Adult educators have much to learn from Native peoples’ focus on the four directions of the medicine wheel: the emotional, physical, spiritual, and cognitive.

Learning from Native Adult Education

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As Mary Jane, a Cree elder, passed the eagle feather around the circle, an amazing calm came over my students. For weeks they had been wired increasingly tighter by the institutional pressures of assignment deadlines plus family and work responsibilities, but in the context of the talking circle their tensions and anxieties dissipated. The talking circle, like many Native educational processes, creates a spiritual space for learning by providing people with room to explore issues of great significance to them. The spiritual focus that many Native people bring to adult education is not only a method; it is also a way of being (Graveline, 1998). It is a good example of what Vella, in the first chapter of this volume, refers to as a spirited epistemology.

Although spirituality has always occupied a special place in the hearts of Native people, only recently has it been a central organizing feature of Native adult education programs. Native adult educators are more likely today to focus on cultural practices that foster a Native identity that is spiritually rooted (Battiste, 1995; Haig-Brown, 1995; Hampton, 1995; National Indian Brotherhood, 1972).

Education for Native identity centers on cultivating a deepened sense of Native spirituality and culture by focusing on indigenous knowledge (Battiste, 1998; Haig-Brown, 1995; National Indian Brotherhood, 1972). Native adult education programs that reintroduce, preserve, or enhance Native spirituality rather than reproducing mainstream education cultivate an indigenous form of knowledge (Battiste, 1998; Friesen and Orr, 1995; Haig-Brown, 1995; Regnier, 1995; Ross, 1996). Adult educators who are struggling to find fresh possibilities for a more integrated worldview in their practice can learn much from Native adult educators.

This chapter describes how a focus on the spiritual dimensions of Native adult education, as lived through the teachings of the medicine
wheel, can enhance Native identity (Hampton, 1995). It draws on published accounts as well as on unpublished research (recorded in my field notes of 1998) that I have conducted with Native adult educators in places where I have worked and continue to work. I recount stories told to me by Native adult educators that focus on ecological and physical teachings, relational teachings, and the teachings of the elders. The stories of Patricia, Matthias, Rose, and Susan point out how spirituality, the fourth direction of the medicine wheel, is manifested in the practices of Native adult educators, and how it can be used to inform Native and non-Native adult education.

Using the Medicine Wheel

The medicine wheel is often referred to as the circle of life. It is an ancient symbol that can be used to express many relationships that involve sets of four, for example, the four cardinal directions—north, south, east, and west; four physical elements of the world—fire, earth, air, water; or the four aspects of nature—mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical. The circle has no beginning or no end. When one sits in a circle, no one is ahead or behind; everyone is together.

The medicine wheel has empowered communities and Native organizations to reorganize, reframe, and recover a self-determining approach to Native adult education (Calliou, 1995; Graveline, 1998; Hampton, 1995). It provides a format for teaching that establishes harmony between physicality, relationality, wisdom of the elders, and spirituality (Calliou, 1995; Graveline, 1998; Hart, 1996; Hart and Holton, 1993; Ross, 1996) and achieves healing and conflict resolution (Calliou, 1995). The medicine wheel is a traditional indigenous way of viewing the world that is both ancient and global (Graveline, 1998). Patricia, a Mi’Kmaq adult educator told me, “When I first saw the medicine wheel I thought it was a western [prairie] thing. . . . As I learned about it I found out that it was holistic. I realized that it was something that we had always done” (Orr, field notes). As Hill (1995) points out, the medicine wheel places the spirit at the center of the knowledge process and seeks balance between its four dimensions rather than privileging any one form of knowing—an insight important for all areas of adult education.

Respect for the spiritual relationships that exist between all things is at the core of the medicine wheel teachings. This is the respect that Vella describes in Chapter One of this volume. The medicine wheel provides a framework for teaching Native values in order to keep spirituality at the center of Native identity. This balance can help to redress the failings of the past and allow people to live differently in the present and future.

Native adult education centers in urban areas typically attract Native people of vastly different cultures, languages, and identities. These centers are turning to the medicine wheel as a way to help Native people live amid this diversity. The spiritual emphasis in such centers tends to acknowledge and promote a universal Native worldview that is referred to as Pan-Indianism.
In such contexts, if adult educators are insensitive to the particularities of diverse Native communities, the medicine wheel can become a barrier and may silence the unique cultural perspectives of Native communities. To avoid such a consequence, adult educators must strive to support the linguistic and cultural differences through which spirituality and culture are embodied (Hart, 1996; Francis, 1999; Powers, 1986).

