

## **ABORIGINAL LITERACY & THE IMPORTANCE OF “UNLEARNING”**

Panel presentation May 16, 2011

Allan Quigley, EdD. Professor Emeritus, St. Francis Xavier University

Launch of the Aboriginal Adult Literacy Assessment Tool

Wanuskewin Heritage Centre, Saskatchewan

---

Thank you to the SALN board and staff—especially Carol Vandale, Bobby Henry and Ross Grandel—thank you also to the Elders, and to our gracious hosts for the invitation to be here at this sacred Wanuskewin Heritage Park Centre.

When I first talked with Carol Vandale, Director of the SALN, about what I might talk about on this panel, she suggested it would be helpful if I would focus on: “What the White Community might learn from this project.”

There is much to learn and much to think about as a result of this project; however, I do want to tell you how, years ago I met the famous author and philosopher, Nirad C. Chaudray while I was a CUSO volunteer teacher in India. Almost 90 years old, with long flowing white hair, living just inside the wall separating Old and New Delhi, the philosopher told me:

“We spend the first 21 years of our lives learning everything, we then spend the rest of our lives *unlearning* everything.”

It is for this reason I want to focus this brief talk on ABORIGINAL LITERACY & THE IMPORTANCE OF “UNLEARNING.”

As a White male baby boomer—and recovering academic—I have learned and tried to unlearn a few things in my life time. But, reflecting on this project, I believe this project challenges *many of us* to begin by “unlearning,” and then to consider what we might learn ... in the area of Aboriginal literacy.

I hasten to add that I am not an expert on Native culture or Aboriginal rights. However, next year will be my 40<sup>th</sup> year in the study and practice of adult literacy education. Through the course of those almost 40 years, I tried to both unlearn and learn.

In that context, since Aboriginal people are such well known as story tellers, I thought I might start with a story:

Here is John Henry Newman’s *The Fable of the Lion and the Man*

---

*The Man once invited the Lion to be his guest, and received him with princely hospitality. . . . [The Man showed the Lion around his mansion]. In it there were a vast many things to admire. There were large salons and long corridors, all richly furnished and decorated, and filled with a profusion of fine specimens of sculpture and painting . . . the works of the first masters . . .*

*The subjects represented were various; but the most prominent of them had an especial interest for the noble animal who stalked by them. It was that of the Lion himself; and as the owner of the mansion led him from one apartment into another, the Man did not fail to direct attention to the indirect homage which these various groups and tableaux paid to the importance of the lion tribe.*

*There was, however, one remarkable feature in all of them, to which the host, silent as he was from politeness, seemed not at all insensible; that diverse as were these representations, in one point they all agreed, that the man was always victorious, and the lion was always overcome.*

*The man had it all his own way, and the lion was but a fool, and served as sport.*

*There [were dozens of depictions of man conquering the King of the Beasts] including exquisite works in marble . . . There was a lion in a net; a lion in a trap; four lions, yoked in harness, drawing the cart of a Roman emperor; and elsewhere stood Hercules, clad in the lion's skin, and with the club which demolished him. . . . there were lions white, black and red: in short, there was no lack of indignity for the lord of the forest and the king of brutes.*

*After he had gone through the mansion, the Man turned to his guest and asked what his guest thought of the artistic splendours it contained. The lion in reply gave full justice and admiration to the riches of its owner and the skill of its decorators, but then he added, "Lions would have fared better, had lions been the artists."*

John Henry Newman (as cited in Thomas Cahill's *How the Irish Saved Civilization*) might have been thinking of Aboriginal literacy with this fable.

We could put it this way, "Aboriginal people would have fared better in our nation's literacy statistics had Aboriginals been the researchers."

And we could well go further: "Aboriginal people would have fared better in our nation's literacy statistics had Aboriginals been the researchers, had they been the policy-makers, and had they comprised more of the adult educators through the past 200 years of Canada's history."

Today's project is, at last, a step in that direction. But it is but a step in unlearning .... I hope this is a step towards greater learning towards greater social justice.

---

I expect we will all agree that the skills involved in adult literacy are critical for a fuller, better life for anyone—male, female, rich, poor, Aboriginal or Non-Aboriginal.

In my experience, no area of education can have the same transformative impact on the lives of adults. In a postmodern world weary with cynicism, literacy is still a place of hope for a better society (Quigley, 1997; 2009).

