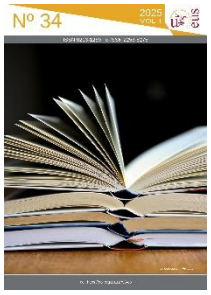

La educación de adultos indígenas desde pasados potenciales a futuros posibles

Indigenous adult education from potential pasts to possible futures

Recibido: 03/02/2025 | Revisado: 14/02/2025 | Aceptado: 18/02/2025 |
Online First: 01/06/2025 | Publicado: 30/06/2025

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Abstract:
Using a medicine wheel model the author describes the characteristics of Indigenous adult education from a time before contact with Europeans, during the early contact period, in times of intense colonialism, and the contemporary moment. One more turn of the wheel leads to contemplation of possible futures and the visioning of Indigenous people and communities for what might aid collective well-being.
Keywords: Indigenous, adult, education, decolonisation, visioning

Resumen:
Utilizando un modelo de rueda medicinal, el autor describe las características de la educación de adultos indígenas desde una época anterior al contacto con los europeos, durante el período de contacto temprano, en tiempos de intenso colonialismo y el momento contemporáneo. Un giro más de la rueda lleva a la contemplación de posibles futuros y a la visión de los pueblos y comunidades indígenas de lo que podría ayudar al bienestar colectivo.
Palabras claves: Indígena, adulto, educación, descolonización, visión

Introduction

Boozhoo. Jean-Paul Restoule nintishinikaas. Wajask nitootem. Okikendawt missing nitooncibaan. Nishinaabe ndaw. Wemitigoshii ndaw. My name is Jean-Paul Restoule. I am Anishinaabe and French-Canadian. I'm a member of the Dokis First Nation, a partner to the Robinson-Huron Treaty of 1850. I am muskrat clan. By this introduction in Anishinaabemowin, I situate myself in relation to self, family, community, nation and Creation (Restoule, Everything is alive and everyone is related: Indigenous knowing and inclusive education, 2011). This is done so that you may understand where

ISSN 0213-7771 - e-ISSN 2443-9991
https://doi.org/10.12795/CP.2025.i34.v1. 07

I see the world from, my biases and roles and responsibilities. An Anishinaabe person can place me when they hear these 10 words. We identify in this way for humans and more-than-humans to know who is speaking and from where. As I share this thought piece on the past, present, and future of Indigenous adult education, know that this is a limited slice of currents in these fields. I've spent 25 years teaching in programs in Indigenous studies, adult education and Indigenous education, first in Anishinaabe aki, Toronto and then in Victoria BC on lək̓ʷəŋən territory.

In thinking of how best to structure this overview of where we've been and where we're going in Indigenous adult education, I'm returning to a structure that has helped me organize and make sense of any phenomena affecting Indigenous people in Canada. in 1996, The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples submitted its final report, an extensive overarching review of every issue affecting Indigenous people in Canada (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). They looked at issues like justice, health, education, law, governance, and so on, through a medicine wheel model. What is a medicine wheel? The actual physical medicine wheels are structures found across Turtle Island (North America) with rocks moved into configurations representing star patterns and the movement of celestial bodies. They hold orientations and mark cardinal directions. They have been adapted and adopted for use in teaching in numerous places and centres across Turtle Island. Taken up by many urban and rural Indigenous peoples, the medicine wheel contains teachings organized in a circle divided into quadrants representing the east, north, south and west and corresponding characteristics, stages of life, stages of time, elements of nature, and so on for each direction (National Library of Medicine, 2025). There are unity teachings about where the four quadrants meet and what it means to bring all elements into balance. There is also a teaching about the fifth, sixth and seventh directions when one considers the plane of the wheel rotating in a third dimension. The medicine wheel teachings are used to explain complex relationships and phenomena in a simple symbolic way that serves as a mnemonic device and reminds us of the wholistic way in which relevant items relate. The wheel has been used as a way to think about personal development and growth and to represent histories as alive and growing (Bopp, 1984). This is where we return to the RCAP's (1996) use of the wheel to represent histories. We can think of Indigenous education on this wheel.

