

MEASURING SUCCESS IN FIRST NATIONS, INUIT AND MÉTIS LEARNING

Paul Cappon

The Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) has developed the world's first composite learning index to track Canada's progress in lifelong learning. However, data gaps hamper measurement of success among Aboriginal learners. CCL and its Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre, in partnership with Aboriginal people and organizations, have taken an important first step to rectify that. First Nations, Inuit and Métis holistic lifelong learning models illustrate the place of learning in the Aboriginal world view, its sources, how people learn and the connection between learning and community well-being. Most important, they help identify what learning success means for Aboriginal communities and provide a framework of indicators to track progress.

Le Conseil canadien sur l'apprentissage (CCA) a mis au point le premier indice composite d'apprentissage au monde en vue de mesurer les progrès de l'apprentissage permanent au Canada. Mais cet indice comporte certaines lacunes qui empêchent de bien évaluer la réussite des apprenants autochtones. Or le CCA et son Centre du savoir sur l'apprentissage chez les Autochtones, en partenariat avec les peuples et les organismes autochtones, ont franchi une étape clé pour corriger la situation en créant des « modèles holistiques d'apprentissage tout au long de la vie » à l'intention des Premières Nations, des Métis et des Inuits. Ces modèles illustrent la place de l'apprentissage dans la vision du monde autochtone, ses sources, ses modes de transmission et le rapport entre apprentissage et mieux-être collectif. Surtout, ils aideront à déterminer en quoi consiste un apprentissage réussi pour les communautés autochtones et fourniront une série d'indicateurs des progrès accomplis.

First Nations, Inuit and Métis face persistent barriers that hinder their opportunities for learning, barriers that far exceed those facing non-Aboriginal Canadians. In 2001, for example, more than 4 out of 10 Aboriginal children under the age of 15 lived in low-income families, according to Statistics Canada. Nearly one-quarter of on-reserve First Nations people lived in substandard housing, compared with 2.5 percent of the general Canadian population. Aboriginal people experience much higher rates of unemployment and incarceration than non-Aboriginal people. Poor economic and living conditions mean poorer health. Health Canada reports that diabetes rates among Aboriginal people are three to 5 times those of Canadians in general. Suicide rates for First Nations youth are 5 to 7 times higher than the national average, and 11 times higher for Inuit youth.

It is a mistake, however, to address these barriers without taking into account the legacy of Aboriginal historical experience. Aboriginal communities have long experienced

the denial of their 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 barriers 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 under way. 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 await successful Aboriginal learners. In 2006, almost half (48 percent) of the

Aboriginal population was under the age of 24. Compare that with a median age of 40 for non-Aboriginal people. Ten years from now, the proportion of Aboriginal children in the school system will be higher than ever (as high as 33 percent 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 huge stake in the success of Aboriginal 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 and storytelling, 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

- They focus on high school or post-secondary education, rather than on the full spectrum of lifelong learning.
- They stress years of schooling and performance on standardized assessments but ignore holistic learning that engages the physical, spiritual, mental and emotional dimensions.
- They ignore the importance of experiential learning and traditional activities outside the classroom.

The result is that conventional reporting on learning success of Aboriginal people provides only a partial picture and therefore does not support effective policy development.

The experience of two pioneering Aboriginal-led research initiatives is germane here. The First Nations Schools Association (FNSEA) School Measures and Data Collection Project in British Columbia and the Assembly

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learning entails the recognition and restoration of this vision.

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.

How?

- They tend to emphasize learning deficits of Aboriginal people, while ignoring positive outcomes.
- They often overlook the special economic, health and social barriers to learning experienced by Aboriginal communities.

of First Nations' Regional Longitudinal Health Survey demonstrate the importance and viability of culturally relevant data collection and analysis.

The FNSEA is a non-partisan organization committed to promoting First Nations control of education and to improving and supporting development of quality, culturally appropriate education for First Nations students. The FNSEA sees the role of First Nations schools as providing "culturally sensitive environments that reflect and respect the needs of their students and the communities they serve." The FNSEA's School Measures and Data Collection Project, initiated in 2004-

2005, conducts surveys of First Nations schools, students and parents in British Columbia.

The project draws on the results of an extensive consultation process among First Nations communities in British Columbia that sought to define standards for First Nations schools. The

The New Zealand government and the country's indigenous Maori are developing a statistical framework to measure several dimensions of Maori well-being. The framework reflects such Maori aspirations as sustainability of the Maori world, social capability, skills development, economic self-sufficiency, environmental sustainability, empowerment and enablement. Built into the initiative is a commitment to statistical capacity building. This will ensure ongoing Maori control and responsibility for the statistical framework and data.

surveys recognize that First Nations schools are responding to a long history of difficult social, economic and cultural issues, that a range of data and indicators are needed to interpret effectiveness, and that an emphasis on positive change, rather than judgments about "good" and "bad" schools, is essential and contributes to a "safe environment for data collection." Three years of research and data collection reflecting First Nations values have produced information that highlights areas of strength, areas requiring greater support and resources, and best practices. The result is more effective programming.

