



ABORIGINAL CULTURE AWARENESS: FINDING A COMMON PLACE IN ADVANCED EDUCATION

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Summary

NAIT is currently producing an innovative course that focuses on Aboriginal Cultural Awareness. The course is being developed by the collaboration efforts of NAIT educational consultants with the guidance of Elders from a number of Aboriginal communities. The intent of the course is to orientate instructional staff and administration to this important area. The following paper highlights the development of this course as the institution continues its success to be responsive to the needs of its culturally diverse student population. The paper also discusses the notion of empowering instructors through the use of ancient Aboriginal storytelling, and how such storytelling speaks to elements of teaching commonly found in contemporary practice. It is in this sense that Aboriginal Cultural Awareness becomes a "lived-reality."

Introduction

Dr. Sam Shaw, President and CEO of NAIT, continues to lead NAIT in stepping forward in developing positive relationships with our Aboriginal community reinforcing NAIT's vision, "to be globally valued for student success, applied research and innovation." Captured in the vision is NAIT's sense of providing opportunity, support, and recognition for Aboriginal students who come to our centre each year to further their career dreams.

NAIT appreciates the complexity and challenge that lies before the institution as it seeks to develop quality programming that meets the needs of its unique culturally diverse student population. Such programming requires work of community stakeholders who step forward to make a difference in helping the institution be responsive toward valuing the cultural diversity and special educational requirements of its students.

As part of the ongoing process of responding to Aboriginal student needs, NAIT is currently producing an innovative course that focuses on Aboriginal Cultural Awareness. The course is being developed by the collaboration efforts of NAIT educational consultants with the guidance of Elders from a number of Aboriginal communities. The intent of the course is to

orientate instructional staff and administration to this important area. The following paper highlights how the course responded to the needs of Aboriginal students and how it facilitated a new way to view teaching practice through an exploration of Aboriginal traditional narrative story telling.

Recognizing the Backgrounds of Aboriginal Students

Many of the Aboriginal students coming to NAIT's main campus come from regions in close proximity to the city of Edmonton; however, this is not the case for all these students. In fact, many of NAIT's Aboriginal students leave remote and isolated Northern communities and arrive at NAIT with little experience with city life. For some Aboriginal students it is their first time in a city environment. For many of these students the hustle and bustle and quicker pace of life is a cultural shock so it is essential that institutions like NAIT provide support to ensure a smoother transition. Recognizing these barriers beforehand is an important part of ensuring student success at NAIT. Evidence suggests that Aboriginal students are susceptible to disproportionate drop-out rates due to some of these factors. (Alberta Learning, Commission on Learning Report 2003; Garrett, M.W., (1995)

Identifying current trends and needs of students is a constant challenge for NAIT staff and instructors who need to keep updated on issues in order to find workable solutions to address these student's needs. This can be extremely difficult as little published information is available that directly provides information to staff and instructors on preparing programs to meet the unique cultural and social needs of these students in advanced technical and trades education in the province of Alberta. (Much needs to be explored and written on the subject in order to advance this field of knowledge.) (Government of Alberta, Commission on Learning Report, 2003)

Barriers that have been identified include entrenched social stereotypical perspectives, which continue to linger throughout Canadian society. Such misinformation about historical events related to land treaties, medical care, and the general life of Aboriginal peoples has created huge gaps for Aboriginals living in Canadian society. These gaps show themselves in terms of poverty, disproportionate representation of Aboriginal peoples in Canadian prison systems, lower overall health scores, lower academic achievement test scores, and in the current under-representation of Aboriginal peoples in higher skill level jobs. (Garrett, M.W (1995); Alberta Government First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework., February 2002).

Students facing these barriers are under undue pressure as prejudice and even racist attitudes can directly affect student acceptance and feelings of well-being, which is

needed to establish a vibrant learning environment. NAIT seeks to address this issue by providing quality events and promoting key learning times in order to bring current and accurate information to its staff and student body .

