

# **First Nations Ways of Knowing: The Circle of Knowledge**

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The Circle of Knowledge (T-C-K) is a unique research project focused on documenting successful and effective pedagogical strategies that addresses fluency in Anishinaabe language through community initiatives, activities and an immersion school. Group teaching and learning, specifically, the precursor to cooperative learning called social interdependence theory is the theoretical framework. Action research was selected as the methodology as it was considered to be the least intrusive and provides a process for continuous improvement of the program. The challenges and successes to addressing fluency in the Anishinaabe language is a unique portrayal of life in this First Nation community. Currently, the pedagogical strategies utilized have dramatically increased the level of fluency for this First Nation community. Documentation of these teaching strategies have proven useful for the Walpole Island First Nation and it is anticipated that many Indigenous communities around the world may benefit from adapting these strategies as appropriate for their circumstances.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Circle of Knowledge (T-C-K) research project is an Aboriginal Pilot Program funded through the Social Science and Humanities Council of Canada (SSHRCC) that requires applicants to have unique relationships focused on genuine partnerships between First Nation communities and Canadian Universities (SSHRCC, 2012). The T-C-K is a research partnership between the Walpole Island First Nation in southern Ontario and the University of British Columbia that provides an understanding of the relationship between First Nations and their respective intellectual and cultural traditions with the Canadian mainstream public.

Walpole Island is North American un-ceded territory and has been continuously inhabited by Anishinaabe people since time immemorial. This First Nation is in the Great Lakes region at the northern end of Lake St. Clair, in the St. Clair river delta. Situated between the State of Michigan (USA) to the west and the southern region of Ontario (Canada) to the east. The territory consists of six islands and five unique ecosystems: Deciduous Forest;

River Prairie; Oak Savannah; Tall Grass Prairie; and the largest Wetlands in the Great Lakes region. The territory has twelve per cent of Canada's rare species at risk. The First Nation community has approximately five thousand citizens, of which, approximately half live outside of the community. There have been approximately seventy-five fluent speakers of the Anishinaabe language or three per cent of Walpole Island residents (WIFN Language Survey, 2008).

The on-going history of initiatives at re-establishing the Anishinaabe language through organized programming began over forty years ago. During the 1970's, Anishinaabe language initiatives were housed in small buildings and out of private homes where small booklets were produced for distribution to the community. During the 1980's, language initiatives were somewhat dispersed amongst programs and departments in the community with evening language classes occurring sporadically and inconsistently without a focus on fluency (WIFN Task Force, 2011). A major transition and challenge occurred in the 1990's when the WIFN Board of Education, (1996) adopted Anishinaabe language policy, which would create immersion classrooms beginning with Junior Kindergarten and expand every year to include a grade level and a classroom until the elementary and the future high schools would have one classroom in English and one classroom in Anishinaabemowin for every grade level. Unfortunately, the implementation of the policy has never occurred, but the intent was there.

The First Nation (WIFN) community developed a five-year plan to address re-establishing the Anishinaabe language in the community. The initial part of this plan has been on developing fluency in the Anishinaabe language with a group of adults from the community by attending an immersion school called MaaTooKiiDaa Anishinaabemowin. This immersion program began in September 2010 with twenty full time students that attend school thirty hours per week. The program runs along the same calendar as the elementary program in the community, which is in operation from September until June. The program immerses students in Anishinaabemowin, giving the students the skills to speak and think in Anishinaabe (WIFN Task Force, 2011). The current community based learning at Walpole Island First Nation is the re-establishment of the Indigenous language (Anishinaabe) and the many cultural traditions connected and held within the context of the language. The foundation of the T-C-K project is to provide a seamless

conduit of communication, ethics and balance with regard to academic and Indigenous knowledge.

A wide range of WIFN community members in various departments are familiar with the importance of research components in any program development. It is with this understanding that the community approached the researcher, rather than the researcher approaching the community. This is a very unique situation as it certainly implies that this is a true partnership. The approach to research is focused on benefiting the community in terms of addressing the T-C-K and enhancing existing group activities. WIFN has maintained a strong community-based decision making approach to sustaining its cultural heritage and traditional knowledge of the environment, while interacting effectively with the non-indigenous population. The WIFN community has worked to educate its Canadian neighbours on the impact of pollution and development in the community. An example is the research conducted on the species at risk.

#### THE ANISHINAABE LANGUAGE SPEAKERS GROUP

Some members of the Anishinaabe Language Advisory Group (ALAG) are speakers of the Anishinaabe language. It is the Anishinaabe Language speakers that have motivated themselves by teaching and speaking the language. Each individual in the group is committed to speaking and teaching the Anishinaabe language and focusing on communicating without the use of the English language. Of course, this creates some difficulties, but these are addressed on a daily basis.