The AFN's Regional Longitudinal Health Survey (RHS) addresses the lack of reliable information on the health and well-being of First Nations. A national holistic health survey, under First Nations control, it collects and reports data concerning on-reserve communities. The RHS draws on both Western and traditional understandings of well-being. It recognizes the need of First Nations to control their own information, and is designed to measure changes in their well-being over time, rather than simply make comparisons with the well-being of mainstream society. Phase 1, completed in 2003, involved 22,602 surveys in 238 First Nations communities.

Subsequent survey results will be released every four years.

The premise of the RHS is that First Nations health and well-being is "the total health of the total person within the total environment." The RHS employs a "cultural framework"

which, like the Aboriginal holistic learning models discussed later, illustrates a First Nations cultural paradigm. It portrays well-being as dependent on cultural vitality, Western and traditional knowledge, healthy relationships and active communities. In short, it embodies a specifically Aboriginal perspective on the broader determinants of health.

The cultural framework drives the content of the RHS. It influences the themes covered, the questions asked and information produced. The assumption underlying the RHS is that indicators of wellness for First Nations communities are not useful unless they also address issues related to education, culture, language, world view and spirituality. The RHS produces consistent data for First Nations communities across the country facilitating authentic, community-based action to improve well-being.

These Canadian efforts to develop appropriate measures for Aboriginal learning and health are taking place against a backdrop of global activity with the same rationale. The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) is also pursuing research to improve learning outcomes for indigenous peoples. The

UNPFII has identified data barriers to measuring indigenous peoples' health, human rights, economic and social development, environment, education and culture. The UNPFII stresses the importance of the participation of indigenous peoples in the selection of culturally appropriate indicators.

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These parallel activities confirm the importance of recognizing distinct indigenous visions of learning and measuring progress that reflect Aboriginal peoples' view of lifelong learning. They can only augur well for the sharing of best practices internationally, while helping to give this issue the profile it deserves on government agendas.

In early 2007, 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 CCL's Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre and First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities and organizations across Canada.

The primary goal was to develop appropriate tools to measure learning progress. CCL organized a series of national workshops that brought together Aboriginal learning professionals, researchers and government representatives from over 50 organizations to help develop an approach to measurement consistent with the Aboriginal view of learning.

The workshops developed three “holistic lifelong learning models” reflecting the First Nations, Inuit and Métis perspectives on learning (see, for example, figure 1. The models graphically portray the relationships between learning purposes, processes and outcomes. They also recognize the role all members of the community play in this common enterprise. They demonstrate the cyclical, regenerative nature of holistic lifelong learning and its cause-and-effect 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 for assessment, curriculum development and teacher training. They also offer an important focal point for discussions about community planning and development. Field testing to date suggests that the models have the potential to con-

tribute to renewed cultural connections and intergenerational bonds.