The East represented a traditional past before contact with Europeans; the south the early contact period where both peoples were changed; the west, a time of intense colonial relations between the two peoples; and the north representing a contemporary moment carrying traces of all the directions and currents that came before it. This structure seems like a good way to organize my thoughts that I share with you. Any pieces missing or left out are not necessarily intentional and others may bring them to mind when reading this piece and know there is a place for them because the wheel is big and capable of containing multitudes.

In this paper, I see the East as what characterised precontact traditional Indigenous adult education, the South as representing initial encounters and the coming of new ways; the West as colonial impositions and shifting of Indigenous adult education into forms of resistance. The North is symbolic of the present characterised by reclamation of the old ways, integration of new ways, and resistance to colonial

ISSN 0213-7771 - e-ISSN 2443-9991
https://doi.org/10.12795/CP.2025.i34.v1.07
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ways. But I will end by one more turn of the wheel to the East where we see biidaban, a new dawn, and a glimpse of the futures of Indigenous adult education.

East

While it's impossible for me to time travel to a precolonial past and tell you what adult education was like in that time, others have commented on the likely characteristics of Indigenous learning at this time. Firstly, we have to remember that Indigenous people learned from the community and the environment (Miller, 1996). Anyone was possibly a teacher, from family relations including aunties, uncles, grandparents, cousins and community members not related by blood, to animals, plants, the Land (which includes Earth, and Waters), the sky, ancestor spirits, and so on. In following WHO we learned from, the place of learning could similarly be anywhere in community and on the land and waters. Learning happened in highly contextual relationships with family, apprentices, ceremonial leaders, for example. Learning was most often informal but some types of knowledge transmission could also be quite formal, particularly if learning specialized knowledge from revered knowledge keepers. Skills that might be gained through apprenticeship would be knowledge about healing, plants, agriculture, hunting, astronomy, midwifery, crafting, keeping history, and time. Adults and children alike learned from stories, play, songs, dances, careful observation, repetition of tasks or teachings, meditation, modelling, dreaming, ceremony, among others. As Castellano (2000) notes, Indigenous knowledge is personal, transmitted orally, through narrative and experiential and holistic. Its sources could be traditional, empirical or revealed. Some learning was gendered although one's sex at birth did not necessarily determine one's gender. Knowledge lived in the land and in our languages which are often thought to have sprung from the land and which carry much of the worldview and understanding of relationships and dynamism embedded within their structures.

South

When Indigenous people found Europeans on their shores and on their lands, the newcomers were not always unexpected. There had been prophecies and visions that these strange new people would be coming. When is the time of the South? It varies depending on the region from the 1600s in Quebec and Atlantic Canada to the 1700s on the West Coast to the mid-1900s in the far North, but the time of first contact and increased Western settlement brings with it similar themes. In a quest for resources, from beaver to lumber to oil and minerals, the West largely avoided or ignored Indigenous people until it wants access to the resources that are on and around the lands we occupied, and then it makes laws and policies and papal bulls to justify displacement, assimilation, war, and any strategy or policy that removes Indigenous presence for Western settlement and resource exploitation. Like Wall Kimmerer (2013) asks, Is the land a source of belongings or a source of belonging? The West has acted on the assumption that land is a resource not a relation. In the

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https://doi.org/10.12795/CP.2025.i34.v1.07

earliest days of contact Indigenous people had the power, in numbers, and knowledge about the land, and for this reason, adult education included an exchange of knowledge with newcomers. Indigenous people were curious about literacy which they witnessed among the Jesuits, and those consulting their Bibles. Early explorers carried time pieces and clocks were of interest among Indigenous people, not the least because they found it curious that these pieces of furniture could make a noise and govern the activities and behaviours of the white people who scheduled their days around it—when to eat, when to sleep, when to pray and so on. The greater theme is that new technologies interested Indigenous people who wanted to learn about how to use them. Rather than change their identities, Indigenous people asked, "how can we use these items 'natively'?" (Valentine, 1995). At the same time, newcomers could not live long without learning Indigenous foodways, medicines and so forth.

