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IDENTITY AFFIRMATION THROUGH LITERARY CIRCLES AMONG ABORIGINAL STUDENTS AT THE CEGEP DE CHICOUTIMI

This report describes the narrative practice of two interveners whom, in collaboration with the CEGEP de Chicoutimi and the Native friendship Centre of Saguenay, have worked on holding literary circles addressed to Aboriginal post-secondary students. Conducive to the emergence of cultural exchange, reading circles prove to be, within the framework of this project, a powerful vector of identity affirmation. Michele Martin, Adapted Services Consultant at the CEGEP de Chicoutimi, is the initiator of this project; Marie-Danielle Riverin, a secondary and post-secondary teacher of French, was hired as a trainer for its implementation. Here, they outline the literary circles and the positive effects they have on participants.

First, can you tell us a little about you and about the other actors in this project?

The Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'enseignement supérieur (MEES) created the adapted service consultant position only a few years ago to meet the growing needs of special populations at the post-secondary levels. I [Michèle Martin] have held this position at the CEGEP de Chicoutimi since. Historically in our institution, a student of French teaching is recruited each year for a few hours a week to support Aboriginal students and immigrants in their difficulties in French. Already involved with these clientele, Marie-Danielle Riverin was recruited for the literary circles project because of her cultural sensitivity, her awareness of oral peoples' peculiarities, and her skills relating to oral learning. The CEGEP

has used her services for the development and the delivery of each workshop. The Native Friendship Centre of Saguenay joined us by providing us with its friendly environment where meetings could be held. Located nearby the CEGEP, the Centre is a community gathering place for Aboriginal peoples living in the region. Therefore, it was from the beginning, a team project in which everyone assumed different mandates.

In your environment, what problems were justifying the need to implement literary circles for Aboriginal students?

Several historical factors justify the implementation of such educational measures for Aboriginal students in our institution. Since 2003, the CEGEP de Chicoutimi has implemented a welcome and integration program for Aboriginal students. The annual statistics measuring success and participation in the program allow us to determine the needs and identify the obstacles. After ten years, in 2013, the results showed that the lack of cultural venues where students could express their traditions was a barrier to their success. Aboriginal students also showed a lot of cultural insecurity and a feeling of exclusion, especially in general education courses (French, Philosophy, and English), where contents had little resonance with their cultural heritage.

Raised in the oral tradition, they are often confronted to unusual reading and writing transmission modes upon their arrival at CEGEP. We noted that they

What are the “literary circles” main educational objectives?

At first, “literary circles” main goal was to give Aboriginal students an appetite for reading and an enjoyment of literary texts. In their family, learning occurs mainly orally. Young people are relatively unfamiliar with literary resources. They read and write little at home, hence the problem of “alphacollegism” encountered in CEGEPs and colleges. All activities developed in the project of literary circles fostered the sharing concept, which is rooted in the system of Aboriginal values. The development of oral learning situations centred on sharing was essential to promote openness, to stimulate exchanges, and to allow these students to achieve real learning. Literary circles were designed to equip participants pertaining to literature and reading through texts of Aboriginal writers from Quebec and North America.



The primary objective of these meetings was to prioritize identity development among post-secondary Aboriginals, through discovery activities of Quebec and North American Autochthonous literature. Learning effective reading strategies, the introduction to literary concepts, and preparation for text analysis was also among the objectives of the project. The circles also ensure bridging between literature and other Aboriginal arts and cultural events.

In practice, can you tell us more on the conducting of workshops?

Every week for two semesters, the participants were invited to a literary circle lasting about two hours. The workshops were held in the evening at the Friendship Centre available to us. We also had access to the kitchen to prepare snacks. The participants enrolled in the activity voluntarily; therefore we did

not always have the same group. At each meeting, participants were asked to read out loud texts selected for this purpose in a book and to discuss them together. This collection included a variety of literary genres, all drawn from the Autochthonous repertoire. It could be novels, essays, poems, songs, newspaper articles or journals, stories and legends collected in the oral tradition, collective texts or even books on the history and autochthonous art. Still emerging, Native literature compared to the Quebec literature repertoire of the sixties. The circles were thus an opportunity for us to introduce the main writers of Aboriginal literature to the participants.

Following each reading circle, exchanges and impressions on selected texts were discussed. A talking circle oriented on themes addressed in the texts was then proposed to the participants. This often led to sharing anecdotes mentioned in the texts. It was a great opportunity to review some literary concepts such as figures of style. In addition, they made associations with other works to deepen the interpretation of texts (pictures, films, songs, etc.). Inter-literary comparisons were also proposed as enrichment. Thus, the workshops enabled learning applied directly into an awareness revealed by the discussion circle. Educational contents were always brought implicitly.

Following the meetings, the texts visited were added to the circle’s blog, which allowed participants to return or to say more about the texts after the literary experience. Reinvestment workshops finally allowed them to question the contents related to identity development found in the works.

Furthermore, the complexity of workshops followed a logical progression over the weeks. For example, the first week, we addressed the Aboriginal proverbs as the culmination of the project was the reading of Yves Thériault’s novel *Agaguk*. Reading an entire book was a daunting challenge for the participants, but most of them succeeded.

Who are the main authors addressed in these literary circles?