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

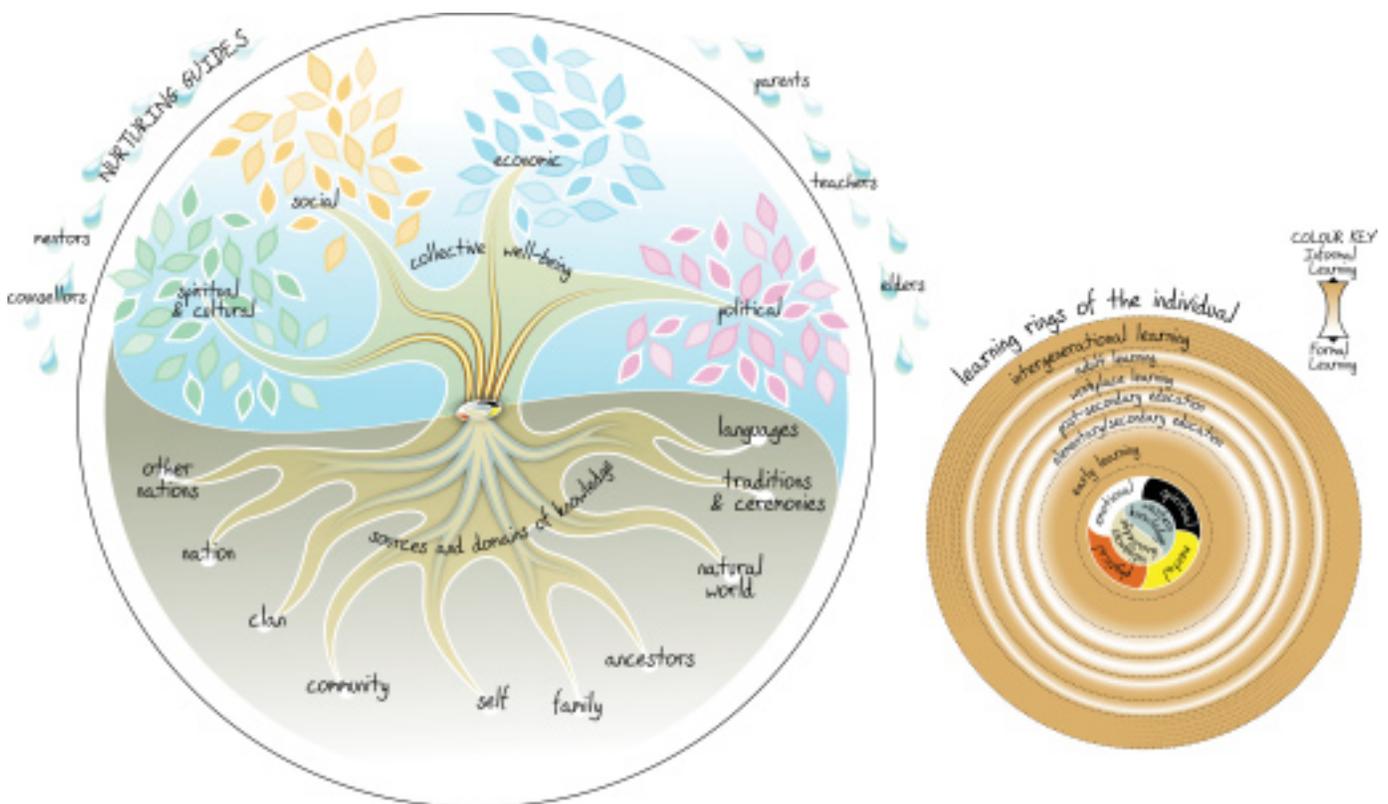
The model has four main components:

- The sources and domains of knowledge (the roots): Representing from whom First Nations people learn and what they learn about, the roots emphasize 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 com-

munity. 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 cycle (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

FIGURE 1. FIRST NATIONS HOLISTIC LIFELONG LEARNING MODEL



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,

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 recognizes 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. Table 1 lists a set of illustrative indicators

learning models beyond their use as a tool for measurement.

In January 2008, CCL and its Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre partnered with the Assembly of First Nations to host a series of dialogues in three First Nations communities: Onion Lake Cree Nation, Saskatchewan; Nipissing First Nation, Ontario; and the Council of Yukon First Nations, Yukon.

The purpose of the dialogues was to assess the value of the First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model as a tool for community planning and development. Each dialogue involved the partners within the community — principals, teachers, parents, students, social workers, recreation program leaders and political leaders — who influence learning outcomes for First Nations across all ages.

Leaders in each community were deeply involved in the planning and development of the dialogues. Participants were divided into five groups to discuss learning specific to different stages along the continuum of lifelong learning: children, youth, young adults, adults and elders. Each group was asked to undertake an asset-mapping exercise, where they used the learning model to address two specific questions:

1. What are the learning opportunities that exist in my community, home, school and workplace, and on the land?
2. What are the learning opportunities that *are needed* in my community, home, school and workplace, and on the land?

Each group identified a series of common priorities across the five life stages. Participants then developed goals, expected outcomes and a plan forward for each priority. The result is the beginning of a “community plan” that identifies what is needed to help create a successful learning community and improve overall well-being.

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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 the interconnectedness of relationships are remarkably similar. (The Inuit and Métis models can be viewed at www.ccl-cca.ca.)

There is no holistic framework for measuring progress in Aboriginal learning across Canada. The new lifelong learning models provide the basis

that show how the models can be used to develop a national framework for measuring learning. The indicators are organized across various dimensions of lifelong learning and are representative, rather than comprehensive. They include both input indicators that occur within the learning system and output indicators that measure achievement of various learning outcomes.

The learning models also help to identify the critical data and information gaps in Aboriginal learning. CCL will continue to work with its partners to develop an Aboriginal Learning Information and Data Strategy (ALIDS) that will determine the information needed to achieve comprehensive, accurate and timely assessment of lifelong learning for Aboriginal peoples at community, regional and national levels. The ultimate goal is the development of an Aboriginal Composite Learning Index, to measure progress over time and identify the lifelong learning opportunities that contribute to the well-being of First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities.