The earliest treaties between Europeans and Indigenous people were about peace and friendship and sharing the land without interference. Both parties had histories of treaty making and understood these were agreements that would allow for mutual existence. A significant 'treaty' is the Guswentah or two row wampum between the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Dutch. With the *Royal Proclamation of 1763*, England set the course of treaty making in what would become Canada. On the Indigenous side of treaty making, there was a need for memorizing the details of the treaty promises. Seeing treaties as living and in continual need of "polishing" and renewing the relationships means there is a need for maintaining traditional storytelling, historical recall and keeping of the artefacts. Perhaps one of the most impactful examples of Indigenous adult education is the holding and passing on of these oral histories of significant agreements among nations.

West

What is the time that characterises the movement from southern quadrant to west or early contact into increased colonialism? In Canada, we might choose the first boarding schools in the mid-1800s that would pave the way for residential schooling. Perhaps the date to choose is Canadian confederation in 1867. For me I think 1876 is a key year as it marks the introduction of the *Indian Act* (Indian Act), a piece of legislation that brought together the many previous laws concerning "Indians" into a consolidated law controlling the activities of Indigenous people (Imai, 2014). The *Indian Act* defined who counted as Indian, how we were to govern ourselves, how we could manage our economies, how we were expected to educate our children, and the ways in which we were allowed to gather, pray, or dance. It created a body, the Department of Indian Affairs, that would govern all of our actions.

Western colonialism with its undergirding of white supremacy and presumed cultural superiority brought with it assumptions about Indigenous futures. No longer were Indigenous people permitted to pursue our desired futures free of interference. Western culture was seen as the one true way, as the preferred evolutionary mode of humanity. Indigenous people were seen as a vanishing race and vestiges of our outmoded ways of knowing and doing could be ushered out on our way to assimilation

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to the right way of doing things (assimilation to Western ways). And so, laws and policies were enforced to make Indigenous people develop and evolve in the same way as Western cultures. Learning couldn't look more different than the east. Schools were imposed and made involuntary for children. Families refusing to send their kids could be fined and imprisoned and the children taken anyway. Schools segregated children by age and gender and introduced 'subjects' and disciplinary time. Adult education was primarily vocational and about providing the skills to assimilate to Canadian economies and when schools failed to provide the readiness for mainstream living, adult education filled the gaps. When residential schooling started to be phased out, it roughly coincided with the rise of intercultural adoptions (60s scoop), integrationism into provincial schools, and urbanization. In the US in the 1950s, termination policy ended support for tribes and many programs on reservations and soon after voluntary urban relocation programs were sponsored by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to send Native people to urban centers like Chicago, Cleveland, Denver, Los Angeles, and Seattle (Lagrand, 2002). Urbanization affected Indigenous adult education in that it started out as an attempt to further assimilate and acculturate Indigenous people, moving them away from reserves, that appeared to be serving as isolates for cultural preservation, and into urban spaces where they would be separated from family, community and the land (Easby et al., 2023)(Langford, 2016). One of the ironies is that the Friendship Centre movement emerged as part of this urbanization initiative, serving as a key site for cultural reclamation, community building, and reconnecting to roots. Both Canada and the United States attempted urbanization programs that sought to place Indigenous adults in low skill jobs that had as their impact a reduction of on-reserve members. Friendship centres, intended as a facilitator of urbanization, helping to find housing and connect with employers, developed into key centres for Indigenous mobilization, cultural reclamation, and resistance to colonization (Langford, 2016).