**The Medicine Wheel in Adult Education Practice**

An andragogy that embraces the balanced approach of all the dimensions of the medicine wheel or sacred circle (Calliou, 1995; Graveline, 1998; Regnier, 1995) is a way to foster a spiritual identity. In the following sections I describe how various Native adult educators have used the medicine wheel in their practices.

**An Ecological Spirituality.** Matthias, a Cree adult educator who works in a central office in a Native-controlled school system in northern Saskatchewan, told me how his commitment to place and to an ecological worldview has shaped his practice (Friesen and Orr, 1995). Matthias learned an ecological way of being as a child during his time on the land, where he observed his grandparents’ respect for Mother Earth. “I watched as my grandfather picked medicinal herbs, for he would always put something back in their place; I learned to be connected to the land,” he explained to me. Similarly, Patricia noted, “Spirituality is all around us. We’re all in this earth” (Orr, field notes).

The respect for the ecological that we hear in Matthias’s and Patricia’s stories is common among a wide range of aboriginal nations (Hampton, 1995; Mander, 1991, Miller, 1991; O’Meara and West, 1996). A fundamental view of Mother Earth as a sacred living thing is important to Canadian tribal cultures such as the Plains Cree, Stony, Woodlands Cree, and Mi’Kmaq (Snow, 1977; Ermine, 1995; Friesen and Orr, 1995; Orr, 1998). This way of being is expressed not only by valuing a sense of place and a view of the earth as a living thing, but also by a commitment to holistic patterns of relationships. Vogel has developed this theme of holistic relationships more fully in Chapter Two of this volume.

Native education that focuses on the sacredness of all things in the physical world provides a way of being that responds in a positive way to the destructiveness of modern society (Slattery, 1995) and allows for an ecological consciousness that is centered on how we live on and use the earth. Graveline (1998) stresses the importance of the physical self in relation to the earth as a way to be more connected and balanced. Native adult education that attends to the ecological cultivates harmony between people and all living things. This Native ecological worldview is in tension with many of the adult training programs that have as their objective preparing Native people to work in mining industries that exploit the earth (Saskatchewan Department of Education, 1989) and that are based on capitalist economics. It also counters the dominant perspectives of science, because it sees all
the world, including the rocks and clouds, as alive (Mander, 1991). Adult educators who follow this path can help their students examine how aboriginal values have been replaced with Eurocentric values that have contributed to severe ecological consequences resulting from our “massive rearrangement of the North American landscape” (Orr, 1992, p. 130).

Calliou (1995) talks of embodying this sense of the ecological in the physical space of the circle. “In the circle, no individual being (two legged, four legged, mineral, plant, etc.) is deemed ‘more than’ or ‘less than’ another, so that treatment which elevates or denigrates one or the other is ruled out” (p. 67). The ecological dimension of spirituality is expressed through holistic forms of andragogy that honor indigenous respect for the circle as a way of organizing teachings. An andragogical practice that draws on the power of the circle allows for an equalization of voices that promotes a shared ownership of knowledge and a collective responsibility for learning. “We use the circle because it is never ending,” Patricia told me. “It shows us that we are all equal, there are no corners, it goes round and round” (Orr, field notes).

The Spirituality of Relationships: Teaching Through Sharing and Respect. Rose, a Cree adult educator, who teaches the Cree language to adults, noted that “the gift of giving is one thing that the elders taught me... Whatever the Creator put on Earth was not for you to take and keep, you pass it on at some point” (Friesen and Orr, 1995, p. 30). The indigenous values of sharing and respect are embedded in Rose’s Cree language. She passes these values on to others through storytelling because “there are lots of values in these stories” (p. 33). The spiritual dimension of Native languages has been emphasized as a key reason why Native linguists from a variety of language groups preserve Aboriginal languages (Francis, 1999; Powers, 1986).

Storytelling is a process that many Native adult educators use as a way to live spirituality through relationships. Patricia uses story circles to ensure that learners have the opportunity to cultivate collectively their thinking as spiritual beings (Orr, field notes). From her perspective, story circles provide learners with “freedom, and there are no consequences for what they say, as what is said stays in the circle.” This relational approach fosters a commitment to their families because it values their family relationships and serves as a way to cultivate the learners’ identities.