The stories of how literacy educators have changed thousands of lives of Canadian adults could fill volumes... These are so often heroic stories. And, for many of us in for the long haul with literacy, the stories and experiences of those adults who gain higher literacy skills and achieve new lives keep us going—they keep adult literacy educators like me and many others in the room today committed to this work. This I have learned and believe to be true.

However, I have also *unlearned* some things about literacy through my research. There is a darker side to adult literacy. Despite our many successes, adult literacy as social policy has, through our history, been far from helpful to most Aboriginal people.

Sociologist Jane Finch tells us that social policy as created to bring about social change, typically has three purposes....

- 1) It can serve as a mechanism for solving social problems,

2) it can be a means for “redistributive justice,” and

3) it can be a means for “regulating subordinate groups” (1984, p. 4).

Sorry to say, many of us in the White community need to understand how literacy as social policy has, in too many cases in our country, sought to “regulate so-called subordinate groups.”

What we have here today is the potential for social policy step not towards “regulation,” but for “redistributive justice”—meaning greater equality in adult literacy and a step towards literacy justice for Aboriginal people.

And I stress that it is but a step because I believe there is still a long ways to go.

---

Consider this. We have been advised by Statistics Canada and the OECD that the *International Adult Literacy Surveys* of 1994 and 2003 found that some 20% of Canada’s adults have totally inadequate literacy skills, and another about 23% have serious difficulty with literacy in today’s society. Some 43% of adults in Canada have literacy problems.

While many across Canada were shocked when these IALS reports were released, actually, many were also shocked just over a decade ago the Southam News study, *Broken Words: Why Five Million Canadian Adults are Illiterate*, was released. That was in 1987. And, many were shocked before that when Audrey Thomas released the first major study of adult literacy in 1976 finding basically the same statistics.

While each of these studies used different criteria, methodologies and data bases, each one found the bottom line was that about 20% of Canada's adult population has severe difficulties and, *importantly for this panel*, Aboriginal adults have comprise a large proportion of those lowest levels of literacy.

But if we step back, no nation I am aware of has ever had full literacy, including Canada and the Scandinavian countries, which always come out with the highest literacy rates in these studies.

Let's do some unlearning.

Let's put the Thomas, the Southam and the two IALS studies in context. Let's consider what constitutes "literacy" in the first place.

- Let me ask how many in this room had a grandparent who did not finish school? **[show of hands]** Of those....did any have a grandparent who could not or could just barely read or write?
- Let me ask how many in this room had a parent who did not finish school? **[show of hands]** Of those, did any have a parent who could not or could just barely read or write?
- NOW, let me ask how many in this room have children? **[show of hands]**. How many don't really care if they finish school? **[show of hands]**
- And one more show of hands--How may don't really care if their children ever learn to read or write?

Laughable? Of course, but my point is that the notion of literacy and that of *how much literacy is enough literacy* changes constantly in Western society. And the criteria for what is sufficient are arbitrary.

But one thing never changes, the bar keeps being raised. While education may have mattered only a tangentially to our grandparents and their parents before them, literacy is social obsession today. To be “illiterate” today has been called 21<sup>st</sup> century leprosy.

**So the first point of unlearning is that the criteria for how much literacy is enough literacy is a social construct. A moving target. A changing concept. Canada may have been shocked at these studies but, despite the science and the psychometrics and the sophistication of the tools used, the criteria for who is adequately literacy is arbitrary.**

**And the point to be made is, “Who is literate is simply a matter of agreement.”**

---

But agreement by whom? Who sets the bar? Who raises the bar? Who determines who is literate?

We all know experts decide this. But who are the experts? What data are used? Whose voices are heard?

If I know one thing, it is that the notion of how much literacy is enough literacy is determined at policy and academic levels that are well removed from and have little to do with the voice of minority groups of Western societies.

Adult literacy is defined and measured, *created and recreated* by agreement within the dominant culture. Minority cultures—not only Aboriginal people—are not only expected to conform to those standards, but the history of adult literacy as social policy has often been that those agreements are in some part intended to “regulate” what is being considered “subordinate groups,” as Jane Finch explains it.

Since this is all a bit grim so here’s something that might make you laugh.