North

Turning to the contemporary moment, any of the threads from the previous three quadrants are alive and operating. For instance, there are still examples of adults apprenticing to learn traditional ways of healing, birthing, mothering, parenting, hunting, gathering, and growing food. Learning still takes place on the land, in circle, in ceremony, following the seasons and connecting to nature's cycles demonstrating gratitude. Indigenous people continue to learn from non-Indigenous people about new technologies and attend non-Indigenous schools to improve their understanding and ability to participate in new economies. This teaching and learning occurs the other way as well with non-Indigenous allies coming to support Indigenous people and learn from us about Indigenous technologies, ways of life and philosophy. And colonialism is by no means extinguished or gone. Land appropriation, pipelines, child abduction/adoption, injustice, missing and murdered women, girls and 2SLGBTQ+ continue to draw Indigenous people together in resistance. Schools continue to marginalize knowledge. National official languages continue to largely exclude

ISSN 0213-7771 - e-ISSN 2443-9991
https://doi.org/10.12795/CP.2025.i34.v1.07

Indigenous languages. While all these movements exist and continue forward from the past, there is reflection on what it means to do Indigenous adult education today.

One way is to live as much as possible in a way that respects traditional calendars, laws, languages and the land. This can mean a life of ceremony and following the seasonal cycles which many Indigenous people do. They enter in this way of life perhaps as young people and as they continue to do the work, they become helpers and eventually teachers and leaders of these ways in their own right. Others have integrated into Canadian or American lifeways while also proudly carrying on traditions and aspects of their identity into their personal lives. This may look like participating in some key ceremonies or learning language or attending the powwow circuit, as well as supporting Indigenous resistance movements without being on the frontlines of these struggles. Linda Smith wrote of 25 projects that contributed to decolonization(Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). These projects characterise many collective Indigenous struggles that have a key place in Indigenous adult education:

Claiming	Writing	Protecting
Testimonies	Representing	Creating
Storytelling	Gendering	Negotiating
Celebrating survival	Envisioning	Discovering
Remembering	Reframing	
Indigenizing	Restoring	
Intervening	Returning	
Revitalizing	Democratizing	
Connecting	Networking	
Reading	Naming	

Today, adult education among Indigenous peoples is a multifaceted field that intertwines cultural revitalization, community empowerment, and educational sovereignty. The following several foci highlight various approaches taken by Indigenous communities worldwide to address the educational needs of adults, highlighting both challenges and innovative practices that have emerged in recent years.

Cultural Revitalization and Indigenous Knowledge Systems

One of the central pillars of adult education among Indigenous peoples is the revitalization of cultural knowledge and Indigenous knowledge systems. Many Indigenous communities prioritize educational approaches that integrate traditional teachings, languages, and practices into formal and informal learning settings (Battiste, 2013). For instance, in New Zealand, the concept of "whakapapa" (genealogy) is central to educational practices among Māori communities, emphasizing the interconnectedness between past, present, and future generations (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003).

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Community-Based and Holistic Approaches

Indigenous adult education often adopts community-based and holistic approaches that recognize the interconnectedness of learning with social, cultural, and environmental dimensions (Archibald, 2008). These approaches prioritize the involvement of community elders, knowledge holders, and local institutions in educational planning and delivery. For example, among Indigenous communities in Canada, the concept of "holistic lifelong learning" integrates traditional teachings with contemporary knowledge to foster well-being and sustainability (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991).

Place-Based and Environmental Education

Place-based education is another significant approach among Indigenous peoples, emphasizing the deep connection between land, culture, and identity (Cajete, Native science: Natural laws of interdependence, 2000)(Cajete, 2000). This approach grounds learning experiences in the local environment, promoting ecological stewardship and cultural preservation. In Australia, for instance, Aboriginal communities have implemented "on Country" educational programs that reconnect adults with traditional lands and natural resources (Smith & Larkin, 2013).