Of course this cannot be done without the direct support of Aboriginal leaders, and the willingness of industry to become involved, NAIT responded to the need by supporting the establishment of the Encana Aboriginal Centre. The Encana Center is supported by NAIT hired staff and offers a number of excellent programs including new student orientation and cultural transition programming, social support groups, as well as a variety of course upgrading and career planning initiatives for Aboriginal students. The Encana Centre also offers tutoring opportunities, connections to traditional and non-traditional councilors, as well as Elders from various Aboriginal people's groups that guide and support students through their education. Finally, the Centre also provides traditional meditation room for those wanting to practice sweat grass ceremonies honoring the Great Creator.

The Centre is hosted by Aboriginal leaders and peers dedicated to enriching student's lives and providing a friendly support for students far away from home and cultural norms. These leaders share a commonality of experiences having ventured also from regions across Canada where they have faced shared experiences as Aboriginal's in Canadian education and social cultural settings. The Encana Centre is not exclusive in its vision as it invites students from all cultures to share with them in the service of supporting one another. This rich experience benefits students from a variety of cultural settings and life experiences and establishes a unique and excellent program for identifying the needs of its students.

Reaching Out from the Aboriginal Centre to the Classroom

As the Encana Centre continued to grow, it became evident by many Aboriginal staff that for the work of building supports for Aboriginal students to be successful the NAIT community needed to be made aware of the issues facing many of their students that had direct impact on the ability of the student to achieve success. NAIT executives recognized that there was a greater need to expand the influence of the Encana Centre and help instructional staff and support staff to be better prepared in addressing the learning needs of Aboriginal students. It was identified that the majority of instructional staff and support staff have very little direct connections to Aboriginal youth outside of the few they engage with within the institution. It was also recognized that while instructional staff came from businesses and industries that hired Aboriginal peoples, few instructors would have the background to clearly understand the barriers and educational perspectives that Aboriginal students have that come to NAIT.

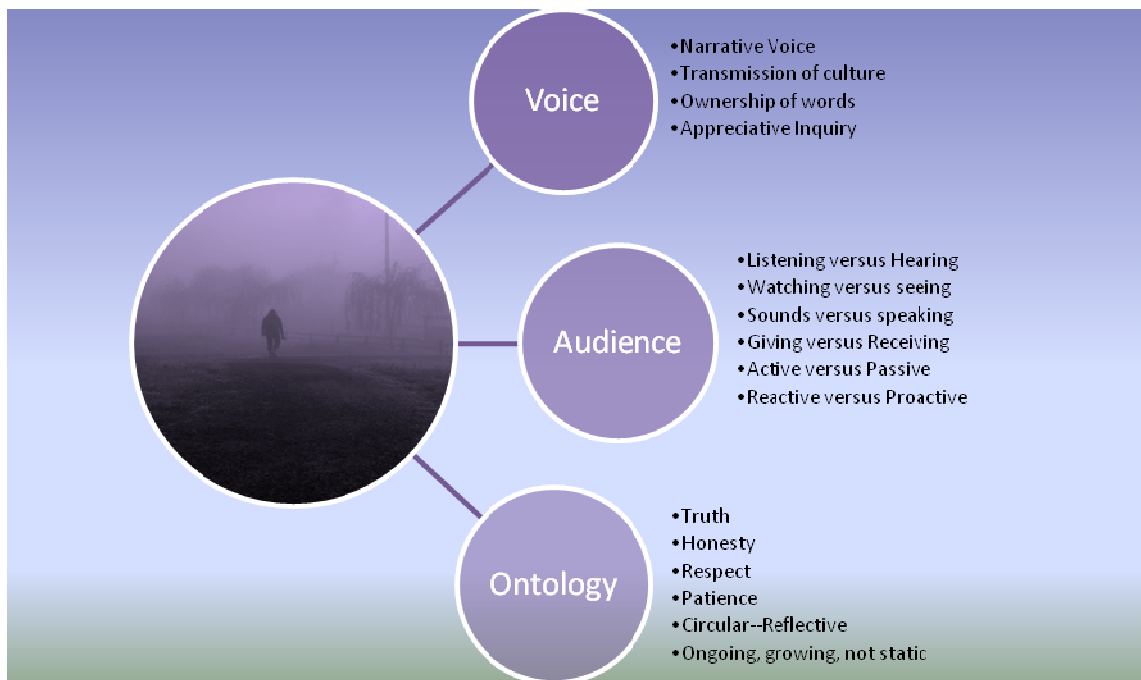
To effectively act upon this identified gap in instructional preparation, NAIT identified the need for a course to be developed that would bring Aboriginal Cultural Awareness to its instructional staff, and later to its general population. Funding was received for the project in 2006.

