

# Reports from the Field

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## Reading and Writing with the Algonquin, Cree, Micmac, and Mohawk: A learning experience for McGill instructors

### Abstract

*Control of their own educational systems by aboriginal peoples is the key to their social, economic, and cultural survival. During the '70s and '80s, considerable achievements were made in establishing some measure of local jurisdiction. This control has been manifested in a number of different ways: administration, finance, curriculum, and teacher training. This report describes what some mainstream instructors involved in an aboriginal teacher-education program have learned about themselves and their aboriginal students.*

### Résumé

*Le contrôle par les peuples autochtones de leurs propres systèmes d'éducation est pour ces peuples la seule façon de survivre sur les plans social, économique et culturel. Au cours des années 1970 et 1980, de grands progrès ont été réalisés dans la mise en place d'un certain degré de pouvoir, qui s'est exercé dans divers domaines: administration, finances, programmes d'études et formation des enseignants. Ce rapport décrit ce que certains enseignants des programmes réguliers ont appris sur eux-mêmes et sur leurs élèves autochtones en participant à des programmes de formation des enseignants autochtones.*

This brief report is a synopsis of the authors' experiences working with various aboriginal groups. A great deal has been learned as a result of interactions with them.

All of the authors of this report are involved in some way with the Native and Northern Education program at McGill University. Lynn McAlpine acts as the liaison between McGill and the various aboriginal groups. She

makes contact with Cree communities near James Bay, Algonquin communities in Rapid Lake and Maniwaki, the Micmac in Restigouche, the Mohawk (who are just a few minutes from Montreal) in Kahnawake and Kanasetake, and a Micmac community in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Lynn coordinates the timing of one and two-day study skills workshops offered to these aboriginal students and meets regularly with the McGill trainers, the aboriginal students themselves, and the various instructors who teach semester-long courses.

### ***The Native and the Northern Education Program***

*Lynn McAlpine*

Control of their educational systems has increasingly been seen by aboriginal peoples as the key to their social, economic, and cultural survival (Matthew, 1990). This control has been manifested in a number of different ways: administration, finance, curriculum, and teacher training. During the 1970s and 1980s considerable achievements were made in establishing some measure of local jurisdiction, so that today almost 250 bands control aspects of their own education systems (Erasmus, 1989).

Native and Northern Education is a program that provides teacher certification for aboriginal peoples teaching in aboriginal schools. What is intriguing and important about the program is that it is community initiated, not institutionally driven. Over the past twelve years, different aboriginal groups have approached McGill asking it to work in partnership to create programming to meet community needs for teacher certification. (For a more complete explanation of the way in which this partnership works, see McAlpine, Cross, Whiteduck, and Wolforth, 1990). Not only is the program community initiated, it is also field-based; the instructors deliver the courses in the communities. Because the teacher trainees work in their community classrooms throughout each school week, their McGill courses are mostly offered over a series of weekend sessions.

The Native and Northern Certificate is a program of 45 credits in three areas. The first deals with the language, history, politics, and culture of each particular nation. The second area deals with the normal and abnormal cognitive, psychomotor, and affective development of children. The third credit area focuses on a series of methods courses and a practicum.

In addition to 45 course-credits, teacher trainees also take part in a series of workshops to help them upgrade their reading and writing skills. These workshops were created in response to an expressed need on the part of the communities that program participants should be encouraged to improve these skills and eventually pass this learning on to their own students. There is approximately one workshop (from 5 to 8 hours in length) for each three-credit course.

In general, the more isolated the community, the more the aboriginal language is the one spoken in the family and within the community. In the isolated Cree communities and Algonquin communities of Rapid Lake and Winneway, for example, English is the language of the school while Cree and Algonquin are the mainstream languages of the community and family. In most of the Mohawk communities and the Algonquin community of Maniwaki, and the Micmac community of Wagmatcook – the less isolated locales – the aboriginal language is used primarily by those over 40 or 50 years of age and English is the language of communication in most settings; here relearning the language is seen as an important community goal. In communities such as the Micmac village of Restigouche, so few people speak the aboriginal language that recovering it is not seen as a viable goal.

