Study Title: Using Traditional and Contemporary Aboriginal Music and Art Activities to Improve Aboriginal Post-Secondary Programming

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Abstract

This study investigates Aboriginal student experiences in an Aboriginal transition program that was co-developed by the student-participants. Data was collected from participants in the study through a focus group, journals, and surveys. The results show that adding Aboriginal cultural activities to the curriculum improved the experience of students in the transition program. Students felt that their contributions were important and valued, that they learned more about their traditional culture, and that their contributions enhanced their experience in the program. Allowing Aboriginal students to participate in their own education empowers them and improves their overall educational experience.

Aboriginal Transition Programs

Aboriginal students in post-secondary programs sometimes need to have an increased focus on academic preparation before entering these professional programs. A 2005 poll conducted by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) found that most Aboriginal students believe that the education they receive on reserve is insufficient, and that when they complete their education on reserve they are about two grades behind students who attended public school, an opinion also shared by AANDC (Mendelson, 2006). However, a comparison between First Nations and public schools is not a straightforward juxtaposition. There are systemic inequities that privilege non-Aboriginal students over Aboriginal students, such as lack of Aboriginal cultural relevance in curriculum, marginalization of Aboriginal people in society and in curriculum, and failing to involve Aboriginal people in curriculum development, as well as education that still has an assimilationist agenda (Agbo, 2002; Cajete,
Government underfunding of Aboriginal education programs impacts academic programming at the primary and secondary levels, and as a result, students who come to university or college from Aboriginal communities are not necessarily receiving the same level of academic preparation for post-secondary education as their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Hill, 2007; Hull et al., 1995; Pijl-Zierber, 2008). Aboriginal students can greatly benefit from taking transition programs that offer basic courses in Science, Math, and Academic Writing, which help to ensure that they have the necessary skills to succeed in college or university. In addition to offering academic courses, Aboriginal transition programs are meant to provide supports to students, both academic and personal, as well as to create a safe, welcoming environment for students who are far from home and who have left home for the first time (R.A. Malatest & Associates, 2005; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000).

One of the ways to create this welcoming environment is to include Aboriginal cultural activities within academic programming (Battiste, Bell, & Findlay, 2002; Newton, 2007), something that has been shown to lead to improved academic performance by Aboriginal students (Bouvier & Karlenzig, 2006; Brade, Duncan, & Sokal, 2003; Evans, McDonald, & Nyce, 1999; Lee, 2007). The length of these transition programs ranges from six weeks to two years (Aboriginal University Education Roundtable, 2007; National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2003), and this poses a further problem when students in these programs apply for funding from AANDC, who are more likely to fund students in degree programs, rather than in transition programs (Aboriginal Education Roundtable, 2007). However, transition programs are important for the future success of Aboriginal students as they continue their education
According to Riecken et al. (2006), in addition to contributing to student success, education that includes aspects of Aboriginal culture in curriculum has the ability to provide a transformative experience for students. This transformation occurs when Aboriginal students feel pride in their own culture (Brade et al., 2003), which is one of the goals of infusing Aboriginal curriculum with cultural content (Goulet, 2001; VanEvery-Albert, 2008).

As an Ojibway instructor, I believed that it was important to increase Aboriginal cultural content in Aboriginal programming at our college. We began by offering an Aboriginal Music course to students in the College Studies program, which is an Aboriginal transition program at the college. This study examines the experiences and impressions of Aboriginal students who have taken the Aboriginal Music course as part of the transition program.

**Empowering Aboriginal Students**

Student empowerment is transformative because it helps students to feel a sense of ownership and control over their own learning (Kunkel, 2002; Piper, 2006) by letting students know that their contributions have value (Curwen Doige, 2001). Aboriginal students, who have been disenfranchised by the education system for many generations, will feel empowered if their contributions are valued in the classroom. In addition, it makes sense that the more control students have, the more they will enjoy what they are learning and the greater chance that they will retain what they have learned (Kunkel, 2002), particularly if Aboriginal students are learning about their own cultures and history. Positive education about Aboriginal cultures and history leads to greater pride in themselves, which has been tied to greater self-confidence and translates into higher achievement (Brade et al., 2003). Empowering students leads to greater participation by students in their own education because they become more motivated and
engaged by what they are learning when they are active participants in their own education (Chan, 2001). Motivation and engagement are often major problems for Aboriginal students who are in the mainstream education system (Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000), but involving students in the planning process of their education demonstrates to them that their instructors value and respect the students’ insight and perspective into their own education (Fielding, 2001; McCuddy, Pinar, & Gingerich, 2008; Rudduck, 2007).

