

# **Building on Conceptual Interpretations of Aboriginal Literacy in Anishinaabe Research: A Turtle Shaker Model**

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## **Abstract**

This article comes out of the larger context of my doctoral dissertation where I investigated my experiences as an academic who attempts to remain true to Indigenous Knowledge (IK) traditions while working within a Western European intellectual setting. In this current paper, I combine the conceptual frameworks of Aboriginal literacy and Cavanagh's (2005) holistic educational model of the Anishinaabe teaching wand to present a holistic model of Anishinaabe literacy. I then consider the ethical responsibility of protecting and sustaining IK. Finally, I share a personal narrative and detail a central model of Anishinaabe literacy—my carving of a turtle shaker. The turtle shaker model is an applied example of Anishinaabe literacy that was developed using learning gained from traditional knowledge and academic environments. The intention is for this model to facilitate the transformation of how IK is taken up in the academy and in schooling settings.

## **Précis**

Cet article provient du contexte de ma thèse de doctorat, où j'ai étudié mes expériences en tant qu'universitaire qui tente de rester fidèle aux connaissances autochtones des traditions tout en travaillant dans un cadre intellectuel européen occidental. Dans cet article, je combine les cadres conceptuels de l'alphabétisation des Autochtones et (2005) holistique modèle éducatif de Cavanagh de la baguette d'enseignement Anishinaabe de présenter un modèle holistique de l'alphabétisation Anishinaabe. Je considère ensuite la responsabilité éthique de protéger et de soutenir la connaissance autochtone. Enfin, je partage une histoire personnelle et détailler un modèle central de Anishinaabe de mes sculpture d'une tortue shaker. Le modèle shaker de tortue est un exemple d'application de l'alphabétisation Anishinaabe qui a été développé grâce à l'apprentissage acquis des savoirs traditionnels et des milieux universitaires. L'intention est que ce modèle de faciliter la transformation de la façon dont connaissances autochtones est repris dans l'académie et dans les milieux scolaires.

**Building on Conceptual Interpretations of Aboriginal Literacy in Anishinaabe  
Research: A Turtle Shaker Model**

This article comes out of the larger context of my doctoral research. My dissertation (Debassige, 2012) makes its contribution to Indigenous discourse by providing an examination and analysis of my personal experiences of coming-to-know Anishinaabe *mino-bimaadiziwin* (Good Life) and journeying as an *oshkabaywis* (ceremonial helper) and academic scholar (*oshkabaywis-academic*). It has been my participation in ceremonies that has greatly facilitated my re-conceptualized understanding of research and literacy. My dissertation presents one pathway for informing the preparation, conduct, and expression of research grounded in an Indigenous framework of knowing and includes expressions of Anishinaabe literacy that I uncovered along the way. Through my research journey, a model and expression of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) for research that is distinctly Indigenous has emerged. I refer to this model as the turtle shaker. The purpose of this paper is to share an applied example of Anishinaabe literacy that relies on learning gained from traditional knowledge and academic learning environments.

First, I present the concept of Aboriginal literacy and localize it within Anishinaabe literacy. Next, I discuss my self-referent methodological approach as framed within Anishinaabe *mino-bimaadiziwin* (Debassige, 2010). I then describe and present illustrations of a carved turtle shaker, which is the central example of Anishinaabe literacy from my dissertation. The shaker, a three-dimensional spirit-centered teaching tool and musical instrument, was designed to deliver knowledge

through oral transmission. In my research, I used it to give context to my data and by data I mean knowledge bundle. In Indigenous contexts, a knowledge bundle encompasses a process of gathering, accumulating, carrying, and using knowledge, information, and sacred items for various purposes in life. Examples of different kinds of bundles are: 1) poetry, stories, oral history, and songs (McLeod, 2007); 2) themes of inquiry (Canadian Council on Learning, n.d.); 3) sacred items (Anishnawbe Health Toronto, n.d.); and 4) power, gifts, and teachings (Benton-Banai, 1988). In research, the term knowledge bundle encapsulates collected information, including facts and statistics as in the conventional use of the term data, and privileges the way information, knowledge, and items are gathered. Therefore, how something is collected, carried, and used is just as important, perhaps more so, than what is collected.

My discussion of the turtle shaker focuses on two of its parts, the handle and the head. The shaker handle metaphorically represents my journeying in ceremonial and academic settings while the shaker head has allowed me to express my experiences at a sugar bush camp in my home community of M'Chigeeng. While the details of the data presented in my dissertation will not be discussed in this article, I do make reference to themes from both data sets. In addition, although the turtle shaker is referenced and discussed throughout this article, aspects of it are not expressed as part of any written medium. For example, the actual carved turtle shaker contains mnemonic representations of traditional songs that are only shared in ceremony or under culturally appropriate circumstances.