The account that follows describes what some instructors have learned about themselves and their aboriginal students. The reader should be reminded that all of the trainers recognize that they are outsiders rooted in their own cultural perspectives and assumptions, and that all have been raised in the mainstream culture in middle-class homes. Thus, it must be understood that the description of the communities and students might not be the way they would describe themselves. In the words of each of the authors, what follows is an account of the learning they have gained from the aboriginal students with whom they have worked.

### *Algonquin Teachers-in-Training*

*M. Alayne Sullivan*

I teach study-skills workshops to Algonquin teachers-in-training in Maniwaki and Rapid Lake, Quebec. I think that what I have gained as a result of these experiences is a greater awareness of my own culture, i.e., that as a highly educated member of a white, middle-class, mainstream culture I have come to realize that I approach most of my experiences with the unconscious inclination to name them. For example, I write journals to explore my thoughts and feelings, I talk – often quite analytically – with people about films and books, and I seek to order most of my experiences quite deliberately with the intervention of language. This deliberate ordering of experience via language is, to quite an extent I think, a function of the educational background of the educated, middle-class individual. As a result of years of studying and teaching, the middle-class educator approaches most teaching and learning experiences with the intention of naming and ordering the components that form her experiences. Of course, whether or not an event can be described by accounting for its separate “parts” is a matter for considerable philosophical reflection. Nonetheless, I think it safe to say that the white educator may be often inclined to structure educational contexts with the deliberate intent of using written and spoken language as a tool by which experiences will be deliberately shaped and concretized.

Being a teacher of reading and writing, therefore, I attempt to help my students order certain experiences quite deliberately with the tool of language. I show them how to manipulate strategies so that they can organize their own written language and structure it so that it makes an optimal impression on their intended readers. I guide them to talk about their writing with peer group members and analyze it with the intention of making it say clearly and exactly what they want it to say. All this is done quite deliberately, using language to clarify and reflect on experience. When reading we experience another individual's deliberate ordering of feeling, thought, and experience. So when I think about my own culture, I conclude it is one that both deliberately and automatically sets out to order experience through written and oral language. Because many of us have been in a middle-class, white school system for many years, we approach our reading and writing experiences with a certain amount of familiarity and relative ease in using it as a tool by which we explore and organize experience.

The following incident prompted me to formulate some of the reflections I have outlined above. On one particular day during the early fall of 1990, I began a study skills workshop with the intention of helping the students learn certain writing strategies that they might then apply to their academic course work. I invited the students to write about something that they did very well and enjoyed doing. We started by free-writing; the students then read and discussed these "freely written" drafts with one other. Following that, I invited the students to think of someone in particular to whom they could address this piece of writing. Things were fine to this point. After these preliminary activities, lasting an hour or more, I introduced the organizational concept of "idea trees" – sketches that showed a hierarchical arrangement of ideas. I invited the students to try to represent with an idea tree the key points and related details of the "expert papers" we were developing. At this point things broke down. They resisted.

One student, in particular, explained why things were not going so well. He said that in the aboriginal culture, they were used to experiencing things as wholes. When hunting, fishing, or participating in any experience, he explained, it isn't possible for them to break things into segments and parts. They couldn't approach experience in parts but only as a whole. Thus when I asked them to identify key aspects of the subject about which they were writing and then represent their topic in a hierarchically arranged "map", they felt that that constrained things far too much. The deliberate academic practice of naming, categorizing, and arranging things in hierarchical order – of breaking up the whole into parts even if for the sake of organization – ran counter to their cultural background. When deliberately ordering an experience into particular segments we deliberately omit parts of the experience; the notion of deliberately narrowing a field of vision according to the strategies we use in our writing classes seemed particularly fragmented and foreign to them.

After an extended discussion, the students came to appreciate the rationale and various applications of the organizational strategy to which I was introducing them. In turn, I learned a great deal. I have become more sensitive in my approach when teaching study skills; I have become aware of the fact that my white, middle-class education, with all of its “strategies”, may contradict the cultural background that aboriginal students bring with them to their reading and writing. I am also left with a quandary: how can I help these Algonquin teachers-in-training cope with the bulk of academic writing and reading required of them in a manner that is faithful to their cultural style of assimilating experience. We are learning together and, at the same time, I think we are all discovering more about our own cultures in the process.