ALAG is a non-profit organization and a volunteer group comprised of fluent speakers and learners from Walpole Island First Nation working together in perseverance to have the original language heard and spoken again as a first language.

Niigaan nikeyaa waa-ni-zhichkeying:

Wii-zhitoong, wii-gaanjwebshkamong miinwaa  
 debwetmong waa-nweying ji-giyakwong nokiiwnan,  
 miidash gda mnishemnaa, gda binoojimnaanig miinwaa  
 da binoojimwaan ji-noodmowaad, ntam nishnaabemowin,  
 naasaab gaa-zhi-daawenmowaad giw gete nishnaabeg gaa-  
 zhi-bi-giigdowaad.

Above statement in Anishinaabe translated to English:

**Vision Statement:**

Develop, promote, and encourage language initiatives so that our community, our children and our children's – children will hear, learn and enjoy speaking our original language, as did our ancestors.

**CONTEXT**

The Indigenous people in Canada as North American citizens have been historically referred to as “Indians” by many colonizing entities. During the late part of the twentieth century, the term “First Nations” has been used to reflect how the Indigenous people that have treaties with Canada now refer to themselves. First Nations people and communities have evolved over many years of contact with colonizing forces, which include the Spanish, French and most recently the British. The British experience included a political and military alliance against the Americans during the War of 1812 (Frideres & Gadacz, 2001).

Treaties with First Nations provided the required legitimacy of nationhood for the British colony that evolved into what is known today as Canada. Canada's continued relationship with their allies and partners in the development of the new nation became a dismal state of affairs due to a lack of sharing of opportunities for nation-building and self-determination. The treaty-making era provided the much needed land base for Canada in exchange for many fiduciary obligations to the First Nations, which included health, education and well-being. It is through the educational experience in Residential schools in Canada administered by the many Church denominations where a process of cultural genocide took place. The focus of this cultural genocide and forced assimilation was on the children of First Nations (Miller,1996).

There are many stories about Canada's national shame that can be found on many web sites and publications. One example is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, which provides specific information on Residential schools and First Nation citizens that attended these schools (TRCC, 2012). Through processes of genocide and assimilation, the children were separated from their parents, families and communities and many endured verbal, physical and sexual abuse by school employees and other students.

Many First Nation communities were effected by the abuse that their members endured which resulted in social and psychological trauma as well as adverse effects on language, values and culture. "English only" was a policy that was strictly enforced in the Residential schools. Those students that were caught speaking their Indigenous language were severely punished and brutalized leaving long term scars. As these generations of children went back to their communities or made their way out in the world, they grew up without an understanding of their mother tongue and faced the many problems of identity crisis (Miller,1996).

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The "Circle of Learning" program, focuses on documenting the collective, group-reflexive and community relevant learning and teaching process that utilizes a pedagogical method termed by Johnson & Johnson as "collaborative learning" or "cooperative learning" (Johnson, Johnson & Smith, 2007; Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2000; Johnson & Johnson 2009). This method is grounded on the premise that through social interdependence – where each member of the learning groups feels they have a responsibility to, and commitment from the group and thus the learning process - progressive learning can take place (Johnson, Johnson & Smith 2007; Sharan 2010). By examining this process within Indigenous communities that function in both "traditional" societies as well as modern societies, such as the WIFN the evaluation of this learning project serves to fill an important gap in the academic literature. Ohmagari & Berkes (1997) note when evaluating transmission of Indigenous knowledge with Omushkego Cree women in Northern Ontario, much of the current academic literature focuses on the fact that information transmission occurs through "symbolic communication emphasizing values, personality traits and attitudes" rather than the "details of transmission of practical skills and knowledge." Thus the "transmission of local and Indigenous knowledge remains a neglected field" (p. 198). In addition, many of the larger socio-political realities that continue to affect Indigenous people such as the legacy of colonization with its devaluing of traditional knowledges and languages, the effects that Residential schools had in interrupting inter-generational transmission of knowledges are quite similar to that of former and future Anishnaabe language speakers in Southern Ontario, Canada. Ohmagari and Berkes (1997) also note that, in

addition to legacy of colonialism, the increase in modernization and access to premade goods there is a perceived lack of value or perceived need for particular skills refer to this as “changes in cultural orientation” (1997, p. 199).

As stated by Johnson, Johnson and Smith (2007), for a learning situation to be cooperative, students must perceive that they are positively interdependent with the members of their learning group, that is, students must believe that they are part of a “learning community” (2007, p. 23). In addition, reflection (or group processing) on what is working and not working in the group, is identified as an essential element so that there can be a “continuous improvement of the processes” (2007, p. 24). In fact, a review of the literature shows five consistent points that help shape collaborative learning, namely: (1) The role of trust between learners, facilitator and as a group; (2) Collaborative/Cooperative Learning consists of very different methods; (3) Cultivating a sense of responsibility to the learning process, peers and content; (3) Importance of good implementation; Learn by doing (Ohmagari & Berkes, 1997; Sharan, 2010; Johnson & Johnson 2009; Johnson, Johnson & Stanne, 2009).