Aboriginal writers such as Joséphine Bacon, Michel Noël, Naomi Fontaine, Louis-Karl Picard-Siouï, Geneviève McKenzie-Siouï, Maya Cousineau-Mollen, Virginia Pésémapié-Bordeleau, Charles Coccoo,

Andre Dudemaine, George Sioui, and author-songwriter Samian were addressed in the literary circles.

Who were the participants in this project?

The following statistics describe the characteristics of participants in the literary circles, which varied from one week to the next, since the project was offered on a voluntary basis. On average, eight to ten participants took part in the reading groups every week. Based on the participation number, 67% were students at CEGEP de Chicoutimi and had courses in literature or in philosophy on their schedules; 20% were students attending adult school who wanted to attend CEGEP later; while 13% were members of the Saguenay Native Friendship Centre.

Was instructional material developed for the workshops?

The literary circles resulted in the development of an animator's handbook in which the whole procedure is detailed, and a participant workbook including texts and related exercises. Following my teaching experience with students with difficulties, I had [Marie-Danielle Riverin] developed a toolbox for teaching reading strategies. But for this project, first I myself had to do a review of works from Quebec and North American Aboriginal literature. Then, I was able to select relevant texts. I created a collection of selected texts, all accompanied by contextualized reinvestment activities. The activities were organized according to themes addressed at each meeting.

What were the main outcomes for participants?

The meetings were held in a warm atmosphere conducive to exchanges and expression of participants' pride in their identity. Rich in textual analysis, literary circles have explored topics as diverse as politics, history, art, intercultural relations, and the environment. Texts were often so thought-provoking that discussions took place without our intervention.

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From facilitators, we became observers of this process that was taking place naturally. The educational content became an identity affirmation engine. The circle is a fabulous tool in that it allows power-sharing among participants.

Within the circle, the brain and the heart connect and everybody is equidistant from the centre. The right to speak, the notions of fairness and respect were therefore at the heart of our meetings. Rooted in their traditions, participants were more inclined to genuine exchanges. Relationships with ancestors and Native spirituality were also widely discussed.

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The circles also helped intergenerational transfers. For example, a text on residential schools triggered heavy emotions causing catharsis in participants. Following this meeting, a student was able to question his Elders on their experience during the residential school period. As facilitators, we had to demonstrate flexibility, as

some texts deeply challenged participants and gave rise to lively discussions where emotions were on edge. From joy to sadness, through anger, we

accompanied the participants in a whole reconciliation process with the past and re-appropriation of their own culture. The intensity of participation in literary circles exceeded our expectations. Candlelight, soft music, sharing herbal teas and afternoon snacks were the means used to achieve this closeness between the participants and gain their trust. It worked. Toward the end, we even integrated other Aboriginal traditions such as purification with sacred sage and opening directions of the circle. The meetings sometimes lasted over two hours and we had to “blow off the candle” on certain occasions.

**“When a word is offered, it never dies.
Those who come will hear.”
(Joséphine Bacon)**

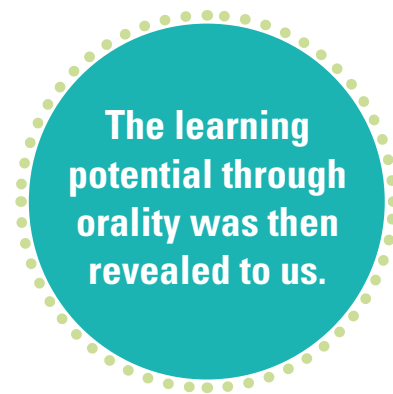
From a literary point of view, the entertaining side of the circle leaves space for meaningful interpretations with respect to a text’s essential nature. For example, many allegories between the animal or plant kingdoms and humans could be determined. Metaphors associated with natural phenomena have also helped explain certain individual and social behaviour. The participants were even able to bring out complex lexical fields from the works read orally in a circle.

In addition, among several participants who dreaded oral presentations, we noted a marked improvement in the ease to speak publicly. The safe and informal environment context in which the circles took place seems to have helped many participants to overcome their shyness. The learning potential through orality was then revealed to us.

Moreover, the reading circles’ positive effects on Aboriginal students’ educational attainment is demonstrated in the following statistics: 100% of CE-GEP students passed the literature or philosophy course on their schedule; 100% of the adult-school students passed their French courses (reading comprehension); 70% were able to read the book *Agaguk* in its entirety (for more than half, it was their first book, containing a considerable number of pages).

These results are encouraging given the difficulties in French of Aboriginal post-secondary students. Real progress has been made in terms of the participants’ literacy skills. We attribute this to the fact that the texts find echo in their cultural heritage and that students have the opportunity to discuss them with peers.

It therefore appears that the cultural reference of a text is a prerequisite for understanding. In other words, to analyze a text, we must first understand its historical context and its cultural foundations.



In conclusion, given their benefits on the participants, will literary circles be repeated in the near future?

As supporters of an inclusive approach to education where differences coexist, we believe in an education more in line with the Universal Design for Learning. At the end of this positive experience, we wish to renew if we obtain the necessary means; we believe important that Aboriginal students have access to a place to share, where they can gather according to their traditions, to share in this safe space that is the circle.

We also believe that this kind of place should be offered in all post-secondary institutions. Therefore, instead of striving to adapt to social mores and styles of learning which are often foreign to them, Aboriginal students could, through these literary circles, see their rich traditions diffused and have access to transmission of ancestral know-how of which any society could benefit.