### *Cree Teachers-in-Training*

*Jean Mason*

I work with adult Cree who are teachers-in-training working toward their McGill Native and Northern Certificate. In addition to working full-time in the classroom, they have family responsibilities and are maintaining their traditional way of life while facing tremendous pressure from outside cultural influences.

The Cree are spread out over the subarctic James/Hudsons Bay region in the territory used by Hydro-Quebec to build massive hydroelectric dams. They are more physically isolated than many other aboriginal groups affiliated with McGill; they live in a harsher climate than other aboriginal groups, and they do not live on reservations. They also signed a political and economic agreement with the Quebec government in 1975, which gives them limited self-government. This agreement was signed with the understanding that it would help them create programs to maintain their traditional values. For example, the Cree have income security for trappers. They also have control of their own health programs, and control of their educational system through the Cree School Board which was created in 1978. These details make them somewhat different from the other aboriginal groups discussed here.

The intent of the Cree School Board is to have Cree as the language of instruction. However, at the moment, although Cree is taught as a language and there are Cree culture courses, the principal language of instruction is English (or French). As a result of this educational system, teachers and children work mostly with educational materials developed in the mainstream culture. The same is true of the teachers-in-training; they study mostly in English and must learn to integrate their coursework into their own language and cultural context.

Given the Cree mandate to have education serve the goals of **their** society and culture and given **my** mandate to teach learning strategies that will help them complete their McGill academic program, I have been prompted

to question my understanding of learning and literacy. For example, when I try to put my observations into a manageable and communicable format I find that what comes naturally to my way of knowing is to organize my thoughts into categories and to find identifiable patterns therein. This approach to assimilating experience often seems to run counter to that of the students.

In light of the differences between my way of knowing and that of the students, I am left with many questions. I ask myself how I can help my students achieve their goals by teaching them strategies rooted in Indo-European language and thought with its tendencies toward linearity and the division of experience into areas of specialization. I ask how I can bridge a cultural gap that is the result of 500 years of presumption and disrespect on the part of my white, middle-class culture. I ask, as well, how I can simultaneously satisfy my own mandate and that of the Cree schoolboard as well as the students' goals. I strive to learn how I can build bridges rather than erect barriers.

I have learned that it is important to use Cree and aboriginal-based materials when teaching study skills to the students. I try to help the students make connections between the study skills I offer them and their own classroom situations and McGill coursework. I also encourage them to define their own immediate and long-term goals as a people. Together we try to adapt the strategies I bring them to their own contexts; the students are encouraged to work in their aboriginal language whenever possible. Finally, I work to be sensitive and flexible, responding to the needs of the students as they arise within each workshop situation. We have to learn to listen because we need to listen to learn.

### *Micmac Teachers-in-Training (Nova Scotia)*

*Anne Douglas*

Two weeks of intense interaction with members of a Micmac community in Nova Scotia brought into objective focus for me what I do as a teacher of "Effective Written Communication" and made me question more profoundly some of the assumptions I had more or less taken for granted in that role. I realized halfway through the first day that if the class participants were to grow in their awareness of themselves as writers, it was necessary for me to reexamine my understanding of the uses of language.

First of all, teaching a writing course in an aboriginal community makes one more aware of the manner in which language serves as a mechanism of control. This becomes apparent from the classroom responses of bilingual aboriginal Canadians for whom English is not their first language. For these writers, English is the language of control; it is the language used in the institutions that control aboriginal life, paramount amongst which is the formal school system. The mother tongue is used in the sphere of the expres-

sive, to articulate familial concerns, negotiate relationships, and voice community concerns. On the other hand, English is used in a directive manner in the public sphere of interaction foreign to and beyond the community. Each language is situated in a context; one context is familiar and permeable; the other, structured and compartmentalized.

These students may very well have felt excluded from the community of English-language users. They all claimed a sense of inadequacy as writers and wanted me to “teach” them how to write properly. Here they were and there, at a remove from them, was the English language about which they felt inadequate. At the same time, perhaps, they felt that with the appropriate instruction they could learn to arrange and manipulate English.

The philosophy of the writing course is to encourage students to write from their own experience. What an overwhelming challenge that is for these students! How to write of the immediate, the known, in a language that has distanced them from the familiar? But this consideration then brings to mind another use of language: through language we communicate to others our sense of relationship to them and the contexts within which we find ourselves. Students were being asked to respond to a daunting challenge: to express the activity of one context in the language of another.