The turtle shaker is of utmost significance in the expression of both my knowledge and my data. My story can be found in both the actual carving of the shaker

itself—through an oral sharing—and in the conceptual model discussed in this article. In essence, the turtle shaker is a mnemonic device and functional form of literacy and expression of spirit-centered data. In my dissertation, I used the turtle shaker literacy as a thematic topic in the written presentation of data. In this instance, the text of the dissertation transforms from written to oral and back to written as a way to honor the integrity of the oral transmission of IK. The oral transmission of IK is generally shared and adapted to the social context in which it occurs and enables the speaker to respond to his/her surrounding environment. This deliberate application and inclusion of Anishinaabe literacy to disseminate knowledge is my effort to contribute to transforming the ways IK is taken up in the academy and in schooling environments.

### **Background: Aboriginal Literacy and the Teaching Wand**

#### **Aboriginal Literacy**

In 1986, the Ontario Community Literacy (OCL) grants program was established by the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Culture, Literacy Branch and contained three streams of funding: Anglophone, Francophone, and Native (Ministry of Education and Training, 1993). The OCL grants program was designed with the purpose of improving “the development and delivery of community-based adult literacy programs and services for Ontario residents” (p. 5). The year following the commencement of the OCL grants program invitations were extended by the Literacy Branch staff to various Native people and organizations in Ontario to discuss literacy issues relevant to Native communities. From that meeting, the Ontario Native Literacy Coalition (ONLC) was established. One of the early conferences united various literacy practitioners to discuss perspectives on

Native literacy and to facilitate the creation of curriculum resource materials. After consulting Native literacy programs in Ontario, the ONLC established the following definition of Native literacy:

Native literacy is a tool which empowers the spirit of Native people. Native literacy services recognize and affirm the unique cultures of Native peoples and the interconnectedness of all aspects of creation. As part of a life-long path of learning, Native literacy contributes to the development of self-knowledge and critical thinking. It is a continuum of skills that encompasses reading, writing, numeracy, speaking, good study habits, and communicating in other forms of language as needed. Based on the experience, abilities and goals of learners, Native literacy fosters and promotes achievement and a sense of purpose, which are both central to self-determination. (Anderson, 1995, p. 2)

Priscilla George (n.d.) later expanded on this definition in her report on *First Nations Literacy in Ontario* suggesting that Aboriginal languages are an essential aspect of Aboriginal literacy and deeply interrelated with Aboriginal culture. Although reading and writing in one or both of the official languages has import in Canada, Aboriginal people place worth on additional factors (George, 2003). In their discussion with Aboriginal Literacy practitioners, Antone, Gamlin, & Turchetti (2003) found that “spiritual and emotional literacy” (p.22) were included alongside conventional aspects of literacy such as reading, writing, and numeracy. Antone et al. also indicated that the

local socio-cultural context of learners is significant in understanding Aboriginal literacy, especially in naming the world (Freire, 1970/2000). Within this localized context, many Aboriginal peoples have sustained distinct traditional, or ancestral, ways of knowing that are part of daily life. Through an Anishinaabe lens, Aboriginal literacy is about living a good life (*mino-bimaadiziwin*) and finding ways to revitalize and express traditional forms of knowledge contemporaneously (Antone, 2003). With these thoughts in mind, my research localizes Aboriginal literacy from Aboriginal to Anishinaabe by using what I consider an example of Anishinaabe literacy, the Anishinaabe teaching wand.

### **The Anishinaabe Teaching Wand**

The Anishinaabe teaching wand was first documented by Newberry (1979) as part of the published proceedings of the *Joint International Symposium of Elders and Scholars*. While reporting on his experience during a pipe ceremony, Newberry witnessed what he referred to as an “Ojibway Teaching Wand” (p. 172). In a diagram, the wand is illustrated by Newberry as being made of three solid rods that are bound at the centre point where all three intersect. Two rods cross together at the midway point of each to form four right angles and each tip symbolizes the four cardinal directions: East and West, and North and South. The third rod is joined at the midway point and is perpendicular to the other two and symbolizes Sky and Earth. As a whole, the teaching wand contains seven points of reference consisting of six directions and one center point

(Newberry, 1979). All of these points of reference are common markers within Anishinaabe worldview and are usually illustrated on the medicine wheel<sup>1</sup>.

Cavanagh (2005) revisited Newberry's (1979) account of the teaching wand and presented it as a spherical model for holistic education. Cavanagh relied primarily on his experiential knowledge in and out of ceremonies which included teachings, stories, and songs shared by elders and other traditional teachers. Therefore, the proposed Anishinaabe teaching wand can be positioned as a valuable tool for communicating the various features of Anishinaabe worldview and for informing the development of educational programs and curricula. Although in this case there is no definitive account of traditional teachings or ways of knowing, Cavanagh stressed that participation in the local context is vital to gaining an understanding of the distinct experience and worldview of a specific community.

