REDEFINING HOW SUCCESS IS MEASURED IN ABORIGINAL LEARNING IN CANADA

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1. **Introduction**

Throughout the past decade, new visions of societal well-being are being conveyed around the world. Yet the concept of well-being within and between countries can differ tremendously depending on what communities consider “progress” to mean. Regardless how a community defines advancement, it is well understood that lifelong learning is a vital ingredient to societal progress and enhanced community well-being.

The 1.2 million Aboriginal people in Canada have long advocated the importance of lifelong learning to improve community well-being, addressing the historically poorer health and higher rates of unemployment, incarceration, and youth suicide than non-Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal people in Canada recognise that “two ways of knowing”—learning that affirms their cultural traditions and values while equipping them with the knowledge and skills they need to participate in Canadian society—will foster the necessary conditions for nurturing healthy and sustainable communities. As Aboriginal people work to improve community wellbeing through lifelong learning, they recognise the need to identify appropriate measurement tools that will help them assess what is working and what is not. Therefore, a key challenge for Aboriginal Peoples—and for educators and governments working with First Nations, Inuit and Métis to improve learning conditions—is to articulate
a comprehensive definition of what is meant by “learning success,” and to develop and implement an appropriate framework for measuring it.¹

Although existing measures of success have pointed to troubling trends in educational outcomes among Aboriginal learners, there is no broadly accepted framework for measuring progress of Aboriginal learners in Canada across the full spectrum of lifelong learning. Current data and indicators, while providing useful information about Aboriginal learning, do not convey an accurate or comprehensive picture of the state of Aboriginal learning in Canada.²

In response, the Canadian Council on Learning is working in partnership with Aboriginal learning professionals, community practitioners, researchers and governments to define what is meant by learning success and well-being, and to identify indicators required to capture a holistic view of lifelong learning that reflects Aboriginal needs and aspirations.

The result has been the development of three “Holistic Lifelong Learning Models” reflecting perspectives that Aboriginal Peoples possess on learning. The learning models illustrate the place of learning, its sources, how people learn and the connection between learning and community well-being. Most important, they help to identify what learning success means for Aboriginal communities and provide a framework of indicators to track progress.

2. Why A Distinct Approach to Aboriginal Learning?

First Nations, Inuit and Métis—Canada’s Aboriginal people—face persistent barriers that hinder their opportunities for learning, impediments that clearly exceed those facing non-Aboriginal Canadians. In 2001, for example, more than four out of ten Aboriginal children under the age of 15 lived in low-income families.³ Nearly one quarter of on-reserve First Nations people lived in sub-standard housing, compared with 2.5 per cent of the general Canadian population.⁴ Aboriginal people experience much higher rates of unemployment and incarceration than non-Aboriginal people. Poor economic and living conditions mean poorer health. Diabetes rates among Aboriginal people are three to five times those of Canadians in

Suicide rates for First Nations youth are five to seven times higher than the national average, and eleven times higher for Inuit youth. It would be erroneous, however, to address these barriers without taking into account the legacy of Aboriginal historical experience. Aboriginal communities have long experienced the denial of their cultural distinctiveness. Historical policies removed children from their families and communities for schooling (often accompanied by physical and sexual abuse), severed the links between individuals and their spiritual and cultural roots, eroded their languages, undermined their traditional leadership, and denied their political rights and their right to self-determination.

Piecemeal responses to specific impediments to learning or other development challenges that ignore this distinct communal historical experience will fall short of their goals. Aboriginal experience and Aboriginal culture demand holistic responses. The challenges are many, but community regeneration is underway. A holistic approach to lifelong learning, specific to the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal communities, is one element of that regeneration.

Demographic realities make the focus on Aboriginal learning all the more pressing at the same time as they underline the enormous opportunities that present themselves to successful Aboriginal learners. In 2006, almost half (48%) of the Aboriginal population was under the age of 24, compared to a median age of 40 for non-Aboriginal people. Ten years from now, the proportion of Aboriginal children in the school system will be at an historical high (as high as 33% in Saskatchewan). As those children enter the labour market they will also make up a larger proportion of the working-age population. As many as 300,000 Aboriginal children could enter the labour force over the next 15 years. With a predicted shortfall of one million workers across Canada by the year 2020, Aboriginal people and the country at large have a common interest in the success of Aboriginal learning.

3. An Aboriginal view of learning

Despite their diversity, Aboriginal people share a common vision of learning as much more than an individual pursuit. Learning is what nurtures relationships between the individual, the family, the community and Creation. It is the process of transmitting values and identity. It is the guarantor of
cultural continuity. Its value to the individual cannot be separated from its contribution to collective well-being. In today’s terms, Aboriginal learning strengthens a community’s social capital.