Susan, a Mi’Kmaq educator, also sees her work at an adult high school as closely connected to relationship building (Orr, 1998). She focuses on relationships through her emphasis on valuing the community in her classroom. Commenting on her own practice, she says, “It’s all a community thing in my classroom. The objective is being there and helping one another by supporting one another” (p. 12).

A relational focus directs attention to values that honor the sacredness of the interpersonal. For Native traditionalists, the key values that shape a relational-emotional stance are caring, sharing, honesty, and respect (Calliou, 1995; Graveline, 1998; Orr and Friesen, 1999). Sioui (1992) tells us
that all Native peoples of the Americas are united by the way they live out the values of “unity and dignity of all beings” (p. 23).

Rose, Patricia, Matthias, and Susan all live what Ross (1996) calls a relational practice that reinforces community and family dimensions of learning by establishing interconnections with the major players in people’s lives. Focusing adult learners’ emotional energies on family and friends strengthens their commitment to the indigenous value of the individual as caring for and supporting the life of the group (Hampton, 1995).

**Wisdom: Living Spirituality Through Stories of the Elders.** The wisdom of the elders is central to understanding and living Native spirituality, because elders hold much of the wisdom that defines traditional Native values. Native adult education must build on this wisdom if it is to reflect these spiritual values accurately. Native adult education practices that honor the wisdom inherent in Native languages and values provide a direction that allows Native people to center themselves in the past so they can embrace the present and the future in a culturally appropriate way. Native wisdom, or knowledge of what is true and right, coupled with good judgment, comes from reflecting on the values that are passed on through the stories of the elders.

Rose has come to know the importance of the wisdom of elders in her work teaching the Cree language to adults (Friesen and Orr, 1995). She sees herself as a bridge between the knowledge of the elders and the more mainstream knowledge of the dominant society. Rose says, “I see myself as a voice in the classroom for elders. As a teacher I am speaking both for elders and for education. . . . You learn to balance the two things. So you just put it into one container” (p. 31). Her role as an adult educator is to keep alive the values that are dying as the elders die. Adult education that embraces the wisdom of the elders helps adult educators focus their teaching on values that emerge from traditional ways such as generosity and respect.

**Strategies for Including Native Spirituality in Adult Education**

A spiritual way of being in Native adult education requires one to develop harmony not only within oneself but also within relationships with others and the environment, in order to be whole (Graveline, 1998). As Patricia told me, “Once we can feel good about our own inner circle, then the circle escalates. Then we can reach out of the circle if we need help” (Orr, field notes). Harmony means that all four directions must be attended to in equal fashion, with the spirit infusing a person’s entire being within the world.

**Attending to the Physical Environment.** The physical-ecological direction can be introduced in the adult education classroom by centering on the power of the circle. In this way, spirituality can be experienced continuously as part of the interconnectedness of the individual, community, and nature. As Graveline (1998) reminds us, all participants are equal in the circle, and that the process of inviting people to form a “cohesive circle is an
integral part of re-establishing interconnectedness” (p. 131). Sharing circles are the vehicle whereby the spiritual dimensions of Native adult education surface as Native people journey toward self-determination (Hart, 1996).

**The Physical Space of the Classroom.** Any adult learning environment needs to be aesthetically and culturally welcoming. The furniture and artwork need to be inviting and comfortable, and elders can be asked to assist in the design of this environment. I was reminded recently of the importance of environment when a Native teacher in a new high school in a Native community expressed dismay about the failure of her community to make the physical environment of her school welcoming. When elders came to her school to speak, they found the physical environment cold and uninviting; they felt uncomfortable. Involving elders in the planning of adult education spaces and inviting them to find a place there regularly contributes positively to the spiritual environment.

**Ecological Worldview.** Strategies that draw on stories of the elders such as *Keepers of the Earth* (Caduto and Bruchac, 1989), *Stories from the Six Worlds* (Whitehead, 1988), and *Voices of the First Nations* (Ahenakew, Gardipy, and Lafond, 1995) provide a way to keep social, scientific, and communication studies centered on an ecological worldview. The strategy of contrapuntal reading that was developed by postcolonial educators (Greenlaw, 1995) works well in helping adult learners compare Native perspectives with the perspectives of writers from the dominant society. This process requires adult learners to read texts that present voices from differing perspectives and to contrast the worldviews of the Native and dominant societies. This strategy provides Native adult learners with the opportunity to examine the limitations of a purely western worldview, and to gain insight about their own culture.