Once the teaching wand is contextualized within an Anishinaabe worldview, the tool can become a mnemonic device or an expression of Anishinaabe literacy. However, the teaching wand is not without flaw. Cavanagh (2005) did not comment on the fact that the teaching wand is only referenced in Newberry's (1979) writings. In my search of the literature, I failed to uncover any other mention of it. Moreover, I have never seen or heard of a teaching wand during my experience in ceremonies over the past decade. Although Newberry (1979) included two diagrams containing the teaching wand, he only briefly mentioned its purpose in his description. He alluded to the usage of the teaching wand when he suggested that "perhaps [the officiant] will use the teaching wand...as his

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<sup>1</sup> Today, the Medicine Wheel is often used as an organizing frame outside of ceremonies for curriculum and teaching purposes. For more detail on one explanation of the origin and use of the medicine wheel see Graveline (1998).

lesson and will speak of the universe” (p. 171). By extension, Newberry situated the teaching wand as an optional teaching tool that can be used if the *officiant*, or conductor of the ceremony, wants to share a teaching. Overall, Newberry revealed very little information about the wand, its origins, or its use. Is the teaching wand part of the author’s imagination, or was it a tool that was simply isolated in its usage and a memory aid for the officiant? Either way, based on both the description of the teaching wand and what Elders and traditional teachers have shared with me during ceremonies, the associated teachings and process of learning fit well with Ojibway-Anishinaabe ways of knowing. In this case, I have been willing to overlook my concerns since the knowledge associated with the teaching wand can be shared by an IK practitioner within the context of traditional protocols.

Cavanagh (2005) positioned the teaching wand as a framework containing essential values, beliefs, and processes that describe one’s education and progression through life stages. This framework gestures to the compatibility of unifying the teaching wand with Aboriginal literacy. Combining Aboriginal literacy with the example of the Anishinaabe teaching wand offers a holistic educational model of Anishinaabe literacy. When I combine Aboriginal literacy with the educational framework of the Anishinaabe teaching wand, I am conceptualizing a holistic educational model of Anishinaabe literacy that is informed by Anishinaabe *mino-bimaadiziwin*. This model sets the context for broader application and use in research and a distinct approach for the dissemination of IK.



### **Protecting and Sustaining Indigenous Knowledge**

My participation and experiences in ceremonies have shaped my approach to research and have helped me become more critical and sensitive when using IK in the academy. At the same time, sharing experiences closely interconnected to ceremonial knowledge has been a challenging task that involves respecting teachings given in ceremonial environments. This task demands a continual vigilance and comprehensive understanding about traditional ceremonial knowledge that elicits many questions: what is shared and when, how it is shared, where it is shared and with whom, and why it is being shared? The answers to these queries only come with reflection, consultation with ceremonial people, participation in IK frameworks, and self-reflective actions to uncover and understand the interrelated aspects and exchanges of IK.

Archibald's (2008) book, *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the heart, mind, body and spirit*, refers to the complex nature of sharing Indigenous stories. Archibald eschewed the use of textbooks as the primary method of deriving meaning from stories. Rather, it is important that new storytellers apprentice with knowledge holders to develop a participatory relationship that is primarily set in the oral tradition. Although conventional literacy is of value and does have its use, there is no substitute for personal interaction with knowledgeable storytellers. Archibald's emphasis on a lived relationship under the mentorship of elders, family, and other respected community members overlaps with another significant issue.

Sustaining a lived relationship to stories goes beyond simply being concerned with writing down knowledge. It includes understanding the implications of potentially jeopardizing the sustainability of Indigenous oral traditions and ways of learning IK.

Although the wealth of writings about IK that are making their way into print is valuable, I emphasize the significance of Dumont's comments printed at the end of the Mishomis book (as cited in Benton-Banai, 1988):

[T]he recording, or written form, of the sacred teachings of the Midewiwin has not been an easy decision. However, it has been a decision that was not easy or taken lightly by Native people who recognized the true sacredness of these words and the importance of the oral transmission of these stories. (n.p.)

The words of Dumont, a traditional Midewiwin man, have lead me to consider the what, when, where, how, and why of sharing Anishinaabe ways of knowing. Keeping alive the oral traditions, stories, and story meanings within a contemporary context is challenging, especially in a world subjugated by conventional literacy and influential media including television, video, and computers (Archibald, 2008). These challenges are compounded when traditional knowledge is considered.

