

Pamphlet # 12

Teaching from an Aboriginal Perspective: Theme 1*

The material in this section is adapted from two sources: "Teaching from an Aboriginal Perspective" (2000) by Herman Michell, faculty member of the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, now the First Nations University of Canada, and a research report "Strengthening the Circle: Facilitating Success of First Nations Students in a Non-Native Post Secondary Institution" (2000) by Joan Roy and Mary Hampton, faculty members of the University of Regina and Luther College respectively, and professors of Psychology.

The research conducted by Roy and Hampton is based on data from four focus groups that were conducted with First Nations students and professors from both Saskatchewan Indian Federated College and the University of Regina. The research supports Michell's suggestions that the professor/student relationship is the foundation for facilitating success of First Nations students. The authors also agree on the importance of distributing this information as widely as possible.

Introduction

Given the historical events that First Nations and Métis peoples have experienced, it is important as post-secondary institutions to realize that people learn in different ways and that often the way we learn as individuals is rooted in our experiences. For First Nation and Métis peoples, our experiences shape who we are, how we perceive the world and how we learn.

This section is meant to serve as a guide for university teachers, but we must caution that there are no 'prescriptions' of how to teach Aboriginal students. There has been relatively little research done in this field. Generalizations can be dangerous and education is a complex endeavour. We also know there is a need to develop a variety of pedagogical models. The following are suggestions that may work for you. Indeed the humanistic and student-centred approaches identified below may well be appropriate for *all* students. These suggestions, primarily from Michell's paper, are grouped according to five themes identified by students and professors in the Roy & Hampton research: Relationships, Curriculum, Teaching Methods, Teaching Style and Classroom Climate, and Aboriginal Life Experience.

Theme One: The professor/student relationship is the foundation for facilitating the success of Aboriginal Students.

- 1) Get to know your students. Honour the knowledge and skills students bring with them into the classroom. Use these experiences as a basis for instruction. *Build* a partnership based on mutual respect.
- 2) Do not humiliate students in front of their peers. Control your temper and instruct in quiet patience. There is a time and a place for everything. Concentrate on the behaviour and not the person. Be specific and offer guidance and direction.
- 3) Use humour appropriately. Self-deprecating humour and modesty are attributes that many students appreciate.
- 4) Be accessible. Allow students multiple avenues and times where they can come and see you to discuss assignments, lessons and problems.

- 5) First impressions always count. Demonstrate warmth and high expectations. Set the tone, parameters and expectations of assignments in the first class. Be consistent. Make sure the students understand by asking for feedback.

Conclusion

The authors suggest that instructors adopt humility as a teaching style, become more open-minded and accepting of the diversity of First Nations and Métis students and are open to learning about Aboriginal cultures. Instructors must also understand the life of Aboriginal students - who they are and where they come from. Many students have experienced poverty, racism, and a lack of positive role models or influences in their lives that can impact on how they learn. As Michell points out, you must not attempt to 'rescue', 'save', or 'lower standards' for Aboriginal students but rather try to balance humanistic concerns with high expectations for achievement and ensure that the students understand these expectations from the very first class.

The above are guidelines and examples to assist you in the classroom. For Aboriginal people, learning has always been regarded as a life-long process and there are many ways of teaching and learning. For instructors at the post-secondary level, it is important to remember that all of us are on a life-long journey in the learning process.

People perceive the world in different ways, learn about the world in different ways, and demonstrate what they have learned in different ways. An individual approach to learning and demonstration of what he or she has learned is influenced by values, norms, and socialization practices of the culture in which that individual has been acculturated

* Thanks to the University of Regina for permission to use of this material.

The research results offer strategies for individual faculty members to use in facilitating success. However, it would be a mistake to assume that as some individual faculty members change attitudes and behaviour, the success rate of Aboriginal students will automatically increase. Changes need to be systemically and scientifically implemented to make certain their addition is organizational in nature rather than isolated subsystems of an educational institution.

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