural identity and so students may claim to belong to another ethnic group instead. These students still benefit from the cultural awareness and respect that teachers establish in their classrooms. They may begin to claim their identity as they learn that it is safe to do so in the classroom environment.

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Take time

“When you take the time to talk to students, remember: the first moments are sacred; they involve the honouring of the dignity of each life that you meet. Take the time to listen with your heart.”

– Aboriginal teacher

Preservation of languages

Many Aboriginal people in Alberta are concerned about the increasing decline in knowledge of Aboriginal languages. About 25 percent of Aboriginal people in Canada can carry on a conversation in an Aboriginal language. Reported use of Cree, Ojibway and Blackfoot declined between 1996 and 2001 (Statistics Canada, 2001 Census). Language vitality is maintained only through regular use.

Alberta Education is working to promote cultures and languages in Alberta’s schools. Blackfoot and Cree 10, 20, 30 courses are currently being taught in a number of Alberta senior high schools. Junior high learning resources for both Blackfoot and Plains Cree have been developed in cooperation with First Nations education authorities (e.g., the Kainai Board from the Blood reserve and Treaty 6 Tribal Ventures).

In addition, Alberta Education and the Alexis Board of Education are developing Stoney/Nakoda language courses.

Influence of language

Because of the way it shapes their thinking—their ways of knowing—many Aboriginal people say culture *is* their language. Language patterns are deeply woven into the lives of Aboriginal students, their families and their communities, regardless of their fluency in an Aboriginal language. In fact, language patterns tend to endure for three generations—a student whose great-grandparents were the most recent Aboriginal language speakers in the family will still be influenced by their language patterns.

The first language of some students is an Aboriginal language. As they speak English, these students are constantly translating their thoughts. This process may be difficult as the meaning of the words and the patterns of thinking in their first language may be quite different from English.

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“The simplicity of our daily life does not indicate that our vocabulary is simple and limited to a few hard-to-gurgle grunts. It is true that we have some tongue twisters, which only go to show that the Cree tongue is highly developed. We have every reason to believe that ours is a beautiful language and so expressive and descriptive ...

For illustration let us take the word “snow.” ... whereas the Cree word for snow is *kona*, while for snowing we have *mispon*, melting snow *sasken*, drifting snow *piwon*, and snow drifts *papestin*. ... we do not attach other words to *kona* for every new word that relates to snow.”

– Dion 1979, p. 2

For speakers of an Aboriginal language, English can seem very linear and lacking in context. It is important to give students time to articulate their thoughts and to find ways to help them express themselves clearly and comfortably.

It is also important to be aware of tone, volume and pitch. Speakers of Aboriginal languages often speak in softer tones. They listen carefully to voice inflection and so may be very sensitive not only to what is being said but *how* it is being said. Aboriginal people often use humour—there is a lot of laughter in Aboriginal conversations.

The languages of students' Aboriginal communities may have a strong influence on their thought and speech patterns, even if the students do not speak the language. For example, people from different cultural backgrounds vary in their "pause times" (the time before replying) in a conversation. The pause time for European people tends to be less than two seconds. The pause time for Aboriginal peoples tends to be about four or five seconds.

Because of this, Aboriginal students may find it difficult to take part in class discussions where, typically, students jump into the conversation as soon as the previous speaker has finished.

To accommodate the learning needs of Aboriginal students, teachers can increase "wait time"—the thinking time they give students after asking a question and before expecting a response. Generous wait time has been shown to increase the length and quality of student responses.

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Wait time

"Indigenous pedagogy accepts students' cognitive search for learning processes they can internalize, and Aboriginal teachers allow for a lag period of watching before doing."

– Battiste 2002, pp. 18–19

Working from Strength

When assessing the learning needs and preferences of Aboriginal students, especially those who may be struggling with school, one effective approach is to recognize and build on their strengths. Positive models, such as the Positive Youth Development approach (Seita and Brendtro 2002), identify the ways in which students cope successfully in a variety of situations, including a range of strengths that may not typically show themselves in the classroom setting.

Positive approaches do not ignore student needs and challenges. Rather, they provide a balance to assessment models that tend to focus on student deficits rather than potential.