One of Archibald's (2008) Elder-participants, Roy Point, related his concern about certain kinds of traditional knowledge that should not be shared without *cultural authority*. Archibald explained that before cultural authority is obtained, a person is rigorously mentored in traditional ways of knowing and is taught to use and respect the knowledge learned in a good way. According to Archibald, "putting any of this knowledge into written form or into another medium was (and still is) considered an extreme violation of this cultural rule" (p. 78).

Like Archibald, I have observed examples of protecting IK and the use of cultural rules or forms of protocol. These include not allowing photographs and/or tape-recording of certain cultural activities to occur. For example, a sociocultural event like a powwow often requires permission to photograph, audio record, or video record people and activities at the gathering. Communities hosting a powwow will sometimes post signs to indicate if and under what circumstances photographs and recording are permitted. If such signs are not present, the Master of Ceremonies may announce the protocol. Another example includes recording or photographing any parts of ceremonies or ceremonial-related activities. In such circumstances, the production of photographs and recordings are typically considered a severe violation of cultural protocol. Notwithstanding these examples, Indigenous peoples do have non-conventional mediums that are forms of written records. As Battiste (1986) suggested “through the use of pictographs, petroglyphs, notched sticks, and wampum, early North American Indians achieved a form of written communication and recording which served the social, political, cultural, and spiritual needs of the early period” (p. 25). These early forms of Aboriginal literacy complemented the oral tradition and served to protect IK.

Safeguarding IK lends to the ethical imperative of establishing the relationship and significance of acquiring spiritual knowledge in a particular kind of way. This involves becoming a serious student-practitioner of our ways of knowing in a time when traditional ways of knowing are in slow recovery and threatened with extinction. I believe Roy Point, the Elder in Archibald’s (2008) study, alluded to an Indigenous approach when he stated that “some of the things I said weren’t supposed to be brought out at all” (p. 78). Archibald connected the Elder’s words to a cultural authority that is

linked to the conditions or the way knowledge is permitted to be shared. Historically, one reason for this careful sharing relates to concern over respectful handling of knowledge. For example, Frances Densmore (1987/1928) reported that Midewiwin medicine people were known to withhold traditional medicinal knowledge from anyone including members of their own family. According to Densmore, the Midewiwin would go to great lengths to keep the medicines secret, including withholding the names of plants and using aromatic herbs for personal identification purposes. Densmore seemed to believe that because the participants of her study shared medicine knowledge with her that the old ways were dying.

However, Castellano (2000) related a more recent illustration while referring to oral transmission of knowledge, as observed during the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Canada, 1996) proceedings: “Aboriginal people know that knowledge is power and that power can be used for good or for evil. In passing on knowledge the teacher has an obligation to consider whether the learner is ready to use the knowledge responsibly” (p. 26). She further suggested that the inappropriate use of the knowledge is why many Elders refuse to be recorded or have knowledge transcribed. “Teachers who allow these things relinquish the possibility of adjusting their teaching to the maturity of the learner and thereby influencing the ethical use of knowledge” (p. 27). I, too, have noted the significance of ethical responsibility during my journeying in ceremonies. There is no question that the method of an ethical responsibility has shifted from one generation to the next. Nonetheless, as Dumont (as cited by LaDuke, 2002) suggested, the traditional lifeway of the Anishinaabe will find its meaning in how our contemporaries and future generations take up the responsibility of reviving and renewing our ways of knowing.

Bearing these points in mind, what might a respectful and contemporary Anishinaabe research approach and literacy model look like?

### **Methodology**

The self-referent approach used in my research is situated within the re-conceptualized methodological framework of Anishinaabe mino-bimaadiziwin (for a detailed explanation see Debassige, 2010). Anishinaabe mino-bimaadiziwin as research methodology is partially concerned with dislodging the dominant ideology that reifies Western academic institutions as the knowledge holders of how to appropriately conduct systematic inquiries. It should be noted that ritualized practice in Anishinaabe ceremonies existed long before settler societies arrived in the Americas, which makes Indigenous peoples the original researchers of these territories. Despite settler societies doing much to trivialize and colonize Indigenous ways of knowing (Smith, 1999), Indigenous scholars have brought Indigenous research methodologies to the forefront of contemporary Indigenous scholarship (Absolon, 2011; Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Therefore, this article is not about educating individuals about colonialism and Eurocentric interpretations of IK. Instead, I concur with Smith (2000) and choose not to waste time and energy reacting to a “politics of distraction” that centralizes discussion about colonialism and detracts from concentrating on IK. The intention of my research is to move “beyond deconstruction of oppressive ideologies and practices to give expression to aboriginal philosophies, worldviews, and social relations” (Castellano, 2000, p. 23).

