

ABORIGINAL APPROACHES TO LEARNINGⁱ

Despite their diverse cultures, histories and geographies, First Nations, Inuit and Métis people share a vision of learning as a purposeful, holistic and life-long process. This vision entails certain shared principles and values that shape and influence how they see themselves in relation to the world, and which form the foundation of their learning.

Intrinsic to Aboriginal learning is the nurturing of relationships among the individual, the family, the community, the nation, and all of Creation. Learning encompasses shared values and identity, developed through the learner's relationship to other people and to the environment.

Individual development and personal responsibility are viewed within the larger context of contributing to the collective or community. Aboriginal learning can be viewed as a process that naturally builds on social capital – a term that generally refers to the development of social relationships and networks based on trust and shared values that ultimately foster community well-being. From an Aboriginal perspective, social capital entails building and sustaining a healthy community based on an approach that values kinship networks and community relationships, and that reinforces Aboriginal people's connection to nature and the land.

The 1996 Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples noted that Aboriginal people advocate a holistic lifelong learning approach that will develop individuals “who can linguistically and culturally assume the responsibilities of their nation(s),” while also preparing their children and youth “to participate in Canadian society.”

Key Attributes of Aboriginal Learning

To compartmentalize Aboriginal holistic lifelong learning may contradict the integrative nature of this perspective. Nonetheless, such a compartmentalization is useful in helping to explain the perspective's essential qualities. Several key attributes of Aboriginal learning are identified and described below:

- i. Learning is holistic
- ii. Learning is a lifelong process
- iii. Learning is experiential in nature
- iv. Learning is rooted in Aboriginal languages and cultures
- v. Learning is spiritually oriented
- vi. Learning is a communal activity, involving family, community and Elders
- vii. Learning is an integration of Aboriginal and Western knowledge

i. Learning is holistic

Individual learning is seen as one part of a collective that extends beyond the family, community and nation to Creation itself. Therefore, the learning process engages and

develops all aspects of the individual (that is, the individual's emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual being) as well as that of the collective/community.

Knowledge is not divided into separate categories or specializations. Rather, all knowledge (including knowledge of traditional languages, cultures and traditions) is related to all existence (humans, animals, plants, cosmos, etc) because of their shared origins (the Creator). Information is therefore framed around relationships such as the interconnectedness of humans, animals, plants, the environment and the Creator.

ii. **Learning is a lifelong process**

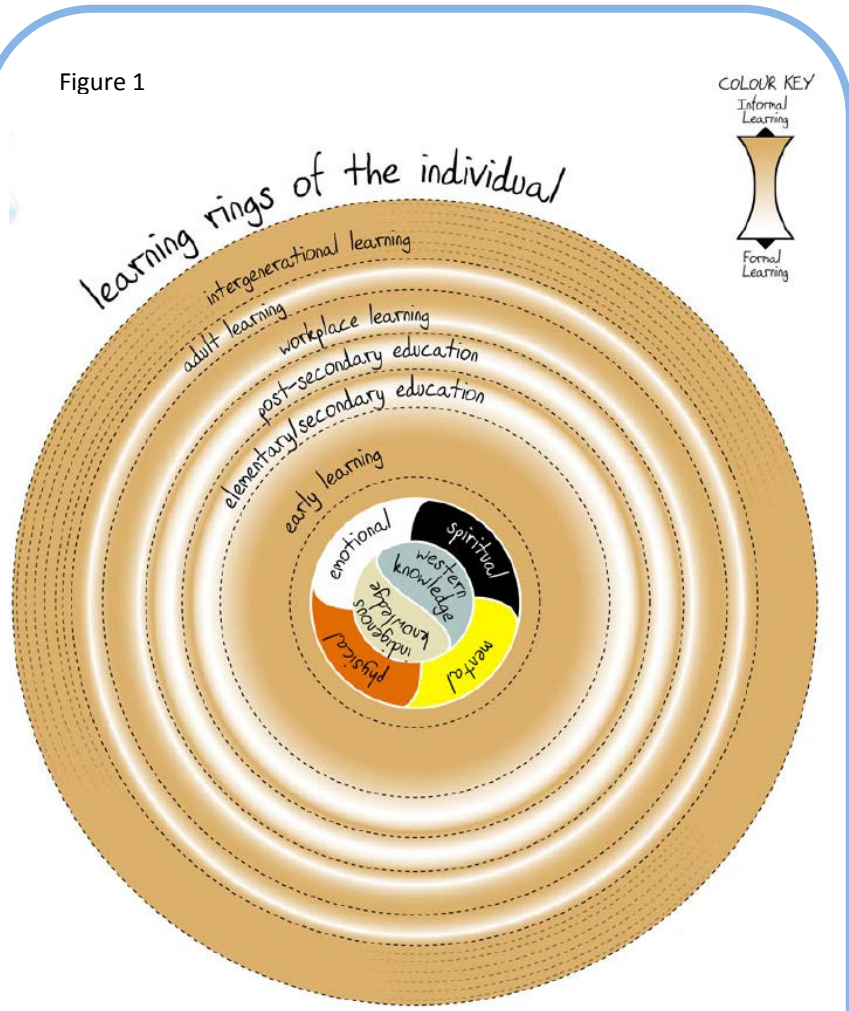
Many Aboriginal Peoples such as the First Nations of the plains and woodlands (Ojibwe, Cree, Blackfoot, Dakota and others) use the Medicine Wheel to illustrate the progressive growth of the individual through a cyclical journey.