In the past few years, NAIT reached beyond the Encana Centre to initiate its first Aboriginal Awareness Course project for instructors and staff at NAIT. The course is unique in the province and will provide a model for other institutions to follow. NAIT began the project by hiring instructional designers to work alongside Aboriginal community Elders and leaders to take the vision of Aboriginal Awareness to the classroom. It was concluded early in the work that not only would such programming support instructors, but it would be of great benefit for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students also.

While the goal seemed simple enough, the actual task of carrying out this vision provided a number of interesting challenges. The course development would push curriculum developers to examine their own preconceived notions about current curriculum design and build new understandings of possible instructional design. The project would also challenge leaders and developers to look again at what was held by so many members of NAIT's Centre of Teaching community as valid Best Practices. Central to the work was also the emerging question to whether The Centre of Teaching and Learning at NAIT (CTL) was fully prepared to develop a curriculum that would challenge current educational practices used in some areas of NAIT. The Centre traditionally supports a Kolb (Kolbs—1950's) perspective outcomes-based curriculum design.

The discourse would be challenging and rewarding and would bring out many important elements to consider when developing such curriculum. In retrospect, it was not surprising that the greater barriers to this development of this work would not originate between educational curriculum course developers and the Aboriginal community, but rather between the cross-cultural barriers of those that held strongly to Kolb theory and those that held contemporary educational perspectives. Such discourse is healthy for any growing institution particularly in light of the institutions move to granting degrees. The discourse would provide insight into current barriers faced by Aboriginal peoples and also challenge curriculum development at the institution. Furthermore it would substantiate the rich cultural practice of storytelling as explored in the following section.

The Power of Narrative Voices



Narrative Voices Topic Overview

Finding the Student in Narrative

A councilor for Aboriginal students recounted this actual story about an Aboriginal male student. It is used here with permission by the storyteller:

He [the Aboriginal student] did not want to speak it out, but after much prodding he told me his concerns. The teacher had asked four students to be leaders in his classroom and to pick out their team members. I was sitting in the back of the classroom, not knowing anyone. As the students picked out the teams, I was left alone with no team wanting me. The teacher spoke out loudly, “Okay, I see you’re the LAST one—no one wanted you, eh! You go with that team over there. I was sent to be on a team with four upper middle class female students who looked rather distraught that I was thrown in with their team. They hardly looked at me during the class, and when they had meetings they would not tell me. Neither would any of them give me a phone number so that I could contact them. I was an oddity to them and I knew it. By the way I failed the class because they stated I did not contribute to the project—what can I say! As a councilor, I was overwhelmed at the cultural bridge that had destroyed this young person’s world.

The story appears almost unbelievable. It is unconscious able that such a thing could happen to a student in the day and age. However, the story is and serves to reinforce the need of courses that will help instructors to become more perceptive in their teaching practice. The teacher in this case probably did not intend the outcome of his or her actions, but nevertheless, a student was placed into a very awkward place. This was compounded for the student for a number of reasons. First, placing a male student with an all female student

group can cause a dynamic where you are placing in an awkward position. This was magnified when it was obvious the girls all knew each other and came from the same background and similar financial backgrounds. Now, compound this with a student that is considered a “left-over” because he comes from an environment totally foreign to the other students and you create a situation that is incredibly awkward and can only lead to deeper hurt, especially from a culture that continues to face open rejection, alienation, open prejudice, and even resentment.