**Story Circles.** A way to facilitate story circles is to invite learners to write paragraphs and pass them around the circle for others to read and expand on. While this process encourages learners to build stories cooperatively, it also supports a relational form of learning that respects the importance of what all participants have to say; it also encourages collective ownership of circle stories.

**Including the Elders.** The wisdom of elders can be used to teach spirituality. Where possible, adult learners need to be engaged in activities that encourage them to interact with elders and hear their stories. Interviewing elders is a particularly useful process for developing a space for honoring their wisdom. Interviewing also develops the oral and literacy skills of adult learners. Rather than using traditional mainstream texts to reinforce literacy, adult learners can learn Native wisdom and values through Native texts as they develop communication skills. This activity can be engaged in by learners at all levels.

Where possible, adult learners should be encouraged to speak with elders about or in aboriginal languages, and to learn from their elders about the spiritual dimensions of their languages. A return to the languages of their ancestors is for many Natives a healing tool and a way to cultivate a spiritual identity (Battiste, 1998).
The Talking Circle. Using the talking circle is also a way to include the voices of participants in the learning process and to cultivate interpersonal knowing. Perhaps the most important dimension of talking circles is the space they create for all participants to listen unconditionally. Adult educators can facilitate the talking circle by asking participants to pass around a sacred object such as an eagle feather or a rock. All participants are invited to speak when they hold the sacred object, although speaking is an option, not a requirement, and to listen respectfully when others are speaking. I have found the talking circle to be particularly useful when introducing or developing highly sensitive topics, and for debriefing teaching processes and concepts. It is important to make sure that trust is carefully and thoroughly developed before this process is used so as not to trivialize this sacred teaching tool.

In my own practice as an adult educator, I have found that close attention to Native ways of knowing has made my teaching more spiritually rooted. By attending to the physical classroom environment, I respond better to the needs of my students and feel closer to them. By paying attention to the wisdom of elders and honoring both ecological dimensions and Native values, I am better able to address the complexity of the world in which my Native students live. By focusing my andragogical practice on relational ways of knowing, I have come to recognize a spiritual purpose for being, and my students—both Native and non-Native—have learned ways of being that honor and respect one another and all living things.

References
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Native adult education programs that reintroduce, preserve, or enhance Native spirituality rather than reproducing mainstream education cultivate an indigenous form of knowledge (Battiste, 1998; Friesen and Orr, 1995; Haig-Brown, 1995; Regnier, 1995; Ross, 1996). Adult educators who are struggling to find fresh possibilities for a more integrated worldview in their practice can learn much from Native adult educators. This chapter describes how a focus on the spiritual dimensions of Native adult education, as lived through the teachings of the medicine. NEW DIRECTIONS FOR ADULT AND CONTINUING What motivates an adult to learn: curiosity or a simple need to know? Educational researchers have come up with an array of answers to that question over the years. The truth is that adults are complex individuals so there’s no one-size-fits-all answer. Adult learning theories provide a foundation to define and marry a learning need to its most appropriate solution. What is an Adult Learning Theory? Adult learning theories are based on the premise that adults learn differently than children. Here are some basic differences: Adult learners vs. Child learners. Children. Adults. Child-oriented learning Learn Adult Education today: find your Adult Education online course on Udemy. Android Development iOS Development Swift React Native Dart Programming Language Mobile Development Kotlin SwiftUI. Digital Marketing Google Ads (Adwords) Social Media Marketing Google Ads (AdWords) Certification Marketing Strategy Internet Marketing YouTube Marketing Email Marketing Google Analytics. learning participation of adults. The NEPS adult stage is responsible for collecting data. from Starting Cohort 6 (SC6, adults). Due to the complexity of the research fields associated with lifelong learning, several choices had to be made: What kind of adult education should be covered—only job-related learning or private learning as well? Enable researchers to study participation in adult education, including effects of learning environments, prior educational activities, migration backgrounds, and psychological aspects, as well as the decision-making processes that lead to participation in adult education. Distinct from child education, is a practice in which adults engage in systematic and sustained self-educating activities in order to gain new forms of knowledge, skills, attitudes, or values. It can mean any form of learning adults engage in beyond traditional schooling, encompassing basic literacy to personal fulfillment as a lifelong learner.