I unapologetically centre IK as legitimate and worthy of inclusion in scholarly pursuits, especially research. Furthermore, I give expression and narrative to learning gained from Anishinaabe ways of knowing as well as higher education that remain true to IK. My personal narrative is in keeping with Anishinaabe ways of knowing or what Castellano (2000) called the “personal nature of knowledge”: to speak only of what one knows. I offer my work as a contribution to the growing discourse in IK and leave it to Indigenous colleagues, allies, and Indigenous community members to consider its “social [and spiritual] validity” (Castellano, 2000). Although my work could be framed in the mainstream literature as an autoethnographic, personal narrative, or self-reflexive inquiry (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), I have avoided these designations just as I have been inspired by some aspects of them [e.g., Cole & Knowles’ (2000) work on reflexive inquiry]. I remain steadfast in my primary re-search intention—to look again (Absolon, 2011). I feel this situates methodology in its appropriate place as a component of the Indigenous storywork process (Archibald, 2008), which involves narrating, expressing, “seeking, doing, learning, and living a spirit-centered way in Anishinaabe research” (Debassige, 2010, p. 21).

### **Sharing and Expressing my Personal Research Journey through Anishinaabe Literacy**

I was living in Toronto, Ontario when I decided to move to my parents’ home to work on my dissertation. It was a nice break from the big city and being home helped me refocus. My parents live in the community of M’Chigeeng on Manitoulin Island.

Manitoulin Island is situated in the northern part of Lake Huron, south of the North Channel, and west of Georgian Bay. M'Chigeeng is centrally located on the Island, nestled in a bay on the North Channel. On either side of M'Chigeeng, to the east and west, are two bluffs that overlook the entire community.

During the latter part of my childhood and throughout my teenage years, I lived in M'Chigeeng and grew familiar with the landscape I call home. My parent's house is located close to the east bluffs. In my younger days, I camped out, hunted with my dad, rode my motor bike along trails, and as a summer student I helped build the hiking path along the bluff. Returning home to M'Chigeeng felt good.

Before beginning the analysis for the dissertation, I decided to engage in a spirit-centered method to guide me. I began by using asemah (tobacco). I felt drawn to the bluff near my parents' home and decided to climb to the top in search of direction. Before leaving my parents' house, I gathered my bundle of sacred items so that I could smudge when I reached the top. After climbing the stairs that I helped build as a young man, I arrived at the top of the cliff overlooking my community. The scenic view of tree tops and rock formations was as I remembered it—simply amazing. I pulled smudge items from my bundle and began cleansing myself, as my teachers had modeled for me many times. I then spoke a prayer and sang two songs in Anishinaabemowin, my Ojibwe language. I noticed an offering of asemah was wrapped in purple cloth hanging from the branches of a cedar tree nearby; I assumed this offering had been placed there by a community member. As I was singing and looking through the branches past the asemah offering, I saw something else quite extraordinary. A vision of a turtle shaker appeared through the branches. The shaker was made of a piece of cedar carved into two pieces

and bound together with sinew. Although I could only see one side of the item, I could see that the shaker handle was about eight inches long and the head took the shape of a turtle's back. I was so grateful for this guidance and overjoyed about this contribution to my work. I thanked Gzhe-manidoo, the Great Spirit, and returned to my parents' home. I asked my dad where I could find a dried piece of cedar wood. He took me to a place where he had cut logs the previous year and I selected a prize piece. I started cleaning the cedar off its bark and halved the cylindrical mass. As I worked on the shaker, I reflected on what I saw, pondered about the purpose of the shaker, and wondered about how it related to the analysis of both of my data sets, which were my personal journeying and sugar bush data. Deciding not to rush the carving, I put it down temporarily and returned to the dissertation to reflect upon the data and the meaning of the vision, the carving, and my experience of going to the bluff. I often returned to the carving to work on it and reflect on how it informed my research.

### **The Turtle Shaker Model**

My vision of the shaker led to the development of a theory-practice model which is expressed through a conceptual framework and diagrams, as illustrated below, as well as through the carving of the turtle shaker itself. I believe that by being open and attentive to the reciprocal exchange between me and spirit, the shaker's essence guided me in the carving of a physical form. This spiritual exchange also informed the organization of my research and data. Through reflection and analysis, I realized that the shaker is not only a carving. From an Anishinaabe perspective, the shaker had become a living entity; it is an active participant in the analysis and co-construction of knowledge.



From a traditional Anishinaabe perspective, sacred items such as shakers, rattles, drums, stones, and eagle feathers are animated with spirit through ceremony. These animate objects come to aid traditional people in their spiritual work. Furthermore, the process of carving involves a reciprocal exchange with spirit and demonstrates how our experiences of being on the land combined with traditional teachings, spiritual guidance, being mentored by Elders, community learning, attentive listening, dreams, intuition, “observation, experience [learning through doing], introspection, and inquiry” (Wheaton, 2000, p. 161) are all aspects that inform and guide our interpretations in daily life. Inevitably, our interpretations and worldviews shape the analysis of our research. From this perspective, the carving became a tangible form of Anishinaabe literacy and a central focus of my doctoral work.