Among the key attributes of an Aboriginal view of learning:

- It is *holistic* – engaging and developing all aspects of the individual (emotional, physical, spiritual and intellectual) and of the community. It stresses the interconnectedness of all life under the Creator.

- It is *lifelong* – beginning before birth, it continues through old age and involves the intergenerational transmission of knowledge.

- It is *experiential* – connected to lived experience, reinforced by traditional ceremonies, meditation, story telling, and through observation and imitation.

- It is *rooted in Aboriginal languages and cultures* – language is the essential vehicle for a culture’s unique world view and values, its way of making sense of things and the key to its continuity.

- It is *spiritually oriented* – spiritual experience and development is fundamental (manifested in ceremonies, vision quests, dreams), the avenue to knowledge without which learning is problematic.

- It is a *communal activity* – a process in which parents, family, elders and community all have a role and responsibility.

- It integrates *Aboriginal and Western knowledge* - an adaptive process that draws on the best from both traditional and contemporary knowledge.

In sum, this view of learning is all encompassing, and demands recognition as an integrated whole. Much damage has been inflicted on it by powerful forces from outside the Aboriginal world. Successful Aboriginal learning entails the recognition and restoration of this vision.

4. **Conventional Research and Measurement: A Partial Picture**

When the key attributes of Aboriginal learning described above are compared to the current approaches used to evaluate the success of Aboriginal learning, some stark challenges are identified. Existing research into and measurement approaches for Aboriginal learning may well be based on accepted and valid practices, yet they often fail to take into account the Aboriginal view of learning.\(^{10}\)

How?

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• They tend to emphasise learning deficits of Aboriginal people, while ignoring the strengths and positive outcomes.

• They often overlook the unique economic, health and social barriers to learning experienced by Aboriginal communities.

• They focus on high school or post-secondary education, rather than on the full spectrum of lifelong learning.

• They tend to stress years of schooling and performance on standardized assessments, ignoring holistic learning that engages the physical, spiritual, mental and emotional dimensions.

• They predominantly disregard the importance of experiential learning and traditional activities outside the classroom.

The result is that conventional reporting on learning success of Aboriginal people does not reflect the articulation of lifelong learning by Aboriginal Peoples, and therefore risks becoming either irrelevant for Aboriginal communities, or unable to inform effective policy development.

5. Mapping Aboriginal views of learning

In early 2007, the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) responded to the need for a new approach by launching “Redefining how Success is Measured in Aboriginal Learning”. This initiative was undertaken in partnership with First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities and organizations across Canada.

The primary goal was to develop appropriate tools to measure learning progress. The workshops resulted in the development of three “Holistic Lifelong Learning Models” reflecting First Nations, Inuit and Métis perspectives on learning. The models graphically portray the relationships between learning purposes, processes and outcomes. They also recognise the role all members of the community play in this common enterprise. They demonstrate the cyclical, regenerative nature of holistic lifelong learning and its reciprocal relationship to community well-being.

The models are intended to be “living documents”, serving as a template for communities, researchers, governments and others who are exploring their use as tools in areas such as community planning, assessment, curriculum development and teacher training.

6. A Case in Point: The First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model

First Nations have chosen a living tree to illustrate the cyclical process of learning through an individual’s lifespan (see Figure 1). The tree links the sources of knowledge and cultural continuity with successful individual learning and community well-being.

**Figure 1: First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model**

The model has four main components:

- **The sources and domains of knowledge** (the roots) – Representing from whom First Nations people learn and what they learn about, the roots emphasise the importance of relationships with the land, family, community, ancestors, nation, and one’s language, traditions and ceremonies. This highlights the potential damage that cultural discontinuity (from family breakdown or loss of language, for example) can have on a learner and his or her community. Both Indigenous and Western learning coexist as sources and are integrated in the trunk of the tree, where individual development and lifelong learning are situated.

- **The individual’s lifelong learning journey** (the rings) – A cross-section of the tree trunk reveals Western and Indigenous knowledge as complementary, informing the individual’s spiritual, physical, emotional and mental growth. This integrative process takes place from birth through childhood, youth and adulthood. The rings give equal importance to formal and to informal and experiential learning. The outer ring portrays intergenerational learning. Its seven segments reflect the responsibility of each new generation for the survival of the seventh generation.
• The individual’s personal development (the branches) – Each branch represents a different dimension of personal development. Personal harmony comes when an individual learns to balance the spiritual, physical, mental (includes critical thinking and analytical skills, the practice of visioning or dreaming, and First Nations language ability), and emotional (such as self-esteem, awareness of personal gifts) aspects of their being.