However, although this concept of collaborative learning has been absorbed into a variety of pedagogical situations and - as noted by Sharan (2010) often imported worldwide - the methods that are used to create collaborative or cooperative learning, vary greatly. In addition there is an inconsistency in how these methods are taught as well as the skill at adapting, or abandoning, various methods cross-culturally (2010, pp. 304-305; 308-310). Collaborative learning, as an ideal, seems to fit the model for the “perfect education” – valuing the student and the learning process, but it also recognizes that all teaching takes place in a particular context and the facilitator/teaching/instructor must be sensitive to how learning takes place within that context – as Johnson, Johnson and Stanne (2000) noted– one cannot just teach the methods or strategies without having a firm grasp on, what they term the “conceptual cooperative learning methods;” a fluency in the conceptual framework of CL which can then be adapted to particular circumstances. Put more simply, Johnson, Johnson & Stanne (2000) note that there are two kinds of teacher training in CL – “the direct cooperative learning methods” (learning particular exercises and techniques) and the “conceptual cooperative learning methods” (fluency in the conceptual framework of CL which can then be adapted to particular circumstances) (2000, p.5). It is of all

the authors' opinions that for CL to be successful the conceptual cooperative learning method is key.

Collaborative Learning practices can be found in formal university settings as noted by Bergon, Wright, Brown and Brooks' evaluation of "hervuta" a CL method used at a University of Michigan's undergraduate course, the English language taking place in Vietnam and Singapore that were evaluated by Sharan and, although perhaps not named as such, the values and traditional knowledge (TK) passed on through Omushkego Cree communities in subarctic Canada (Ohmagari & Berkes, 1997). What appears to be the common element in such divergent contexts is how both teaching and learning is understood, and understood in relation to one another. Sharan, citing Brody (1998) notes that teaching can be thought of as transmission, transaction or transformation (p. 205). According to her the most successful CL took place when instructors perceived the goal of teaching to be "transformation" rather than simple transmission (pp. 306). This was often seen with the Omushkego Cree communities who noted, the eight step flow chart of the learning "transmission" process consists of until one successfully reaches mastery and is transformed into a teacher themselves (pp. 204-205). Such a concept works well with programs such as the MaaTooKiiDaa Anishinaabemowin, which focuses on revitalizing traditional languages and cultures where what is being "transformed" is not only the participants' knowledge but also internalizing and thus promoting the valuing of such knowledge to others within the community who can become potential learners and teachers. What becomes key then is both the methods as well as *how* success is measured. As Johnson, Johnson and Stanne explain it, success is defined as:

Achievements, higher-level reasoning, retention, time on task, transfer of learning, achievement motivation, intrinsic motivation, continuing motivation, social and cognitive development, moral reasoning, perspective-taking, interpersonal attraction, social support, friendships. Reduction of stereotypes and prejudice, valuing differences, psychological health, self-esteem, social competencies, internalization of values, and the quality of learning environment.  
(2000, Exhibit B)

The authors (two of whom coined the concept of CL in the 1970s) reviewed 194 studies that claimed to use CL and in the process identified ten distinct strategies; all, which they determined had a "significant positive impact on

student achievement.” They noted that CL methods are utilized in all levels of formal schooling (preschool – graduate school) as well as “non-school educational programs.” (Johnson, Johnson, Stanne, 2000). The ten strategies are:

Learning Together and Alone; Teams-Games-Tournaments; Group Investigation; Constructive Controversy; Jigsaw Procedure; Student teams Achievement Divisions (STAD); Complex instruction; Team Acceleration Instruction; Cooperative Learning Structures; and Cooperative integrated Reading & Composition (CIRC). (2000, p. 12)

This is not an exhaustive list of group teaching and learning strategies, but is certainly sufficient for discussion and analysis purposes.

## METHODS

The methodology used to address social interdependence theory has been through action research (AR). As there have been many community based language activities and programs in existence in the community, there are some teaching methods that are known to have worked and those that may need to be improved on. Typically AR starts with an idea, observation, puzzle or focus and is a cyclical series of steps or actions, which provide the basis for personal reflection (perhaps as well as planning and reading) on the process and its outcomes. There are then further steps and reflection as the action research ‘cycle’ is repeated (Nunan, 1993).

AR is currently addressed by many practicing teachers and administrators. In many ways AR was developed in response to research that is abstract and a need to study a “real school’ situation McMillan (2004, p. 12) There are many workshops and training sessions made available through Colleges and Universities as well as a wide range of materials available to address applications of action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Mertler 2012).