Aboriginal-controlled curriculum would lead to independence of Aboriginal people by celebrating Aboriginal culture and freeing Aboriginals from the colonial system under which Aboriginal education currently operates (Kirkness, 1998), and it would also result in students learning the truth about their own history and culture. This type of education would focus on the real-life experiences of contemporary Aboriginal people, such as art, music, oral history, and learning about the land; it would include cultural activities such as feasts, traditional camps, healing circles, drumming, dancing, and ceremonies (Riecken et al., 2006). Music is a common theme that runs through all of these experiences and continues to be an essential aspect of Aboriginal culture that should be included in the development of new curriculum.

**The Aboriginal Music Course**

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences and impressions of Aboriginal students who have taken the Aboriginal Music course as part of the College Studies program. As reported in this study, the five-month Aboriginal Music course was piloted in 2010 at the college level to increase the level of traditional cultural content in a 10-month Aboriginal transition program. This study was conducted during the second offering of the Aboriginal Music course in 2011, which began in September 2011 and ended in January 2012.
The Aboriginal Music course did give Aboriginal students the opportunity to engage in traditional Aboriginal activities such as the making of Aboriginal instruments, to attend traditional cultural events, such as pow-wows and sweatlodges, and also the opportunity to assist in the curriculum planning of the course. The following questions provide the foundation for this study.

1. Does adding an Aboriginal music course to regular college courses improve the experience of the students while they are enrolled in Aboriginal transition programs?

2. Does involving students in the development of curriculum improve their educational experience?

Setting

The College Studies program is a ten-month transition program that is designed to give Aboriginal students the academic background necessary to succeed in a variety of academic programs at our college. The Aboriginal Music course was held for three hours every Friday afternoon from 1:00 to 4:00 pm. in the Aboriginal Student Centre.

The Centre is a large space designed to simultaneously accommodate students from all of the programs in Aboriginal Education for cultural events such as feasts and pipe ceremonies. In addition to musical performances in the Aboriginal Student Centre, our class also attended public performances off-campus in various locations. For example, students attended a three-day pow-wow in a large arena and they also attended musical performances in smaller venues around the city. When possible, we attended these events as a group, but we often had to meet at these events because they were held in the evenings or on the weekends. Most performances were held at the college.
I invited and received consent from 12 of the 15 students who were enrolled in the Aboriginal Music course. All of the students who consented participated in focus groups, completed surveys, and kept journals. I did not know which students had consented to participate in the study and which had not until the course was completed. I used data only from the students who had given their consent to participate in this study at the beginning of the course, but all students participated in all classroom activities whether or not they were participating in the study.

**Participants**

The participants in this study were students in a college transition program and were all high school graduates who came to the program from Aboriginal communities all over the province. Pseudonyms were given to each of the students in this study to ensure anonymity. Ethical review procedures for both The University of Western Ontario and the college were followed to ensure the safety of participants and that I met all ethical requirements of both of these institutions.

**Procedure**

During the first class, students were told about the study, including my research questions and how I would be collecting data. I also had students collaboratively determine what styles of music and even which specific performers they would like to see in the class. In addition, students identified which traditional musical instruments they would like to make in the class. I had the students make these decisions because I wanted to allow students to infuse their perspective into the curriculum of the course.

