

The Master of Aboriginal Social Work Program: Elders and Culture Camp as the Foundation

Joan Sanderson
Associate Professor, MASW Coordinator
School of Indian Social Work
First Nations University of Canada

Abstract

This reflection paper, written by a faculty member who is also an alumni, recognizes the School of Indian Social Work (SISW) as one of the early programs of Indigenous social work in Canada (1974). In 2001 the SISW had its first intake into the Master of Aboriginal Social Work (MASW) and this paper primarily focuses on important Indigenous practices within this post graduate program. The MASW begins its program in August with Culture Camp, ASW 800, which is held on a Saskatchewan First Nation community. The teachers for this experiential course are two traditional First Nations Elders, a female and a male. In the fall semester the Elders continue to teach Traditional Counselling, ASW 822, so their essential role is maintained. These Elders are available outside of class time to support the students in their growth and healing. The Elders and Culture Camp provide the foundation for the MASW.

Author in Context

As I reflect on the Master of Aboriginal Social Work (MASW) program for this article, and particularly on the Elders and the Culture Camp course, personal memories surface regarding my own experiences in the School of Indian Social Work (SISW). In the present moment I am a faculty member and coordinate the MASW, however, I earned my Bachelor degree from the Indian Social Work Program several decades ago, and I know first-hand the life changing knowledge and experiences that traditional Elders can provide. The importance of their role cannot be understated, particularly in these times when so many First Nations people are surfacing their residential school wounds and making efforts to free themselves from old trauma.

My own story reflects the influence Elders can have. As a student the old ones had given me the salve necessary to begin a spiritual journey, and I know those years were a major turning point; however, I did not remain as focussed on my healing as I should have. Years passed; marriage, children, other degrees and career moves filled the space of my life, and yet those early years in this program remain clear – as if they were a moment ago. Years after graduation, I was resisting my mid-life crisis. I floundered; I flailed; I froze. I craved the safety that the Elders emitted. Then I saw an advertisement for a faculty position at my alma mater, and every cell vibrated with possibility. This was a place that would support my healing and foster my capacity to truly learn the internal lessons that were eluding me. The Elders were there; the ceremonies and teachings were there; the love was there. The first four years as a faculty member are the most sacred of my life. With the help of several Elders I learned to stop running, to turn around and face myself and the agony that was within. Ceremonies, prayer, teachings and laughter were provided generously, and the old ones became the ground that held me up as I grew into my spirit. In turn I do all I can to give students the bravery to live in their truth allowing it become their teacher rather than their prison.

The SISW, along with other Indigenous social work programs, has challenged and changed social work education, the profession and social services in Canada. We know of the colonial induced trauma that most

of our students carry. We talk 'it'; we feel 'it'; we release 'it'. SISW has been part of a social justice movement to address the discriminatory way that First Nations people have been treated. The elements that make this program unique and life-changing are many; some highlights, in particular the Elders roles, are shared in this paper.

Vision Unfolding

The Indian Social Work Education Program opened its doors in 1974 as a part of the University of Regina's (U of R) Faculty of Social Work. First this was dreamed by the grassroots first people who knew that education would provide a better life. Elders and leaders arose who knew these things, too. Their children and grandchildren had to have the same opportunities as other Canadians, but they knew that 'same' should not be the same. The higher education institution that their children needed would emulate the old wisdom of their ancestors; it would embrace like a circle; it would smell like sage; it would beat like the drum. Ethical allies joined the cause, but First Nations people led the charge.

The creation of the Indian Social Work Program also opened the doors of Indigenous Social Work to Canada as the first program of its kind. The Certificate (CISW) and Bachelor of Indian Social Work (BISW), unique credentials indeed, came later in 1976 when the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College was created through a partnership with U of R. The Indian Social Work Program was independently accredited in 1992, and the program is now called the School of Indian Social Work (SISW). The School of Indian Social Work offers an educational experience that is grounded in First Nations knowledge and expects and supports personal growth and healing.

Twenty-five years after its beginnings the SISW began the development phase of a post- graduate program. Funding was obtained through the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, and in 2001 the first cohort of students entered the Master of Aboriginal Social Work (MASW) – the post graduate Indigenous social work in Canada was underway.