My understanding of a spirit-centered literacy emerged as I carved the turtle shaker. The process of carving gave me space to make meaning, be conscious of my good thoughts, and reflect on my experiences. The turtle shaker is not only spirit-centered data; it is also a form of spirit-centered literacy and partners with Indigenous forms of orality for the purpose of disseminating knowledge.

For the purpose of explaining this contemporary form of Indigenous literacy in research, two sections of the turtle shaker must be considered. The first section is the handle (see *Figures 2, 3, and 4*); the second section pertains to the head (see *Figure 5*). The handle of the turtle shaker visually represents (through carvings and related symbols) my experiences of coming-to-know Anishinaabe mino-bimaadiziwin and journeying as an oshkabaywis (ceremonial helper). The head of the shaker visually depicts and

organizes the five groupings of Anishinaabe literacy uncovered in the sugar bush camp<sup>2</sup> data set of my dissertation: 1) spirit-centered literacy; 2) local community literacies that include familial knowledge and other local knowledge exchanges; 3) turtle shaker literacy; 4) literacy of the medicine water; and 5) technological literacy.<sup>3</sup>

The journey is symbolized through an image of a spiral to emphasize an Anishinaabe practitioner's (oshkabaywis') ongoing lifelong learning process. Although much of the knowledge embedded in the turtle shaker is held to oral transmission, I will explain four sources of inspiration for the design of the turtle shaker's handle. The first source was Cavanagh's (2005) Anishinaabe teaching wand. The second source was the bimaadizinwin or life symbol, which is located at the Sanilac petroglyphs in Bad Axe, Michigan. The third source involved my experiences working in ceremonies, listening to traditional teachings, working with traditional teachers, and my academic participation (i.e., my experiences of coming-to-know Anishinaabe mino-bimaadizwin and journeying as an oshkabaywis-academic). The fourth source was the Experiential Learning Cycle/Spiral reflexive model developed by Cole and Knowles (2000). Three of the four sources are informed by either Indigenous scholarship or community sites involving IK, while the fourth non-Indigenous source of inspiration, as described by Cole and Knowles (2000), allies well with IK.

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<sup>2</sup> A sugar bush camp is a shelter usually located in the centre of a large stand of maple trees or a maple bush. Sap is collected from trees in the spring and cooked under a continuous boil until the water evaporates and produces maple syrup.

<sup>3</sup> Full explanations of these groupings are beyond the scope of this article and will not be detailed here. They can be found in my dissertation titled, *Re-searching, Expressing (Literacy), and Journeying in Indigenous Education: Coming-to-Know Anishinaabe mino-bimaadizwin and the Oshkabaywis-Academic* (Debassige, 2012).

In particular, the bimaadiziwin and the experiential learning life cycle need further clarification. The bimaadiziwin life symbol originates from a petroglyph found at a historical site near Bad Axe, Michigan. Petroglyphs are ancient rock engravings that were carefully etched into our physical landscapes and continue to be significant vehicles to understanding our Indigenous consciousness and place in the world. A replica of the petroglyph is on permanent display at the Ziibiwing Cultural Centre in Lansing, Michigan. Beside the replica of the spiral petroglyph is the following caption:

Bimaadiziwin

Life and All its meaning

The never-ending Circle of Life symbol represents our journey and connection to all creation.

Many Anishinabek believe that our earthly walk of life is just the beginning of a long journey. Like the Earth and the Universe, we will change form, but our spirit will remain the same as we continue on our journey. On our path, we must walk in a good way with love and respect for every part of Creation. (Ziibiwing Cultural Centre as cited in Atalay, 2008, p. 40)

To further contextualize the importance of this symbol, Atalay (2008) pointed out that the spiral represents “the past coming alive in us in the present” (p. 40). As a source of inspiration, I have reproduced a similar spiral symbol (*Figure 1*).



*Figure 1.* Reproduction of the bimaadiziwin life symbol.

This spiral has been carved into the handle of the turtle shaker. My understanding of the bimaadiziwin life symbol is based in Anishinaabe ways of knowing, being, and doing, as connected with an Ojibwe-Anishinaabe worldview. The teaching and learning of this worldview is intimately related to working as a ceremonial helper (oshkabaywis). Through my helper role, I gained deeper insight and built an intimate introspective relationship to Anishinaabe mino-bimaadiziwin. I have expressed this ongoing introspective relationship through the turtle shaker's reproduced symbol and wood carving.