The Wheel conveys the passage of the four seasons, the integration of emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual aspects of human development, and the interconnectedness of life. It also presents learning as a lifelong process connected to all stages of human development: beginning before birth and continuing through childhood, youth, adulthood and old age. Knowledge and wisdom, acquired through a lifetime of learning, are transmitted to younger learners in a process that repeats itself with successive generations.

iii. **Learning is experiential**

The traditional Aboriginal

Figure 1



The illustration above provides a graphic representation of First Nations' perspective on learning. The individual is located in the center of the circle, with the four aspects of the learner (spiritual, mental, physical and emotional) encasing indigenous and western knowledge – both of which coexist within the learner. The stages of learning are represented by the concentric circles that surround the learner and progresses outwards with every stage of life as would the trunk of a tree as it grows with time.

(Note: The illustration should be further interpreted in conjunction with Figure 2, found on page 8.)

classroom consisted of the community and the natural environment. Each adult was responsible for ensuring that each child learned the specific skills, attitudes and knowledge they needed to function in everyday life.

Experiential learning is seen as connected to lived experience, as in *learning by doing*, and is structured formally through regular community interactions such as sharing circles, ceremonies, meditation, storytelling and (informally through) daily activities.

iv. Learning is rooted in Aboriginal languages and cultures

Language and culture play a pivotal role in successful learning. Through language, Aboriginal Peoples transmit cultural knowledge from one generation to another and make sense of their shared experience.

Aboriginal languages also reflect their worldview, their connection to the land, contains the “knowledge of the technologies and life’s rhythms of [a] specific place”, and “is nothing short of a living, working, practical toolkit for survival in that specific region.”

Language connects Aboriginal people to their culture’s system of values about how they ought to live and relate to each other. As Aboriginal languages encode unique ways of interpreting the world, they are seen as inseparable from issues of Aboriginal identity and the maintenance of Aboriginal knowledge systems.

v. Learning is spiritually oriented

Central to the Aboriginal worldview is the supremacy of spiritual development that derives from a reverence for life and affirmation of the interconnectedness of all beings. To understand the reality of physical existence, to make ‘knowing possible,’ the individual turns inward to connect with the energy that manifests itself in all existence (the Creator). Spiritual experience is, therefore, equated with knowledge in itself and is manifested in the physical world through ceremony, vision quests and dreams.

“When the spirit is absent, learning becomes difficult, unfulfilling, and, perhaps, impossible.”

Dr Marie Battiste
Mi’kmaq educator

Knowledge is therefore a sacred object, and seeking knowledge is a spiritual quest. Many Aboriginal people have conceptualized the *learning spirit* as an entity that emerges from the complex interrelationships between the learner and his or her learning journey.

vi. Learning is a communal activity

The family and community play central roles as lifelong educators. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples noted that

“Traditional education prepared youth to take up adult responsibilities. Through apprenticeship and teaching by parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, skills and knowledge were shaped and honed. In the past, the respective roles of men and women in community life were valued and well established, with continuity from

generation to generation, so that youth saw their future roles modeled by adults and elders who were respected and esteemed within their world."

Parental and family involvement in community learning can entail diverse roles: as first educators in the home, as central partners with the school and as advocates and key decision-makers for all children and youth.