Vision Expanding

The undergraduate programs had a curriculum based on First Nations philosophies, worldviews, theories, practices and included congruent western knowledge. Our visionary Elders had told us to “take the best of both worlds” (SIFC, 1976). The MASW would follow suit, as expressed in the mission of the MASW.

“The mission of the MASW program is to prepare social work students at the graduate level to become clinical practitioners who are especially skilled in First Nations approaches to therapy and the use of congruent Western Theories and approaches, and who are especially sensitive to issues facing First Nations communities. Fundamental to the MASW program is an understanding of traditional First Nations spirituality, culture and healing, and especially how these traditions can function effectively in contemporary settings. Our mission is also to encourage the development of a critical analytical framework with which to understand the effects of residential schools and colonial impacts on First Nations people and the opportunities for self-determination”. (SISW, 2002).

A brief overview of the MASW program’s defining characteristics (SISW, 2002), outlines our philosophical and pragmatic approach to graduate education for Indigenous social workers.

First, the MASW program is one culmination of the vision and determination of First Nations people to develop educational opportunities for First Nations people to better serve First Nations communities. Our strength and inspiration is derived from a steadfast commitment to the vision that the First Nations Elders, chiefs, political leaders, educators and grass roots people put forth many years ago, a vision that placed the spirituality, philosophies, knowledge and skills of First Nations people as the foundation for learning.

Second, the MASW program is guided by the wisdom of the Elders who stress that First Nations people should “take the best from both worlds” to ensure a positive and meaningful future, though the primacy of First

Nations ways of being must be maintained. As a result, the MASW program offers what is unique at the graduate level of Social Work education, and unique at the graduate level of education in North America: a high quality academic program guided by teachings of the Elders.

Third, as another key to articulating that founding vision, the MASW program has a strong and enduring commitment to serve and give back to the First Nations community.

Fourth, as yet another key to articulating the founding vision of First Nations Elders, leaders and communities, the MASW program stresses the importance of students engaging in the work of self-healing and participating in their own healing journeys. The Elders teach that one cannot be of help to others unless one is actively working on oneself.

Fifth, the MASW program at present has a clinical orientation. The program trains social workers to perform as therapists and/or senior management in agencies that focus on healing from a First Nations perspective, rather than for example social policy analysts.

Sixth, the MASW program responds to a critical need in graduate education and graduate social work education in particular, namely the graduate education of Indigenous social workers in order to provide culturally relevant services to the First Nations community.

This is a cohort program and courses run from August to the following April. After April, students enrol in the internship, project or thesis. The bonds that students forge during this intensely challenging time are deep and authentic. Unlike mainstream academia, a competitive atmosphere is not evident; instead, attitudes of support and love are the norm, and it truly is an 'all for one, one for all' experience.

The SISW is proud of the MASW and its primary focus on traditional First Nations knowledge and practices and their importance in contemporary Indigenous social work. The way to ensure that the MASW mission is achieved is through the involvement of traditional First Nations Elders.

Elders are the First Teachers: Vision in Action

Our program knows the importance of the Elders and their contributions to individual, family and community development, and the literature supports our perspective. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (1996) states that:

“Elders...are those recognized and respected for knowing, living and teaching the traditional knowledge. They see the world through the eyes of the ancestors and interpret the contemporary world through lessons passed down through generations. Their wisdom is transferred to young people who seek their teachings. The elders are a living bridge between the past and the present. They also provide a vision for the future, a vision grounded in tradition and informed by the experience of living on the land, safeguarding and disseminating knowledge gained over centuries (p. 7).

So many of the people feel disconnected from themselves and the world around them. Elders help those around them to connect with their spirit and to learn to trust that part of themselves. Fyre Jean Graveline (1998) states, “A spiritual connection helps not only to integrate our self as a unified entity, but also to integrate the individual into the world as a whole... allowing the individual to move toward experiencing connection to family, community, society and Mother Earth.” (p. 54). We often need guidance to find our true selves, and “Elders have traditionally provided this support and have been identified as a critical component of the healing process for Aboriginal people (Menzies & Bodnar, 2009, p. 97). Sanderson (2010) writes that Elders want the best for the people and they teach that “[t]o develop as the Creator intends we must all be around the same campfire” (p. 50).