The turtle shaker design was also influenced by Cole and Knowles' (2000) experiential learning cycle/spiral model which describes a four-stage approach to reflective teaching and learning. The four stages are as follows: 1) personal experience and practice; 2) the gathering and documentation of information; 3) the development of personal theories through reflection and examination; and finally 4) action based on knowledge. This depiction of ongoing reflexive practice became an aspect of my Anishinaabe mino-bimadiziwin conceptual framework. The spiraling nature of the model illustrates an ongoing and reflexive learning process, and its meaning was easily transferred into the co-creation and related meaning of the turtle shaker handle. In

actuality, the model of the turtle shaker expresses journeying journeys and an emerging synergism between four sources of knowledge.

### **The Design of the Turtle Shaker Handle**

My four sources of knowledge (i.e., the Anishinaabe teaching wand, the bimaadiziwin symbol, personal learning experiences, and the Experiential Learning Cycle/Spiral model) inspired the conceptual design of the handle for the shaker. The contribution of each of these sources of knowledge became increasingly significant as I reflected on the literature, reviewed my data, and contemplated the meaning of the turtle shaker. Once I realized that I could organize and re-conceptualize my journal reflections data using the turtle shaker's structure, I decided to sketch accompanying images. These drawings remained expressions in flux as I began carving the cedar wood. I allowed my hand to be guided naturally and unrestricted by a prescribed model. This meant continually working on using asemah to seek guidance, regularly smudging myself and the carving, carving at specific times, and ongoing reflection.

I began the process of drawing the handle of the shaker independent of its head (see *Figure 2*). At the base of the illustration is a sphere symbolizing Cavanagh's (2005) teaching wand. From the sphere, a spiral protrusion moves from the base of the handle toward the head of the shaker. This spiral protrusion was inspired by the experiential learning cycle/spiral model of Cole and Knowles (2000); it illustrates my coming-to-know Anishinaabe mino-bimaadiziwn journey as uncovered in my recorded journal reflections.

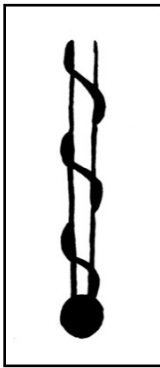


Figure 2. Drawing of shaker handle, part one.

It is important to note that the cylindrical movement in the original Cole and Knowles model moved upward but not outward. The upward movement accounted for reflexive growth as it pertained to corporeal reality, but it does not account for the spiritual growth that corresponds with an Anishinaabe spiritual reality. The adapted upward-widening spiral or cone-like shape of the shaker's handle (see *Figure 3*) better represents and builds on the dual expression of one reality, the physical realm and spiritual realm in synergy (Dumont, 1976/1992).

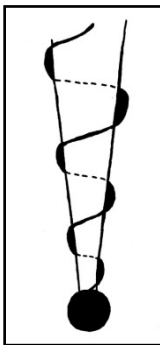
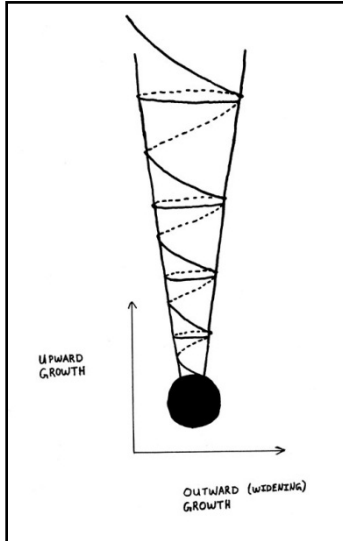


Figure 3. Drawing of shaker handle, part two.

The bimaadizwin life symbol is also incorporated in an effort to illustrate the spiraling nature of my growth and the spiritual learning I experienced during my coming-to-know

journey as an oshkabaywis-academic. *Figure 4* illustrates the spiral-like nature that exemplifies gradual growth through four stages toward the head of the shaker.



*Figure 4.* Drawing of shaker handle, part three.

The spiral also represents the ongoing process of learning and growth that occurs as one continues to put their hands to the work of being a practitioner of Anishinaabe mino-bimaadiziwin and journeying as an oshkabaywis-academic.

### **The Design of the Head of the Turtle Shaker**

The head of the shaker symbolizes the back of a turtle (see *Figure 5*) and serves to organize my sugar camp experiences. My learning and identification as a traditional Midewiwin and Sundancer, combined with my recorded reflections, facilitated an understanding of how the turtle shell could serve to organize the sugar camp related data. The sugar camp is a complete example of a holistic educational model and a form of Anishinaabe literacy. A brief description of how I organized the sugar camp data set follows.