Language Revitalization and Bilingual/bicultural Education

Language revitalization is critical to Indigenous adult education, as many communities face the loss of their native languages due to historical assimilation policies (McCarty, 2005). Bilingual and immersion education programs are increasingly employed to preserve and promote Indigenous languages among adults. For instance, in the United States, Navajo adult education initiatives integrate the Navajo language into vocational training and literacy programs, enhancing cultural pride and linguistic fluency (Reyhner & Eder, 2004). Bicultural education, a focus of the landmark policy document, Indian Control of Indian Education, (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972) seeks to provide Indigenous people with the ability, tools and capital to thrive in both the colonial and Indigenous societies. This strategy has guided much education policy and goals for Indigenous people in Canada since the 1970s (Mashford-Pringle, 2015).

Intergenerational and Lifelong Learning

Indigenous adult education often emphasizes intergenerational learning, where knowledge transmission occurs through mentoring, storytelling, and community gatherings (Kawagley, 1995). Lifelong learning frameworks are embedded within Indigenous educational philosophies, promoting continuous personal and professional

ISSN 0213-7771 - e-ISSN 2443-9991
https://doi.org/10.12795/CP.2025.i34.v1.07

development across the lifespan. In Alaska, for example, Yup'ik communities have revitalized traditional subsistence practices through adult education programs that bridge generational knowledge (Kawagley, 2006).

Empowerment and Self-Determination

Empowerment and self-determination are core principles guiding Indigenous adult education approaches, aiming to foster agency, leadership, and community resilience (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008)(Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). Many initiatives are community-driven, empowering adults to address social and economic challenges through education. In Brazil, for instance, the Tupinambá people have established community-led adult literacy programs that promote political engagement and cultural preservation (Gomes, 2011).

Challenges and Resilience

Despite these innovative approaches, Indigenous adult education faces numerous challenges, including funding constraints, institutional barriers, and the ongoing impact of colonial legacies (Battiste, 2002). Addressing these challenges requires collaborative efforts among governments, educational institutions, and Indigenous communities to support sustainable and culturally responsive educational initiatives. Resistance to economic projects that would bring destruction to Indigenous lands is a key site of struggle for Indigenous people the past 50 years as is the request for a return of lands expropriated during wartimes or for other colonial reasons. A short list of flashpoints that garnered media attention shows how prevalent these struggles have been. Just in Canada, one could name the events at Kanesahtake, often called the Oka Crisis (York, 1991) where Kanienkeha:ka fought the expansion of a golf course and condo project on the Pines, where their dead were buried; or the events at Ipperwash where unused military grounds taken from the Anishinaabe and Odawa people were not being returned even though the second world war had ended more than 50 years earlier (Enjibaajig, 2022) (Edwards, 2003). Oil and gas pipeline projects have been halted by Indigenous resistance including Wet'suwet'en land defenders, the Lakota and allies at Standing Rock (Estes, 2019). There has been mercury poisoning at Grassy Narrows (Shkilnyk, 1985) and multiple chemical contributions to toxic pollution where Aamjiwnaang First Nation bears the brunt of the impact (Wiebe, 2016). Resisting the harms of Hydroelectric development led the Cree and Inuit to cofound the first modern day treaty in 1975, the James Bay Northern Quebec Agreement (Waldram, 1993). Similarly Cross Lake fought problematic hydroelectric development on its lands in the late 1990s early 2000s (Niezen, 2010). Mining has threatened Indigenous lives and wellbeing globally, from diamond and uranium mining in Canada's North and from Talhtan and Tlingit communities to Cape Breton Mi'kmaq and many points in between (Hall, 2013), to communities in Colombia, Nigeria, Brazil,

ISSN 0213-7771 - e-ISSN 2443-9991
https://doi.org/10.12795/CP.2025.i34.v1.07
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Guatemala, Australia and Chile (Caxaj et al., 2014)(Caxaj et al., 2013) (Coates et al., 2023)(Göcke, 2014)(Hipwell et al., 2002).