The Positive Youth Development approach uses the four principles of connections, continuity, dignity and opportunity as a framework for assessment that emphasizes strengths.

Connections

- Who are the significant people in a student's life?
- What are the student's relationships with family, friends and community?
- Who does the student rely on for support?
- What people strengths does the student have?

Continuity

- What life challenges does the student face?
- How is the student coping with these challenges?
- What difficulties has the student overcome?
- How does the student ask for help with these challenges?
- Who does the student ask for help?
- How can the student be helped with these life challenges?

Dignity

- How does the student feel about himself or herself?
- What are the student's hopes and dreams?
- Does the student feel in control of his or her life?
- How does the student treat others?
- How can the student be supported in developing self-respect and strength?

Opportunity

How can the student be supported in developing:

- a sense of belonging
- a sense of mastery
- a sense of responsibility and independence
- a sense of sharing, generosity and compassion?

These four principles are a blueprint for strength-seeking instead of flaw-fixing interventions. The goal is to create environments where all students can thrive and grow.

Helping Students Learn About Learning

Thinking about thinking and learning about learning—or metacognition—is fundamental to working with Aboriginal students. The more students can recognize and articulate which learning processes and preferences work best for them, and in which situations, the easier it will be for them to learn and for teachers to support their learning.

The process of helping students learn about their learning is:

- a collaboration—teacher and student work together in a relationship
- an ongoing dialogue—talking about learning becomes part of classroom routine, one-on-one, in groups and as a class
- based on observation and listening—the student is the best teacher when it comes to his or her abilities and learning needs.

In this process, reflection becomes a key part of every learning activity. Teachers can expect these reflections to become more detailed and complex as the school year progresses. The more students learn about learning, the better able they are to meet their own learning challenges, to teach other students about *their* learning and to teach other teachers. They take more ownership of their own learning.

This mastery becomes increasingly important as students move through grade levels and on to different classrooms and schools, where they will need strong self-advocacy skills in order to succeed.

Teacher story

Learning by watching

“I invited a traditional teacher to teach the class about tipis. His approach was really interesting. He demonstrated how to put up the tipi, and then put them to work in groups, setting up model tipis. He didn’t guide them verbally, he just observed them. When he saw that students were having trouble, he had them watch his demonstration again. He let them learn by doing—it seemed like he never doubted they’d be able to do it, and he was right. And the students were happy because they accomplished this on their own. Thinking about experiential learning and how much students really do learn by observation—this seems like an approach I’d like to try myself.”

Learning preferences

“In Aboriginal thought a whole person consists of spirit, heart, mind and body—the capacity to see, feel, know and do. Therefore, in the learning process, a whole person engages his or her physical, mental, emotional and spiritual capacities in receiving data or information for the brain to process” (Hill 1999, p. 100).

There is no “learning style unique to Aboriginal learners.” When students understand how they receive information and process it—when they identify their learning preferences—they increase their ability to take control of their own learning processes.

Teacher story

How students like to learn

A master teacher we know uses a comment box to find out about her students' experiences. Here are some comments she gathered when she asked her students how they like to learn.

"I learn by doing."

"When I study, I like to chew gum and play with a keychain or elastic band or something."

"I learn by reading and highlighting what I've read."

"I like to build things and work with my hands."

"I learn by reading and then repeating it out loud."

"I learn by working slowly and by understanding the problem."

"I listen to music while I do homework or study."

"I learn by working with other people."

"I learn by observing and observing other people learning."

"I listen best in class when I'm doodling or drawing something."

"I learn by viewing, tasting, listening, hearing, all of the senses."

The teacher's comment when she read these responses?

"Each student clearly learned in a unique way. I thought back on the number of times I limited learning by determining the learning process."

Aboriginal educator Diane Hill uses a circle to illustrate the four elements involved in the learning process cycle: to see, to feel, to know and to do.¹¹ Each type of learner has a place within the circle. Whether the students learn best by seeing, feeling, knowing or doing indicates whether they are intuitive, emotional-relational, mentally-centred or physically-centred learners.

The first step in this circle involves the spirit and the ability to see. It begins with awareness in relation to self, family, community, nations and the universe.

