

# Indigenous Education: Finding face, making space, having place



**Lorna Williams**

*University of Victoria,  
British Columbia, Canada*

Professor Lorna Williams is Lil'wat from the St'at'yem'c First Nation. She holds the Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Knowledge and Learning in the Faculty of Education and Department of Linguistics at the University of Victoria BC Canada. Her research is in the area of teacher development and collaborative learning. She is also the former Director of the Aboriginal Enhancements Branch of the Ministry of Education.

Professor Williams is an educator with many years of experience in Aboriginal Education, Indigenous Language Revitalization, Curriculum Development, Teacher Development, Mediated Learning, Cognitive education, effects of colonization on learning, and Indigenous ways of knowing. She has co-directed a series of videos called *First Nations: The Circle Unbroken*. She has written children's books, teachers' guides and developed Lil'wat language curriculum to teach people to read and write the Lil'wat language, which was exclusively oral until 1973. Professor Williams was a CCL Minerva Lecturer in 2007 and was invested into the Order of BC for her work in education in 1992.

## Abstract

This article uses an Indigenous storytelling methodology to relate the success factors that institutions, policy makers, administrators, teachers and communities can attend to in making changes to support the achievement of Indigenous learners. It draws on what Indigenous students, families and communities themselves have attributed their educational success. The article serves as a witness to their stories.

## Introduction

Last night I attended a graduation recognition ceremony at the university and was witness to the successful completion of university degrees by Indigenous students. Their stories demonstrate the complexity and intricacies of the word 'success' for Indigenous students. And their stories illustrate the treacherous and heroic journey to successful academic attainment while maintaining their identity and values as Indigenous peoples. Their stories exemplify what I mean by 'Finding face, making space and having place' to support Indigenous student success.

The first story is the ceremony itself. It began when there were only a few Indigenous students at the university, mainly in one faculty. That faculty had been actively promoting and developing programs focusing on service to Indigenous communities for many years. The annual celebration to recognise, witness and acknowledge the students' achievement is a faculty and family affair. Over the years as more students graduated from other faculties, they too were invited to the celebration, following the Indigenous tradition of inclusion and the honouring of relationships. Today the celebration takes place in the First People's House which opened in 2009 and is hosted by the office of Indigenous Affairs with the guidance of the university's elders

in residence. It follows the protocols of the local First Nations ceremonies on whose land the ceremony takes place. We sing, pray, tell stories, cry, laugh and eat foods from the land and waters. There is a speaker following the custom in all big houses in the south island. He makes sure that everything goes smoothly and we conduct ourselves in an appropriate way.

Each graduate selects someone to speak on their behalf, to introduce them to the community and to name their achievements. It is in these stories and more stories during the open session that we hear about the student's courage, unique personality, their perseverance and hard work on their path to graduation. In the stories I hear in these ceremonies the students had support from family, community and institution to encourage them to keep on going, to hold them up when they wanted to fall. We heard about the multiple responsibilities held by the students in addition to their studies – family, children and community responsibilities. We heard that each graduate had many people who cared about and supported their success within the program, school and community. A crucial aspect of the pathway to success is to have a network of caring and attentive, firm and affirming support. When I listen to students, as I have over many years, talk about what they attribute to their school success – it is the same. This ceremony demonstrates that our achievement belongs to a community beyond ourselves and acknowledges that each graduate is actively engaged in their success. 'Family' means the extended family, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings or adopted families stepping in when a parent is not present. 'Community' refers here to leaders, elders, youth and children.

We heard stories of the students taking on more responsibilities within the university – being actively involved

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in the life of the program and school. Being part of the life of an institution is a factor for success. The office of Indigenous Affairs implements programs to enable students to be involved in teaching or research projects conducted by university faculty or community led research projects. Counselling services are available in the First Peoples House by conventional western trained counsellors or counselling with the elders in residence, who are available everyday. The service that is offered is culturally consistent with an Indigenous standpoint. In this way, the Indigenous community on campus has a place that is consistent with their cultural values and they can find themselves reflected in the activities and services offered there.

Establishing a welcoming space takes time, careful tending and a shared commitment at all bureaucratic levels in an institutional environment that is well grounded in a modern corporate Euro western structure. The commitment must be clearly stated in the working documents, as well as evident in the daily practice of an institution. The First Peoples House first appeared in the strategic plan of the University of Victoria in 1999. In the following years the retention and recruitment of Indigenous students was listed as a priority. Each year built on the success of the previous years, but not all of its efforts paid off immediately. If an educational institution does not indigenise its practice and structure, it will continue to carry out the assimilationist policies of a colonising government.

When the students in the Masters in Counselling in Aboriginal Communities spoke, they shared their journey in completing their degree successfully. What can we learn from them? They were ready for the program to progress in their chosen careers; most of them were already working in the field and needed to study and to gain

the necessary credentials. They wanted to participate in this particular program because of the program's stated goal to prepare people to work in Indigenous communities.