Data collection processes with video has been an on-going process. There have been some challenges with camera shyness, based on the misunderstanding that the video recordings there would be used to produce a movie, be viewed by the public or get uploaded on the Internet. Those students that indicated that they were shy around cameras have indicated that their shyness started before exposure to cameras in the T-C-K project. The teachers have been very cooperative and are at ease with the cameras in the classroom. The following strategies have been observed during the data collection process:

Group Investigation and what is referred to as “learning together” has been observed daily, this is the basic learning process, and all students are engaged in a process referred to as total physical response (TPR). There is a wide range of conversations, which provide processes of “learning together”. Another aspect of group learning that is referred to as “learning alone” is a process that can be considered as an individual’s time for reflection. Through observation, the focus has been on the process of “learning together” which has evolved into a learning community.

## FINDINGS

There have been clear indications regarding the processes of ethical review requirements that effect research with First Nations. The T-C-K project imposed stringent ethical standards on itself based on the United Nations guidelines outlined in the report on protecting Indigenous heritage (Castellano, 2004). The community made clear understandings with regard to presentation of information on a regular basis. Early experiences with outside researchers left some community members with feelings of disengagement or a feeling that something was taken. The initial visits of the T-C-K were focused on observation, listening and seeking input into the ethical review process. Time became an element that had not been considered as the passage of time is at a different pace with regard to seeking community input as well as the time the application took to wind its way through the ethical review committee at the University.

The initial visits on the First Nation community were also information sessions to share how the research could be designed to be most beneficial and useful for the community. The overall documentation through data collection provides a unique portrayal of life within the MaaTooKiiDaa Anishinaabemowin (language immersion school). There are clear challenges during the early stages of the program. Many students indicated that it took some time for them to “get used to hearing Anishinaabemowin all day”. Other comments had to do with making sense of the sounds and being able to respond or understand what the conversation was about. There was some indication from students that there was some type of block that they encountered after six months of immersion. Additional stress and anxiety as well as questioning their own identity were common experiences. There was some indication that guest lecturers that visited and shared their knowledge

would alleviate some of this anxiety along with having a “circle time” to share their thoughts and feelings.

One of the unique findings has been the use of drama and music in the immersion school classroom. Production of skits; songs; exercises; and food preparation. All activities utilize communication in the Anishinaabe language without any use of the English language. Other student led activities in the language immersion school makes use of images such as digital videos, pictures and multimedia as part of their presentation.

There is an annual Anishinaabe language conference in Sault Ste Marie, hosted by the Sault Tribe of Chippewa Anishinaabe. This conference is a great opportunity to showcase student projects as well as different phases of the project. The lead teacher and two of the MaaTooKiiDaa students presented a workshop at the Anishinaabe language conference focusing on the class activities and the processes of group teaching and learning.

## CONCLUSIONS

The community has much to be proud of with the initiatives that they have taken upon themselves. The policies based on the philosophy of Pratt, (1892) “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man” has not been successful. There are still Anishinaabe youth that will grow up with an interest and a commitment to learning their Anishinaabe language. The Residential schools, Churches and the Government of Canada played pivotal roles in the future of First Nation communities. They have created hardships, poverty and disenfranchisement from the land and from within the individual. Language immersion may not address all of the problems that occur within First Nation communities, but certainly will provide an opportunity to instill pride and knowledge that the ancestors of First Nation people held dearly.

There are some aspects of these findings that require further study. The use of drama education as a process of teaching and learning Indigenous languages is a theme throughout many parts of the world. There is a great deal of body language that is used by fluent speakers of Anishinaabe language. Utilizing drama education and indigenizing the process makes sense as it will provide an aspect of addressing body language and body movement. Another aspect of these findings has to do with the many themes that are displayed. Cooking, music and exercise, are themes that can be expanded on as well. It is easy to get excited with the many opportunities that an

immersion program can provide for the community as there is witness to success and progress in obtaining fluency.

The overall significance of this study is its' focus on contributing to the much-needed information and literature addressing fluency issues in the First Nation community. Continued research along with co-creation of knowledge will continue to evolve and develop. The need to provide a glimpse into the lives of a First Nation community and the positive process of re-building a vital part of Anishinaabe identity such as language and culture is very important.

The real significance of this study is that it opens the door to understanding this First Nation community through the eyes and hearts of the people themselves. In many ways one could consider this project as something akin to a vision quest, where wisdom and knowledge cannot be separated from the spiritual and the emotional. A large number of conceptions, misconceptions, distortions and assumptions have always dominated how the Anishinaabe people and First Nations communities are viewed by mainstream society. This study gives voice to truths and realities. The responses by participants from this First Nation community will reflect patience and dignity despite the struggles and challenges as individuals and the multitude of challenges that have been created due to past injustices such as human rights violations, oppression, and genocide suffered by previous generations.

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