• The community’s well-being (the leaves) – On each branch, clusters of leaves represent aspects of four dimensions of community well-being: spiritual/cultural, social, political, and economic. The more vibrant a leaf’s colour, the better developed that aspect of the dimension. The fact that leaves grow, fall, decay and grow again reflects the cyclical, regenerative learning process that influences community well-being. A community’s well-being nourishes its roots and, in turn, the individual’s learning cycle.

The circularity of the model is fundamental, underlining the all-encompassing, non-linear, interconnectedness of the relationships that govern individual learning and community well-being. The Inuit and Métis Holistic Learning Models employ different graphics—an Inuit blanket toss and another living tree for Métis—but the underlying circularity, the sources of learning, and interconnectedness of relationships are remarkably similar.

7. Identifying Indicators of Aboriginal Learning Success

A holistic framework for measuring progress in Aboriginal learning across Canada has never existed. The new lifelong learning models provide the basis for this national framework. The learning models shift the emphasis from a piecemeal, external assessment that focuses on learning deficits relative to non-Aboriginal standards, to a holistic approach that recognises and builds on success in local terms. They underline the critical connection between community regeneration and well-being and individual learning.

The models identify the relationships that contribute to Aboriginal learning—a crucial first step in isolating the indicators needed to measure progress. Figure 2.0 illustrate how the learning models can be used to build a comprehensive measurement framework. CCL, together with Aboriginal people, have begun to identify the existing indicators required to measure success in Aboriginal learning. Although the indicators in this figure are organized across the various dimensions of lifelong learning, they are representative, rather than comprehensive.

CCL has also developed online and interactive learning tools, accessible from CCL’s website at www.ccl-cca.ca, that provide a wider audience with information on how to use the learning models as a gateway to access data and indicators. Through use, the learning models also help identify important data gaps.
Currently, CCL is utilising this new and innovative approach to report on the state of Aboriginal learning in Canada. This report and measurement framework is expected to be released in November 2009. In the end, this report will be more than a report on the state of Aboriginal learning in Canada. This report will:

- Provide a new and innovative approach to measuring success built on Aboriginal Peoples’ vision of learning and wellbeing;
- Use a holistic measurement framework that analyzes a compendium of lifelong learning indicators, balancing the many learning challenges that exist in Aboriginal communities across Canada with the many strengths;
• Establish the recognition that learning throughout life for Aboriginal people goes beyond the classroom—occurring in the home, work, community and on the land; and

• Offer a perspective of lifelong learning that from which non-Indigenous education systems in Canada, and across the world, can learn.

For example, CCL’s upcoming report on the State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada will show that, despite the troubling trends in educational outcomes that are persistently reported, recent data indicates the many learning strengths and opportunities found in Aboriginal communities—such as strong community and familial supports, active youth engaged in a myriad of informal learning opportunities, and communities that are rich in Aboriginal culture and traditions. Such strengths in learning have the potential to become the building blocks for future lifelong learning policies and programs, that can be relevant and effective in supporting improved outcomes.

8. Conclusion

The learning models, framework and rationale outlined in this report support an alternative vision of Aboriginal learning and community well-being. The Holistic Lifelong Learning Models themselves provide First Nations, Inuit and Métis people with an opportunity to articulate and explore—and for non-Aboriginal Canadians to appreciate—the value of Aboriginal lifelong learning as an essential human endeavour that can benefit us all and enhance societal progress.

The Holistic Lifelong Learning Models can reframe an apparently intractable policy challenge, transforming it into an exciting field of opportunity with multiple benefits—for the success of Aboriginal learners, for the regeneration and well-being of First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities, for regional and national economies and for the health and social cohesion of Aboriginal and Canadian society.

CCL and its many partners in this initiative recognise the many challenges associated with implementing such an alternative vision on the ground, but are confident that the inherent depth and scope of the Holistic Lifelong Learning Models provide a solid foundation for identifying specific aspects of learning that must be measured appropriately.

If decades of Aboriginal poverty and marginalisation are to be reversed, there is an urgent need to re-examine what is understood as Aboriginal learning and how it is measured and monitored. By taking a holistic approach to measurement, comprehensive and accurate information can contribute to the development of relevant policies and programs that meet the expressed needs and aspirations of First Nations, Inuit and Métis people. Most importantly, such information empowers the Aboriginal learner, the family, community and education system to effect meaningful change.