The program promised the students would study in an Indigenous environment. Each of the students spoke at length about this promise. First they spoke about selecting the program because they needed to learn and study in a way that respected their heritage and the population they were planning to work with. They spoke of their hopes that the program would live up to its promise and their fears that it wouldn't because they had attended many programs that made the same promise but failed.

They spoke of their surprise when they attended the first course and they were told that there would be no books, articles, paper, pens or computers. They would learn sitting in a circle and in ceremony, pulling their knowledge from deep within their memories, drawing on their experiences and knowledge of traditions. Their first task was to construct an Indigenous healing environment, with roles for each member of the class including the instructors, as it would exist in the community and family. The graduates related how difficult it was to stay in the Indigenous model of a healing community; changing habits of mind requires practice, self-checking and the feedback from the group and instructor. They also shared that the class was a safe place to state their fears, hopes and confusion. Many of the students grew up outside their communities and felt that they didn't know enough of their traditions. In the beginning they didn't feel confident in their knowledge. They could begin to try new ways of thinking and behaving, knowing they were accepted and not judged. The instructors held fast to the Indigenous values and principles identified for the program but they were compassionate,

making certain that there was ample time for discussion, querying, explaining, exploring and silence. One of the activities students remembered was finding metaphors from their own Indigenous world to describe models of healing. In all their following courses as well as in their final exam, they drew on these early metaphors. In this safe environment the students were able to support one another and build on each other's knowledge. They also held each other responsible for participation in all activities.

The community members related the growth they observed in the students as they progressed in their programs. They commented on students' diligence, studying late into the night after they put their children to bed. They told stories of how the family and community stepped in to help when students wanted to give up. They also spoke at length of how these students will offer the needed support to the wellbeing of the families and communities in their chosen professions. For Indigenous students learning must be connected to meaningful purpose, it must make a difference in the lives of family and community. Learning is not only for the individual student. Both students and workplaces value programs that have an experiential component. Practicum supervisors told stories of how individual students impacted the organisations where they were assigned, bringing innovation and new understandings regarding decolonised practices. When I asked a group of high school students what supported their school success, they spoke of the elders who were prominent in their lives, giving them advice and encouragement. They also cited the programs in the community. For example, the community leaders gave funds to older students to design and deliver after school and summer youth programs. This practice is a common traditional

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practice, creating opportunities to youth to plan and engage in responsible community-building activities, practising leadership and service, by working independently but with the watchful support of community leaders and family.

One of the protocols of First Nations ceremonies is to name witnesses. The role of the witness is to remember all the details of what transpired and to step forward if there is a dispute over what transpired and to share the details of the events when appropriate to keep the community informed. This is a powerful way in an oral culture to record history and to publicly report transactions and changes in the community. Knowledge is shared and accumulated in the hearts and minds of community members.

## Conclusion

The telling of stories in the Indigenous world serves to inform, instruct, reflect and challenge. In the Indigenous world the teller would leave the story to the listener to take from it what they need, immediately or at a later time. Here I'd like to highlight some areas that need to be considered for planning for the success of Indigenous students.

- Teachers who are caring, warm and who are a supportive guide. Teachers who are firm but non-judgmental, teachers who affirm and recognise students' efforts. For students it isn't only the achievement that is important, but the effort and challenge of attaining the achievement. Comments from students about teachers to whom they attributed their success include: 'he believed in my potential and was always encouraging me'; 'she inspired me to work harder'; 'they build on my strengths'. Educators need to experience Indigenous ways of learning and teaching to understand what they can do to

incorporate these practices into their classes.

- Establish and maintain support networks with students. This might mean support from peers and classmates. Cohort models work extremely well when there is time built in for relationship building and maintenance. Building mentorship or apprenticeship opportunities into a program is a powerful way to enhance intergenerational support.
- Protecting, maintaining and enhancing the identity development of Indigenous students is crucial, especially in places where the cultures, knowledge, values and languages of Indigenous people are devalued or rendered invisible in a country. Students must perceive their school learning as adding to their knowledge, not obliterating their own Indigenous wisdom and values. Indigenous people have survived by resisting assaults on their identity. Programs can be developed to maintain relationships with the land and communities. Students can see themselves reflected in the curriculum and in the day-to-day practices in the school. Reconciling two worlds, two ways of being is challenging, and having a strong sense of identity can help to negotiate between the two worlds.
- Give careful attention to transition points. Transitions between age/grade levels, transitions to post secondary and from post secondary back to the communities. Indigenous students are immersed in a foreign and alien environment when they are in school; social rules and interactive behaviours are different. When they return to their homes and communities they are different. Although the community appreciates the knowledge and skills they have acquired, it takes

attention to resocialising back into the community with a new identity.

- Institutional spaces where students feel safe and accepted, and feel like they belong promotes success. Institutions can review their policies and practices through a decolonisation lens to create a welcoming environment.
- Connecting learning to the community so that learning is seen as purposeful and meaningful is critical; achieving high marks is not the only benchmark for success. In Sencoten, the word for education is 'eltelniwt' – to become a whole human being. That means that learning involves the heart, mind, body and spirit, and it is for the self, family, community, the land, ancestors and descendants.