If I went around this room and asked everyone to give us their definition of adult education I expect we would hear words like “learning, relevance, lifelong learning, voice....”

Would you like to hear what the definition of adult education was that appeared in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1953)? I’ll bet no one came up with this definition:

**“Adult Education is a phrase originally meaning the education of adults who have not been properly educated as children.”**

We take the results of these expert reports as fact, as reality—but what it means to be “properly educated” is not determined by the Lion — those who write for the 1953 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and those at Statistics Canada and the OECD who ultimately decide on the types of questions to pose for the IALS tests, and the cut levels for who is placed what level of literacy skill—who goes to Level One, who rises to Level Five, is rarely determined by those whose lives are being affected.

It is not that I think the IALS and similar studies that shape Canadian literacy social policy are a bad idea—the IALS has done more to get adult literacy issues in front of the politicians in some 40 countries than anything else in literacy history.

But I have said that while the construct of literacy and the levels as determined may be arbitrary, what who does the deciding **does not** have to be arbitrary. Who is at the table matters.

People like Dr. Tom Sticht have asked how Stats Canada arrived at the cut level for each of these....how was it decided who was Level one, Two, Three, Four and Five? The answers are psychometric but they are also political.

And such literacy tests have been seriously challenged through time. In the 1960s, a test called the Adult Performance Level (APL) tests came out of the University of Texas as designed by Dr. Norville Northcut. It again simplified the “literacy problem” of the United States to a set of tests, like the IALS.

That APL test was embraced by the federal government and soon every state was applying it. Adults were being tested and then, later, those same adults were being taught using APL-based materials (*also developed by Norville Northcut*).

Then came the unlearning--it was later found by professors Ron Cervero and Bill Griffith that the APL tests were clearly culturally biased towards the White middle class in the first place. The APL movement collapsed for these and other program reasons and, as Professor Carol Kasworm later said, the APL testing and the APL teaching movement

through the 60s and 70s was the biggest, most expensive boondoggle in American adult education history.

As Pierre Bourdieu has told us: “Reality is not an absolute, it differs with the group to which one belongs.”

---

**II. This takes me to my second point.** I suggested earlier that today is but one step towards greater equality and social justice in literacy. Here is a challenge for the next steps .....

We may ask: “What is a proper education in adult literacy?”, and reply that the voice of Aboriginal people needs to be heard in defining and assessing literacy, but here is my challenge for this committee and future leaders and policy makers as we move into the 21 century.

“When we say someone is “literate,” why must we mean *literate in English* or, for some, in literate French? Why is not possible for the person who has mastered the Cree language, or the language of the Nakota or Dakota peoples to be deemed “literate?”

In fact the first census in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the United States asked citizens only if they could read and write—not what language they could read and write in. English was not part of what was being considered “literate” in the early days of the United States. The U.S. had multiple languages . . . and still does. But not in the eyes of the literacy policy makers. Canada is not different.

“What if Aboriginals had been the researchers and policy-makers in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries of our nation?” Would English and French be the single and only languages that can constitute literacy? How can we

have two languages only for literacy and then turn around and boast that Canada is a multi-cultural country?

The notion that there is one “proper education” for literacy is still alive and well today. It needs to be unlearned and redefined.

**Further**--why must we immediately assume reading and writing, and occasionally numeracy, are the singularly most important skills to be measured to be literate? Is it so unthinkable to include orality? Or oracy as it is sometimes called? Speaking, listening, developing our ways to see the universe—why are these so irrelevant for literacy?

In fact, John Ralston Saul in his book, *A Fair Country* points out how the Supreme Court of Canada has recognized that the first Treaties were as much spoken agreements as they were written commitments, and the Supreme Court has accepted spoken testimony from Aboriginal elders.

Saul points out that it is in fact the academic community that still insists on print in all things before something can be considered authentic and valid. **The requisite skills of literacy, therefore, need to be unlearned and, I would say, need to be relearned.** In fact this has happened in NZ. And I ‘d like to return to this point in a minute.

---

**Please right now please indulge me for a few minutes to refer to some ancient history ..... that isn’t so ancient....**

Does anyone know where the very word “literacy” comes from? What the original concept referred to and when it was invented?