Recent experience also demonstrates the value of the holistic

TABLE 1. TOWARD A NATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR MEASURING ABORIGINAL LEARNING

		Place where learning occurs (sources of learning)				
		Home	School/ institution	Community	Land	Workplace
Early learning	Formal Learning					n.a
	Informal learning	Extent to which parents read to children	Access to First Nations-specific ECE program	Access to organized activities (reading programs, play group)	Interaction with family who help understand traditional practices	n.a.
Elementary/ secondary education	Formal learning		High school graduation rate		Exposure to school field trips to sacred sites	
	Informal Learning	Use of First Nations language at home	Participation in sports and recreation programs at school	Participation in First Nations ceremonies and festivals	Practice of First Nations traditional skills (hunting, trapping)	Availability of internship programs
Post-secondary education	Formal learning	Participation in distance learning courses leading to a certification	University completion rate	Availability of community-based post-secondary programs		Availability of apprenticeship programs
	Informal learning	Exposure to First Nations culture and traditions at home	Access to Aboriginal student centres and/or support programs	Access to a community library	Use of celestial bodies (interpreting seasons, navigation, weather)	Availability of non-formal workplace training
Adult learning	Formal learning		First Nations adults returning to school to complete high school diploma			Participation in formal workplace training
	Informal learning	Reading non-work-related material at home		Community involvement and volunteering	Knowledge of traditional medicines and herbs	Self-directed learning through the Internet
Intergenerational learning	Formal learning		Proportion of teachers in school who are First Nations			
	Informal learning	Intergenerational transmission of First Nations culture at home	Involvement of elders at schools	Exposure and interaction with elders who help understand language and culture	Extent of use of traditional practices	Use of First Nations language in the workplace

In the case of the Onion Lake Cree Nation, 50 kilometres north of Lloydminster on the Saskatchewan-Alberta border, approximately 100

community members took part in the community dialogues.

Onion Lake is a relatively large community of more than 4,000

members that has managed education on the reserve since 1981. It operates a primary school (including a Cree immersion program), an

elementary school and a high school. The Onion Lake Board of Education is responsible for setting the direction of education.

Using the First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model, dialogue participants were able to visualize how learning occurs in their community, its interaction with language, culture and history, and the role each of them plays in successful learning. Community members identified nine shared priorities:

1. Becoming a healthy community — spiritually, socially, intellectually and physically.
2. Increasing parental involvement in learning through teaching of traditional values and virtues in the home, at school, and in the community.
3. Increasing the understanding and awareness of kinship and genealogy.
4. Improving the fluency of Cree language among learners of all ages.
5. Improving the engagement of elders within all learning environments across the community.
6. Creating a learning space (resource centre or library) to facilitate the transfer of cultural and indigenous knowledge.
7. Learning to work together by building relationships across all agencies, organizations and families within the community.

8. Increasing opportunities for the community to understand, develop respect for, experience and learn from the land.

9. Developing entrepreneurship and employment opportunities within Onion Lake and with neighbouring communities.

The priorities demonstrate an approach to lifelong learning that moves well beyond the bounds of what is conventionally regarded as “education.” The holistic learning model encouraged and allowed community participants to draw linkages to broader determinants of learning success and opened up new avenues for community involvement.

These priorities, along with short-medium- and long-term goals and outcomes, were presented to the Onion Lake Board of Education in the form of a community plan. However, the nine priorities make it clear that responsibility for learning reaches far beyond the education system to involve all members of the community, including families, elders, health care providers and many others. A joint report on the three community dialogues will be available at www.ccl-cca.ca or www.afn.ca in May 2008.

The holistic lifelong learning models are proving to be powerful resources that enable Aboriginal com-

munities to visualize successful learning, and set out actions to achieve that vision. Perhaps as important is their continued use as a means of engagement, to foster and focus dialogue about learning and its contribution to the community, the region and the country. Online, interactive learning tools accessible from CCL's website at www.ccl-cca.ca provide a wider audience with information on how to use the models as a gateway to access data and indicators. Through use, they will also help identify important data gaps.

We are convinced that the learning models reframe what has too often been regarded as an intractable policy challenge and transform 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.

Paul Cappon is president and CEO of the Canadian Council on Learning in Ottawa. For a copy of the CCL report Redefining Success in First Nations, Inuit and Métis Learning visit CCL's Web site at www.ccl-cca.ca. The site also offers interactive versions of the three learning models.

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