

Where Aboriginal Practice and Dialogue Education Meet

by Shannon Perez

At the beginning of summer I had the opportunity to take a course for professional development. It was a course offered by the [Canadian School of Peacebuilding](#) and the instructor was the author Rupert Ross. The content of his book *Returning to the Teachings: Exploring Aboriginal Justice* and his course have stuck with me since that time.

In his course *Returning to the Teachings*, Ross used stories to teach and also invited us to share our stories. We did this throughout the week either in an informal or formal [sharing circle](#). I learned the value of circle practice and experienced the trust, safety and respect that it can create (and is needed!). I used to be doubtful of formal sharing circles but now understand their power and potential. Ross indirectly taught Aboriginal cultural through this practice of sharing circles and it was deeply moving.

I also had the opportunity to take another professional development course. This one was offered by Global Learning Partners, called *Foundations of Dialogue Education: From Principles to Practice*. It was about how to design an engaging and relevant course to maximize learning. I took this course late in the fall of last year before Rupert Ross' course.

In this course, I learned that adult learners have much to offer and that designing a course and facilitating it needs to be an intentional and authentic process. It is a practice that needs to ensure respect, safety and inclusion for all. It, too, changed me.

Today I am struck by the similarities of these two courses and their methodologies. The core principles and many practices parallel each other. What is at the heart of Aboriginal People's traditional culture and practices is also deeply valued in Dialogue Education.

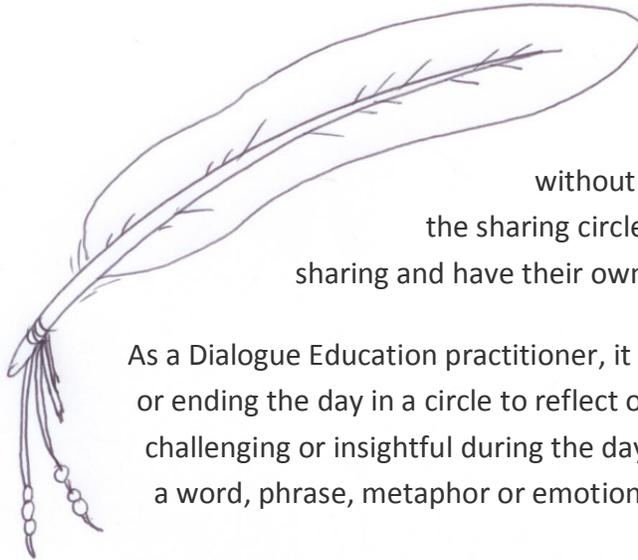
Let me share a few observations that are especially powerful for me:

Silence. I have often heard people struggle with what to do with the silence felt when sitting or talking with Aboriginal people. Yes, we respect silence and often sit in it for long periods of time. We believe that much can be learned in silence. We also believe that much hurt and misunderstanding can occur when we speak before thinking.

As a Dialogue Education practitioner, I have also learned to value silence. Too often the teacher, trainer, or professor feels she needs to "fill the space" and takes over the group. I have learned the importance of waiting: good things happen to trainers that wait.

Humour. I love how Aboriginal people can laugh at life and know the importance of laughter. I often hear my friends and family roar with laughter when they are together. Even when we are going through tough times and there is much suffering, laughter is never lost.

As a Dialogue Education practitioner, I also know the importance of laughter. What better way to increase engagement or bring a group together or break the ice, than to have the group laugh!



Circle practice. In a formal Aboriginal Circle, it is a place to share one's own feelings, thoughts and questions in a safe environment without fear. This sharing can be beneficial to others in the sharing circle because people might relate to what you are sharing and have their own inspiration.

As a Dialogue Education practitioner, it is always good to hear from learners. Starting or ending the day in a circle to reflect on what will be learned or what was especially challenging or insightful during the day, can be helpful. However, sometimes sharing a word, phrase, metaphor or emotion is enough.

Respect. Respect in Aboriginal culture permeates everything. Respect is not limited to people but encompasses the whole of creation.

As a Dialogue Education practitioner, I understand that respect is essential and crucial for adult learners. We try to create an atmosphere where respect is practiced and always present. One cannot learn if one feels disrespected.

Heart learning. Storytelling in Aboriginal cultures gets to the heart of "heart learning." A lesson or moral will stick with someone when it is shared in a story where the learner needs to draw his/her own conclusions.

As a Dialogue Education practitioner, I understand that learning can come in many different forms: knowledge (head), attitudes (heart) and skills (body). To teach holistically we need to engage all three parts in the learner. Heart learning is especially powerful!

Authenticity. In Aboriginal culture, because it is understood that we speak from the heart and are respectful to the listener, it is understood that what we have to say will be authentic.



As a Dialogue Education practitioner, I believe we need to teach and work in truth and respect. I always work to enter the teaching and learning space with genuine love and concern for the learner and his/her learning.

The above principles and practices have taught me much about myself and best practices in my work, and I look forward to deepening my learning in the future.

How have you seen Dialogue Education principles and practices mirrored in your culture?

Shannon Perez sperez@crcna.org is from Winnipeg (Canada) and is Justice and Reconciliation Mobilizer for the [Canadian Aboriginal Ministries Committee](#). She regularly facilitates the interactive workshop [The Blanket Exercise](#) (a tool that works with learners to re-enact the history of relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada) and enjoys training volunteer trainers in how to ensure learning to maximize the possibility of real change in this world. Shannon is proud to be an Aboriginal woman and practitioner of Dialogue Education!