During the middle ages—from the 8<sup>th</sup> right up to the 12<sup>th</sup> century B.C.—under the Roman Empire, a word and a concept was created—*litteratus*. From this word we get words like literate, literacy, illiterate, literature, letters and literati.

What did it mean? According to Stephen Roger Fischer in his book, *A History of Reading*, under the Romans, “An ‘illiterate’ was not a person who could not read rather, an “‘illiterate’ was someone *who could not read Latin.*” [Latin was] the vehicle of Christendom under the Romans. Only some who could read Latin was *litteratus*.

This means the technicalities of coding and decoding symbols were not really important—only those who could code and decode, read and write, Latin, were *litteratus*.

What I am saying is the very concept of literacy comes out of cultural domination and colonization. When one nation conquers another, first to go are the visible artistic, religious, cultural signs and artefacts, second to go are the languages. There is a tragic history of this in Canada with Indigenous people that I don’t need to remind us of, from the Residential Schools to language policies that have tried to eliminate Aboriginal languages in some regions.

Just as during the Mille ages, it is not enough to master one of the ancient indigenous languages of North America’s First Nations people; Cree, Mi’kmaq—No. To be “*litteratus*” today, English, French only can constitute a “proper education.” These are the languages not of Christendom but of the dominant White Culture.

Please tell me how this differs from the middle ages? How is this not cultural domination and colonization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

So I ask: “What would the educational programs, and statistics, and definitions look like if Aboriginals had been the researchers, the policy-makers and the educators over the past 200 years in our nation?”

- Perhaps literacy would mean a fuller recognition of our multiple First languages in the hegemony of adult literacy.
- Perhaps the spoken word through the recognition of orality would mean something today—it would still retain authenticity and credibility through oracy in our understanding of what literacy means.
- Perhaps a “proper education” today would be more inclusive of the languages and cultures of Aboriginal people—of the First People’s knowledge and wisdom.

---

**To close with my third point,** I want to suggest these challenges of unlearning in order to learn are not an impossibility.

Let me close by telling you a bit more about what I “unlearned” in New Zealand a few years ago. And wonder aloud if this could ever happen here?

The Adult Reading and Learning Assistance Federation (ARLA) invited me to be their keynote speaker at their annual conference. What I found, however, was they met to hear speakers but they were also meeting to hold a vote.

The Maori teachers of Maori adult literacy learners were deciding to split off from the mainstream English-speaking White literacy organization. It was a bold, radical step. An emotional step.

It took two tumultuous days...of impassioned speeches, doors slamming, tears shed, lengthy breaks for the whole conference to re-think what they were doing. Was this the right thing to do?

The Maori literacy teachers came back and continued to argue that they could not live with the English speaking teachers in the same organization—under the same roof. The English language and culture was smothering their culture. They loved their colleagues, they loved their friends...but they needed a divorce.

Even being informed they would get no future funding from government (which turned out not to be true), they formed their own association. It thrives today; as do Maori language-medium schools for children.

-----  
Does the idea of Aboriginal literacy, oracy, and multiple Aboriginal languages as literacy for a greater literacy democracy sound impossible for Saskatchewan and Canada? A dream? fantasy?

I have said:

- the concept of adult literacy is arbitrary. A social construct—a matter of agreement.
- I've said experts removed from the voice of Aboriginal people need to be challenges.

- I've suggested the history of literacy would have been different if written by Aboriginal researchers, policy-makers and adult educators.

Can we have literacy democracy in Canada? Perhaps not.....perhaps things will never change for us, for our children, for our children's children...

But I like to remember what Jonathon Dale once said. Jonathon Dale is a Quaker who has spent much of his life as a community worker in some of North England's most depressed inner-cities.

Even after a lifetime of struggle, Dale tells us: *"First we must dream. Nothing is harder . . . [because] dreaming has to break through the constantly reinforced assumption that 'There is no alternative.' Reality is all"* (1996, p. 1).

**We have alternatives in this country.**

This is Canada...this is our future....we can do better, beginning today.

Today's launch is a statement of this fact for all citizens of Canada.

THANK YOU.

### SOURCES

Cahill, T. (1995 ). *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. NY: Random House.

Finch, J. (1984). *Education as social policy*. London: Longman.

Quigley, A. (1997) *Rethinking literacy education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Quigley, A. (2007). *Building professional pride in literacy*. Malabar, FL: Krieger.