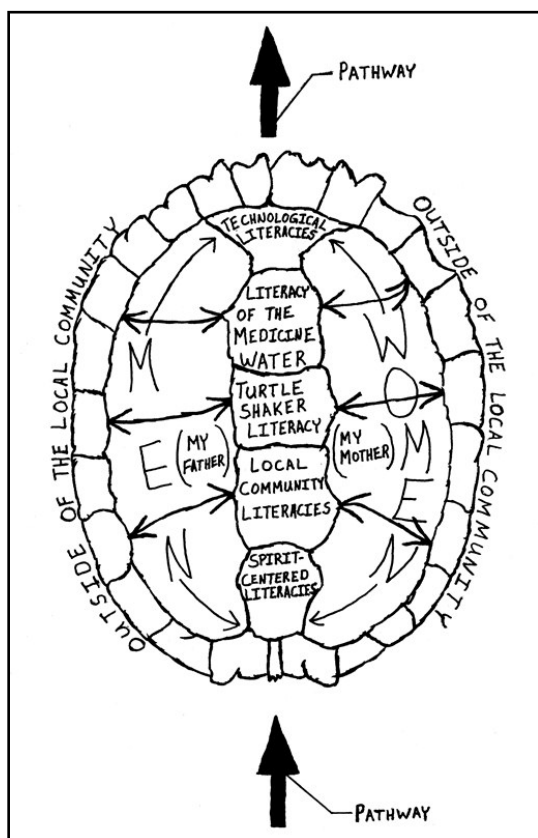


Figure 5. The head of the shaker (the turtle's back).

I continually returned to the data and the vision of the turtle shaker to better understand how I should proceed. Dreams, intuitive moments, and time on the land among all-our-relations became integral parts of the process. These methods supported me through this exhausting work and helped me to stay focused and meditate on what I was being guided to do. Gradually, the organization of the data became clearer, and I had a foundation for approaching the data. Although there were some slight variations as I began to divide the data into themes, the initial organization remained fairly consistent.

Following the pathway from bottom to top, each literacy theme represents a section down the center of the turtle's back. The themes are as follows: spirit-centered literacies, local community literacies that include familial knowledge and other local



knowledge exchanges, turtle shaker literacy, literacy of the medicine water, and technological literacies. My mother and father were large contributors to the sugar camp experience and are located on the right and left sides of the shell respectively. Their positions on the shell symbolically represent local community contributions of both men and women. The outer circle represents knowledge stemming from outside the local community. The double-sided arrows on the turtle's back indicate the flow of knowledge occurring in and out of the community and how these knowledges inform various literacies.

In my research I used an Anishinaabe spirit-centered approach when organizing my data for analysis. Through this approach, the vision of a turtle shaker emerged as a complementary way to disseminate and organize my data. My learning in ceremonies informed my understandings about the turtle and taught me to use asemah to seek guidance in the research process. I took time to carefully reflect on the various ways of applying the turtle to the organization of the data. Coming-to-know Anishinaabe mino-bimaadiziwin and journeying as an oskabaywis-academic provided me with the conceptual lens to uncover links between the turtle shaker and collected data. While the handle of the shaker was used to illustrate my learning, the upper shell of the turtle shaker is used as a conceptual model to organize the sugar bush data. Through the data I collected both from my experiences of coming-to-know Anishinaabe mino-bimaadiziwin and my journeying as an oskabaywis-academic, I began the process of building a relationship to learning, understanding, and participating in Anishinaabe literacy.

### **Conclusion**

When I moved home to M'Chigeeng and began thinking about and conducting Aboriginal literacy research, the community provided me with many applied examples of local Anishinaabe literacy. Although my work is introspective and was initiated through many interrelated Anishinaabe literacy projects, it builds on Hare's (2005) research where she contextualized several generations of her local community in relation to Anishinaabe literacy. I have extended this work by revitalizing the contextualization of Aboriginal literacy research through my personal journeying in ceremonies and my research in a sugar bush camp. This work is brought to life through the application of the IK processes of learning and transmitting knowledge by way of the turtle shaker. In order for the meaningful cyclical reading and writing of the land to continue, younger generations must be given opportunities in schooling environments to take up the work of sustaining IK for future generations in culturally responsive ways.

Creating curriculum that facilitates the learning of Anishinaabe literacy involves combining ecological knowledge with our worldviews. The sugar bush project briefly referred to in this article is an example of this type of curriculum. There is need to conduct further research that explicates the value of Anishinaabe traditional knowledge alongside outdoor educational programming. In addition, much research is needed in the area protecting and sustaining traditional IK. Aboriginal literacy provides one approach for how knowledge can be shared but traditional knowledge holders must be included to teach how the respectful sharing of knowledge can be achieved. A practitioner relationship to IK requires patience and steady persistence but the knowledge gained is well worth the journey.

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