One of the key strategies of the “Effective Written Communication” course is that writing is carried on in groups in all stages of development – the thinking about, talking about, and trying it out. For me, group work provided the bridge that would enable these aboriginal students to write of their own experience in the English language. With support and feedback from their peers, they could wrestle with what it was they had to say in words that best represented their experience for them. It was as though they were involved in a negotiated process of discovery, using English-language words in new ways to relate their experience.

The students worked together to determine where the emphasis should lie in English, and how to best translate their Micmac idioms into English. Through this shared process these students might be able to work through the constraint imposed by English as a language of control. It could then be seen in a new way: that of opening up the communication between the two contexts in which the students live, and making the experience of each context relevant to the other.

*Micmac Teachers-in-Training (Restigouche)*

*Donna Lee Smith*

I have conducted three weekend workshops with the Micmac in Restigouche. My experience is perhaps different from that of my colleagues

because the Restigouche Reserve is just across the bridge from the fair-sized town of Campbellton, New Brunswick. The Micmac work and shop there. They go to school there; their experiences and aspirations are, in many ways, similar to their non-aboriginal neighbours – or at least more similar than some other nations in more isolated regions.

As my first weekend approached I was apprehensive. Although I had been briefed and told that all the students had completed high school, I wondered how I, a non-aboriginal, could presume to enter their world. In my mind, I represented the down-side of the non-aboriginal influence. The confrontation between whites and natives in Oka (Quebec) in the summer of 1990 was still fresh in my mind and I felt I was yet another outsider set on devaluing their fragile way of life, taking them further away from their oral tradition and leading them down the path of the written word. I was convinced that what I was about to do was reprehensible.

As you may have guessed, I needn't have worried. What I had fallen victim to was a bleeding-heart, romantic vision of the aboriginal as a spiritually realized tree hugger. What I met in reality was a group of women – all my students are women – whose aspirations and goals are not dissimilar to my own. We're all about the same age, we have children, we're running a home and taking classes, and trying to balance it all.

I felt an affinity with these women. They are warm and have a sense of humour; we spent much time laughing at ourselves – at life – at men – at our children. And they are caring; I knew they would rather be at home with their children on a Saturday afternoon than paying a babysitter so that they could come to a non-credit course. But they would stick it out because they have a strong commitment as teachers.

Only one of the students grew up with books in the house; she was the only one who was read to as a child, and she is the most confident writer in the group. They all say they read to their children now, yet I fear that television and video play a large part in their children's lives. It is as if they and their children have gone from an oral tradition to a television one, and bypassed the print. But on the up-side of the non-aboriginal influence, what I see happening to these aspiring teachers is that through their increased knowledge will come confidence, more money, and the independence necessary to lead a fulfilled life.

Through education the women will learn to write the language needed to communicate about their own lives, and so instead of feeling like I would lead those women away from their spiritual past, I see that I can perhaps play a small part in leading them toward independence. And through them, their children will benefit. As women, we all need to know that the lord and master of our home and children is our own capable selves.



*Mohawk Teachers-in-Training*

Carolyn Pittenger

I work with the Mohawk in Kahnawake who live just a few minutes from downtown Montreal. As a group, the Mohawk are just beginning to regain their aboriginal language. Unlike other aboriginal groups, they live in close proximity to the white mainstream culture and have become far more assimilated within the white, middle-class culture around them than the other groups discussed here.

The students with whom I work are widely varied in the skills they have to build upon. They are going through an identity crisis as they fight the larger society around them. I represent that larger society. My students want to enter my world and yet they don't want to be contaminated by it or changed beyond what is reasonable.

One of the problems my students and I face is the lack of aboriginal-based materials with which to work. The students also lack a range of background experiences in academic reading and writing. The academic program within which they are enrolled at McGill cannot completely compensate for their background; they need a steady, weekly diet of reading and writing. In addition to the gaps in background experiences with reading and writing, there are cultural divides between the students and the mainstream culture. They seek practical versus theoretical knowledge and I must work to help them bridge the various gaps between their cultural and academic background and that of mainstream culture within which the McGill program is inculcated.

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