The students identified musical performers from a variety of genres that they wanted to see in the class, and I accommodated them where possible. Some of the performers in the course
included Indian City (country rock band), the Gaudry Boys (Metis fiddle music), and Wab Kinew (hip hop mixed with traditional hand drum singing). Students also had the opportunity to attend a pow-wow, which was a major cultural event held over three days. As well, students had the opportunity to participate in Aboriginal Music Week, which consisted of different concerts every night performed by innovative Aboriginal musicians such as Joey Stylez, an Aboriginal hip-hop artist, and the Electric Pow-Wow, which was traditional pow-wow music fused with hip hop music accompanied by a light show and held in a club. Students also participated in making hand drums and Aboriginal flutes in the course, both of which were facilitated by elders who provided cultural teachings as well as technical expertise.

In addition to watching musical performances and reflecting upon these experiences though weekly journals, students prepared presentations about various aspects of Aboriginal Music and demonstrated their own expertise as musicians and artists through performances in class. One of the students demonstrated his skills as a pow-wow grass dancer and other students demonstrated skills at Metis jigging and traditional crafts. These experiences likely helped to increase the self-confidence in all of the students because they saw how talented their Aboriginal peers in the class were – something that has been shown to increase student pride in themselves as Aboriginal people (Corbiere, 2000; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000; Riecken et al., 2006). The students also conducted research about various aspects of Aboriginal music and the information they found was supplemented by material I provided. The students completed reflective journals about their experiences in the course each week.

**Summary and Conclusions**

In order to have culturally relevant education, curriculum developers must involve the local Aboriginal community. This can be done through partnerships among academic
institutions, instructors of Aboriginal students, and Aboriginal communities, such as the Mohawk Education Curriculum Development Project (Agbo, 2002), *Earthsongs* (Kennedy, 2009), the Thompson Rivers University School of Nursing (Mahara et al., and the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (Price & Burch, 2010). My study involved members of the Aboriginal community through partnerships with Aboriginal organizations and performances and workshops facilitated by local Aboriginal musicians and artists.

One of the ways to ensure students have positive educational experiences in their program is to involve them in the development of curriculum (Brinegar & Bishop, 2011; Cook-Sather, 2008; Gleixner & al., 2007; Oliver-Hoyo & Allen, 2005). Students in my study assisted in the curriculum development of their program by determining which musicians they would like to see, musical events in which they would like to participate, and which instruments they would like to construct. Students reported that participating in curriculum development was a positive experience for them because it made the class more interactive, they felt more involved, and they felt that they were part of a community. The experiences of the students in the Aboriginal Music course were overwhelmingly positive.

The purpose of this study was to determine Aboriginal student experiences when Aboriginal cultural content is added to their transition program and to determine how assisting in curriculum development affects Aboriginal students. There is no doubt that this particular Aboriginal Music course improved the experience of the Aboriginal students who were in the course. Listening to and learning from Aboriginal performers made the students feel proud to be Aboriginal themselves. In addition, making contributions to the curriculum of the course was a positive experience for the students. The Aboriginal Music course has similarities with other Aboriginal education programs in that it infuses the program with Aboriginal content and does
involve students in making decisions about curriculum. As well, the Aboriginal community is involved in the program through the Aboriginal musicians and cultural teachers who came to the class during the course. The students also receive credit for the course, which they can use toward attaining their College Studies certificate, which can lead to other diplomas and degrees at the college.

**Directions for the Future**

Most of the projects I have referred to in this study, including my own, are limited in scope. Most of the time, Aboriginal content is added to existing programming by inserting one Aboriginal-focused course into mainstream curriculum (Bouvier & Karlenzig, 2006; Richardson & Blanchet-Cohen, 2000; & Robertson, 2003). The Aboriginal Music course is an example of this method of incorporating Aboriginal curriculum into existing programming, which is not ideal. The Aboriginal Music course gives students the opportunity to listen to Aboriginal music played by Aboriginal musicians, to construct and play their own instruments, and to learn more about Aboriginal culture. Some of the students may have enjoyed the course because listening to the music might have given them glimpses into our past as Aboriginal people, but also hope for what Aboriginal people can become now and in the future. Aboriginal music is an important element in Aboriginal education because it helps students to connect to and understand more about Aboriginal culture. Including Aboriginal music in the curriculum and allowing students to participate in developing their own curriculum helps students to feel proud of who they are as Aboriginal people.

**References**