The second step in the circle involves the heart and the ability to feel. This step requires the learner to make a decision to struggle personally with the new information and problems that arise. Some of the new information will contradict assumptions, beliefs and attitudes that the learner holds, causing an internal struggle.

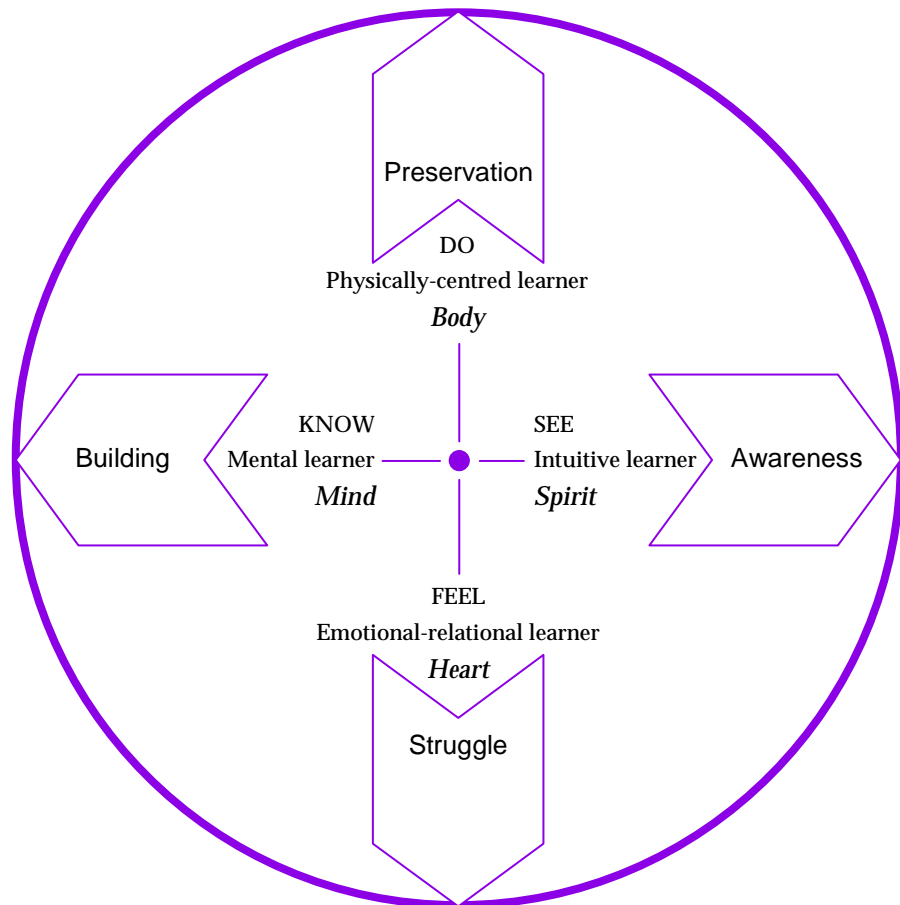
11. Used with permission from Diane Hill, "Holistic Learning: A Model of Education Based on Aboriginal Cultural Philosophy" (unpublished master's thesis, St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, 1999). © Diane Hill, Ph.D. (abd). 1999. Unpublished Master's Thesis. Email: dianhill@worldchat.com

The third step in the circle involves the mind and the ability to know. The learner must resolve the contradictions encountered in the previous step and use these resolutions to build new knowledge.

The final step in the circle involves the body and the ability to do. This step represents preservation. Once the learner has experienced the awareness, struggle and building of the first three steps, a new sense of self can now be preserved.

Although the typical path through the circle of learning seems to begin with awareness and move toward action, it is possible for learners to move through the steps in any order; they may, for example, begin with their learning preference.

Teachers can consider this learning circle as they plan learning activities that will accommodate, engage and motivate students.



Shared wisdom

Using the circle to build understanding

“I have found that when I demonstrate with the circle and explain the never-ending spiral of awareness, struggle, building and preservation that an Aboriginal literacy learner experiences, the learners understand better their own learning capabilities. Sharing this information with them also helps to build their trust in me as a supportive and understanding practitioner.”

– Swanson 2003, p. 64