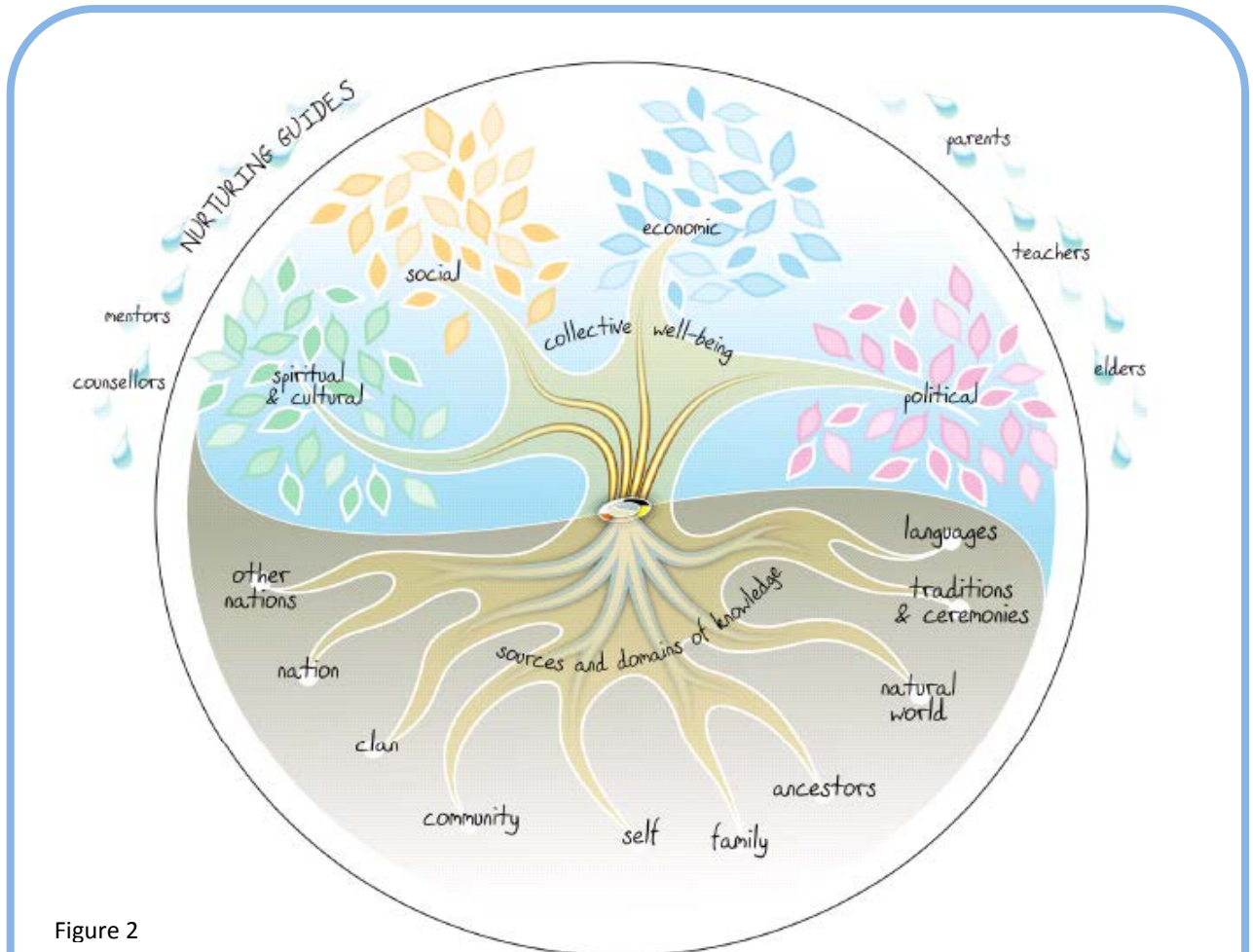


Figure 2

The illustration above provides a full graphic representation of First Nations' perspective on learning. The learning rings of the individual (depicted in Figure 1) is located at the center of the diagram and forms the body/trunk of a tree.

Individual learning is rooted in a number of domains and sources of knowledge (e.g. family, community, clan, nation, traditions & ceremonies, languages, the natural world). By firmly rooting individual learning in this manner, the individual is able to flourish spiritually and culturally, economically, socially, and politically while at the same time contributing to collective well-being. Throughout this process, the individual is nurtured and guided by the people around him/her, such as parents, teachers, Elders, mentors and counsellors.

(Note: The illustration should be further interpreted in conjunction with Figure 1, found on page 7.)

Elders play a key role as facilitators of lifelong learning. They teach responsibilities and relationships among family, community and creation, reinforcing intergenerational connections and identities. Elders also transmit the community’s culture through parables, allegories, lessons and poetry, presented over a long period of time. They play an important role in fostering culturally affirming school environments that links students, staff, families and community to Aboriginal cultures and traditions.

vii. Learning integrates Aboriginal and Western Knowledge

Aboriginal learning is not a static activity but rather an adaptive process that derives the best from traditional and contemporary knowledge.

As Inuit Elders have suggested, there is “great continuity between the past and present, tradition and modernity. Inuit have always known how to adapt to new contexts. They do not just want to go back to the traditions of the past, but they also wish to apply Inuit traditions that have proven their value to solving modern problems. They wish to integrate the good and useful traditions from the past into modern institutions.”

“From the earliest days of contact, Aboriginal parents have had the deeply held desire for education that would equip their children to reap the benefits of the knowledge and technologies of the Euro-Canadian society. However, they have maintained a parallel desire to preserve their own ways of knowing, cultural traditions and heritage. For Aboriginal students, education is not an “either or” proposition, but a “yes and” situation.”

Inuit Elder

ⁱ Canadian Council on Learning. “Redefining How Success is Measured in First Nations, Inuit and Métis Learning.” 2007.