This example highlights that for Aboriginal Cultural Awareness to be successful at NAIT it must address current face-to-face issues that could represent themselves in the daily work of our instructors and not be limited to information “about” the various Aboriginal cultures. The material needs to draw from actual events, and pose questions for the instructors to act upon. There is power in Narrative—Power Power to convince; power to shift opinion; and empowerment to act.

Finding Insight into Teaching through Narrative

Finding insight into teaching was also a highlight discovered in the development of the course. Course developers had opportunities to visit with Elders and receive direct teaching from them. As one course developer stated, learning in this manner from the Elders was a privilege in itself. He wished that others could experience what he had gained. He recounted the following story about an Elder’s story told to him:

The Elder pointed out that learning is acquired only when one has learned to listen in an Aboriginal way: The Elder shared the following story:

When I was about three or four my grandmother would go into the bush around where we lived and go off to be alone. One day, I called out, Hey, can I come? She flatly replied, no—you do not ask! The next day she was going out and called to me—you come with me. I followed her for quite a while until she found a small clearing. There she sat down and became silent. I sat quietly also—well until some ants started crawling up my leg and around my neck. I swatted at them. She looked at me and stated, stop moving—be quite. I tried, but soon more and more ants came and I was wiggling all over. In her quiet manner she addressed me—Look you be quiet and still now or you will not be able to hear the song the ant has for you. I fought now that day very hard to listen for the song—it wasn’t easy because they still kept tickling me.

The narrative was practical and illuminated another aspect of Aboriginal knowing. Learning comes through listening, through fighting through distractions, through respect for nature, and being attuned with an anticipation to learn something. The Elder smiled at me after he told this story. It was a wonderful moment that invited further exploration of bringing these ways of knowing into the course.

What stood out most about the instruction was that sense of how the four foundations were always woven into the story being told to them--Knowledge, understanding, honesty, and respect. To create a successful course these elements also needed to be explored, as they would unlock the third element of the nature of Aboriginal Culture Awareness. This would occur because the participant would begin to develop a sense of how cultural values and beliefs are interspersed within stories told over and over again. The Elder knew by retelling the story in such a way, that this aspect of awareness would not be lost, even though it was recognized as the most difficult to incorporate into a course given the epistemological differences that existed in the two cultures.

Conclusion

Finally, Aboriginal Cultural Awareness embraces a number of key areas of teaching. It provides a sense of the needs of students and how specific culturally defined groups can be disadvantaged simply by poorly carried out instructional practice. It recognizes that barriers are often created without malice or prejudice, but come as a result of just not knowing about a student's background or way they see the world. Aboriginal informs practice on many levels and it is not isolated to only supporting Aboriginal students. Many of the elements discovered in the course can also be applied to all students and provides a way to think more reflectively about the way we instruct other people. It provides a mechanism for refreshing practice, and growing as a teacher.

Being open to other ways of knowing like narrative also helps instructors to develop alternative ways of reaching their students. Does it mean that NAIT instructors should not be critical or test what is being said? Of course not! NAIT instructors should be all the more critical and test what is being said, but the key is that instructors will not be so quick to dismiss another approach that is being attempted by a student in solving a given problem. Aboriginal Cultural Awareness rewards other ways of knowing. It provides opportunities for instructors to be open to discovery instead of being predetermined that there is only one way to understanding a concept. Aboriginal Cultural Awareness unfolded in this manner invites open dialogue and welcomes debate; it does not mean an abandonment of scientific investigation, rather it establishes a climate for further inquiry.

As demonstrated in this paper NAIT is purposed to embrace a larger understanding of the term. NAIT's vision, "to be globally valued for student success, applied research and innovation" is not only stated here, but through this innovate work it is established. Through the development of this course, NAIT recognizes the valuable contribution our Aboriginal

students make to our institution. The institution also values the wonderful contribution of its instructional staff who devote hundreds of hours to improve teaching practice in order to help their students succeed. NAIT values our Aboriginal community also and will continue to build relationships and listen to its leaders. NAIT will continue to find more ways to meet the needs of its students. This innovative approach is just one way that will equip our instructors and staff members at NAIT to support our entire student as we build dreams together.

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