

Elders as Leaders in Post-Secondary Education

Canada's First Nations have an uphill battle to fight when it comes to post-secondary education. Residential schools severed formal education from Native culture and identity, such that many of the wounds are still felt, making many suspicious of all levels of formal education. Although the statistics are improving (see Frideres 1998:161), Natives are still under-represented in post-secondary institutions. Clearly, here is a situation where, to use Terry O'Banion's key phrase for educational innovation, the 'architecture of education' must be remade.

There are a number of ways in which First Nations are doing that remaking. One is the 'institutionalizing' of the Native Elder in schools at all levels. In this abstract, the nature of this institutionalizing will be discussed as it applies to post-secondary education.

In 1987, Beatrice Medicine, a Lakota educator addressed some of the basic problems encountered in the first stages with Elders becoming involved with formal education. She was concerned that although First Nations wanted Elders involved, they were not sure how to address concrete issues such as who was an Elder, and what an Elder should do. Early on in the process, not surprisingly, mistakes were made. Telling is the following commentary by Roderick Mark of the University of Calgary:

"...we have misused the role of elder through our ignorance and failure to see that not all elders are teachers, not all elders are spiritual leaders and not all old people are elders."
(Medicine 1987:147)

What Is An Elder?

What is an Elder? The following definitions are useful in establishing this important concept:

"A label given to men or women who, recognized by others, possesses knowledge of Aboriginal stories, values, and the history of communities and nations." (Draft proposal, the Ontario Curriculum, Grades 11 and 12, Natives Studies, January 1999, p69)

"It is important to note that the title "Elder" does not necessarily indicate age. In Aboriginal societies, one is designated an Elder after acquiring significant wisdom and experience." (Meadow Lake Tribal Council website)

"Elders are repositories of cultural and philosophical knowledge and are the transmitters of such information." (Medicine 1987:142)

"[Elders are] those people who have earned the respect of their own community and who are looked upon as elders in their own society." (Mark, cited in Medicine 1987:146)

We can therefore say that , for purposes of education, Elders are people who:

- have significant wisdom in areas of traditional aboriginal knowledge.
- are recognized as having that wisdom by their community, their Nation.
- have the capacity to transmit this knowledge to others.

The following short biography of ray Peter (Qwul Shi Mut), Elder-in-Residence at the Nanaimo Campus of Malaspina University-College in British Columbia, aptly demonstrates what being an Elder so defined means:

“In the past Ray has worked at the Victoria Friendship Centre, the Native Heritage Centre in Duncan, as well as driving truck, logging, and various other seasonal labours. Ray also heads a Tzingwa Dance Group out of Duncan, and we can all attest to his beautiful singing voice.

Ray actively participates in his culture and traditions, and never lets us forget that while he is an elder, he is continually learning as well.

As well as working at Malaspina, Ray teaches the Hul Qami? Num language at John Barsby Secondary School in Nanaimo and has been working within the district for the last five years.” (Malaspina University-College website)

What Roles Should Elders Play?

One of the early difficulties that Medicine discusses, involving Elders becoming education leaders, is aptly stated by Kay M. McClenney, in her keynote presentation at the League for Innovation in the Community College’s conference of 1998. It concerns why educational innovations fail. The first two of five reasons she gave for such failure are:

- Innovation falls short when we use it as decoration.
- Innovation falls short when we choose symbol over substance.

A Blackfoot woman asked to be part of an Elder’s Committee, addressed those kinds of difficulties when she replied: What is the role of elders? Are we taken off the shelf just to give the opening prayer at some meeting?” (Medicine 1987:146)

It is vitally important that Elders as leaders in post-secondary education are not decorative, not symbolic, but are deeply entrenched in the new architecture of Native education as foundations. Two such foundation positions held by Native Elders in post-secondary education are as Elders-in-Residence and as Visiting Elders. Some institutions, particularly those with a significant percentage of Native students and with a number of Native stream programs have both, while others, with a lower percentage of Native students and fewer programs, opt more for just the latter status. A good example of the former is Lakehead University in Thunder Bay in northwestern Ontario, deep in the traditional country of the Ojibwa or Anishnabe people. Their Native stream programs include:

- Master of Arts in Native and Canadian Philosophy
- Bachelor of Arts and Honours Bachelor of Arts (Indigenous Learning)
- Native Teacher Education Program
- Native Language Instructors Program
- Native Nurses Entry Program
- Native Access Program for Engineering
- Native Access Program (General Arts and Science)
- Aboriginal Summer Institute

Lakehead has an Elders-in-Residence Program, a Visiting Humanities Fellowship in Native Philosophy, an Annual Elders Conference and Elder/Healing Circles. How busy that type of program can make the Elder-in-Residence can be seen in the following description of some of the work done by Louise Underwood (Thulih-wul-wut), Elder-in-Residence, Cowichan Campus, Malaspina University-College, who, in addition to her close connection with the Child and Youth Care - First Nations Diploma program:

“...also is a resource on subjects of First Nations cultural practices, traditions, and protocol to faculty and staff. Louise has taken a lead in directing cultural events, hosting guests and other visiting elders. Louise has provided a link between Malaspina University-College and first Nations organizations and assists in building the vision of cultural and elder participation [into a] university-college setting.” (Malaspina University-College website)

Sometimes that must involve the students coming to the Elders, rather than the other way around. In Alaska, for example:

“One of the strategies that is proving most successful in connecting the school curriculum to students lives in culturally and educationally meaningful ways is through the involvement of Native Elders as teachers and the real-world setting of a subsistence camp environment as the classroom.” (Alaska Native Knowledge Network)

A good example of the latter type of institution is the University of Ottawa. While they only have an estimated 100 Native students, they run a Visiting Elders program through their Aboriginal Resource Centre. During the current (1998-1999) academic year they are having eight elders coming from various First Nations for periods of a few days. The stated goal of their program is “...to provide Aboriginal students with support and also to educate non-Aboriginal people in an effort to promote respect and awareness of Aboriginal culture.” (Heartfield 1998)

Visiting Elders programs are available at a number of community colleges, particularly those, such as Georgian College, that have Native students at a number of different campuses.

The Key to Success: Elders as Transition People

In his *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey speaks of the important leadership role of what he (following his friend Dr. Terry Warner) refers to as ‘transition’ people.

He speaks of such people as rising above the negative life scripting that has been given to them, changing them to more positive scripts for the generations to follow. He sees this as involving a strong spiritual component that integral to a balancing of the physical, the mental, the social/emotional and the spiritual.

In the following statement of the roles of Elders at Malaspina University-College, we hear this role echoed in their words:

“The elders are the spiritual component of our program. They say the morning prayers. They are the ones that connect us with our higher power and keep us well grounded. They do this for both the students and the staff. They act as encyclopedias of history, healing and humanism. The elders carry the wisdom that came before us. They help us all find ways to heal ourselves and find the joy in our own hearts.” (Malaspina University-College website)

They must do this through a process of attachment, re-establishing those links of learning with culture that were severed by the residential schools. This attachment connects natives with their whole selves, their whole selves with their identity, and the identity with the schools and with formal learning.

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