Indigenous adult education represents a dynamic and evolving field characterized by diverse approaches that emphasize cultural revitalization, community empowerment, and educational sovereignty. By integrating Indigenous knowledge systems, fostering community-based learning environments, and promoting language revitalization, these approaches contribute to the resilience and vitality of Indigenous cultures worldwide. Moving forward, continued support for culturally responsive educational policies and practices is essential to ensure the ongoing success and sustainability of Indigenous adult education initiatives.

Biidaabun: A New Dawn

The wheel never stops turning. So as we return to the East direction, what might we see as possible futures for Indigenous adult education? Like the North direction, all the currents from previous turns of the wheel will move forward. There will be land reclamation and attempts to live a life free from colonial structures like the experiments carried out by Sakokwenionkwas at Kanatsiohareke (Porter, 2006) or the 65 hectares of land Molly Swain and Chelsea Vowel purchased under the Back 2 the Land: 2land2furious project in Lac Ste. Anne County Alberta (Muzyka, 2020). Living the kinds of lives you want to live is a way of making real futures that can only be imagined now. But by living in the ways you want to see societies organized you generate the future you want to see. Land Back is more than a hashtag. It’s a multifaceted strategy for supporting Indigenous self-determination, whether it's actual return of land to Indigenous people, or reparations for lands stolen and opportunities lost. The many ways in which land back is actualized will continue to be a key site of Indigenous adult education.

In the area of Indigenous Language Revitalization, one of the interesting trends developing is the use of artificial intelligence to build vocabulary, sentences, grammar and dictionaries. For languages that have been dormant for years or generations, AI could help potential speakers develop tools and resources to support language reclamation and revitalization (Maracle, 2024). The Elders and fluent speakers who have been consulted on how to conjugate verbs and create words can now have their time used more selectively, checking on AI constructions. As always, there are some cautions with AI’s potential, as it has already been used to create language resources for financial gain, skimping on accuracy and community benefit.

The establishment of the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* was a decades long movement (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). It is only now that we are beginning to see its potential in action. Similarly, the movement to recognize rivers and mountains and other more than human beings as persons before the law will continue to be actualized to work for the collective protections of Indigenous peoples and lands. This is a continuation of a trend of creating and engendering spaces that allow old ways to thrive and be practiced without molestation. This includes activities like invasive weed pulls, restoration of wild spaces, permaculture and wild edible food

ISSN 0213-7771 - e-ISSN 2443-9991
https://doi.org/10.12795/CP.2025.i34.v1.07

gardens, medicine walks, and connecting young people to traditional territories and language to aid reconnection to land, language, culture and Indigenous futures (Restoule et al., 2013). Entering institutions and attempting to make change from within will continue as a strategy for supporting Indigenous self-determination.

Many Indigenous practices have been rediscovered without acknowledgement of their source and then presented as innovative solutions to perennial problems. In the space of education this has looked like character education, daily physical activity, meditation/sit spots, land and place based learning, and so on (Restoule & Chaw-win-is, Old ways are the new way forward: How Indigenous pedagogy can benefit everyone, 2018). It is likely that this trend of refashioning old ways as though they are somehow new strategies will also continue. But if it means a restoration of Indigenous ways, this is a positive.

Most important for the future of Indigenous adult education is visioning itself. As Cajete (1994, 2020) has talked about, visioning has always been a process for collectively working for the community's future. Connecting to spirit, ceremony, land, and ancestors for these visions that connect young people to their gifts that will benefit community, has been a practice going back to the oldest times for Indigenous peoples (Cajete, 1994; 2020). The process will continue to be an important source for articulating visions and connecting individuals to our collective futures. Finding our face, our heart and our foundation is the core of Indigenous education for all ages (Cajete, 1994, 2020). Going to that place has served us well in the past, and the present and will do so into the future.

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