Goulet and McLeod (2002), who work with Elders within Indigenous Education at First Nations University of Canada, acknowledge the SISW’s premise when they share, “We found that the ones most able to lead students to connect and reconnect with themselves, their past, and the world around them were the Elders” (p. 357), and again in the statement, “The Elders assisted in promoting change by expanding our capabilities as faculty and

students to understand our world and ourselves in a holistic manner...” (p. 358). Stiegelbauer (1996) learned from Elders about how they approach their role in these contemporary times, as follows: “The strategies that these traditional teachers employ, both individually and organizationally, offer suggestions to all teachers: they emphasize the importance of being a role model, of tailoring your teaching to the readiness and needs of the individual, and of continuing to learn as a teacher” (p. 39).

Culture camp (ASW 800).

The first course that the MASW students take is Culture Camp, ASW 800. It is coordinated by a faculty member and led by a female and a male Elder. Other Elders are invited to lecture at the camp. “Under the guidance of these traditional Elders, this experiential course offers students opportunities to learn about traditional culture, emphasizing spirituality, values, philosophy and ceremonies” (ASW 800 Course Outline).

ASW 800 differs from the Cultural Camp for the BISW program in both intention and intensity. Students entering ASW 800 generally are expected to be at a more advanced level of understanding about Aboriginal cultural traditions and more experienced in their journey of self-discovery than students generally are when they attend the undergraduate camp. For example, students in the ASW 800 will deal extensively with issues of cultural identity, and at Cultural Camp they will build on that, moving toward the next level of learning. In the undergraduate Cultural Camp, many students are just beginning their examination of issues of cultural identity.

The Cultural Camp ASW 800 will also be a more intensive experience than the undergraduate Cultural Camp. There will be far fewer students; typically, 8-12 rather than the usual 40 in the undergraduate course. Therefore students in ASW 800 will have the opportunity for a closer, more intensive and extensive contact with Elders, emphasizing one-on-one counseling and teaching, and more opportunities for intensive participation in ceremonies. Finally, students in ASW 800 will be expected to take a more active role in their learning from Elders, by reflecting on the Elders’

teachings and subsequently engaging Elders to seek further understanding and insight.

The course outline description provides an overview, as follows:

This course provides an opportunity to learn about traditional Aboriginal spirituality, values, philosophy, life-style and ceremonies in relation to self-knowledge and knowing of others. At its core is a weeklong experiential cultural immersion program guided by Elders, taking place in a local Aboriginal community, coupled with seminars to prepare for and debrief the experience.

Students will deepen their commitment to learning about Aboriginal culture, and through ceremonies and exchanges with Elders, their own understanding and growth will deepen. As students grow in their own commitment and understanding, they can further their own journeys towards health and healing, enhancing their abilities to be of help to others.

The camp is held in the summer, usually in early August, and it is the beginning of the MASW experience. Its positioning in the program as the first course is purposeful. This required course is viewed as one of the most essential components of the MASW program, and it is intended to start each student on a positive learning journey during their masters program. Each graduate course will maintain the focus on the importance of First Nations knowledge, worldviews, culture and methods to the advancement of healing for First Nations individuals, families and communities. It is therefore, imperative that this foundational culture camp experience be at the forefront of the program.

The culture camp is by its very nature, wholistic. All four aspects of our humanness are alert, engaged and connected to the lived experience of this course. Life at culture camp ensures emotional, physical, mental and spiritual learning in an interconnected and natural way. Camp reflects the classroom of authentic living, and removes the participants from the classroom – an environment that can easily entice us to lose touch with our wholeness and focus too strongly on the mental aspect of our being. Another important issue is addressed at camp. The Elders and coordinator introduce the idea that graduate studies are rigorous and demanding, and

the culture camp provides an opportunity to envision this exciting venture and to commit to the balance that will be necessary if students are to gain the most from the experience. The necessary bonding that brings the students together in a way that will benefit everyone throughout the coming semesters is cemented at camp. Many graduate programs are competitive; the MASW approach is to come together as relatives – as extended family – to help one another through the challenges, set-backs and frustrations and to celebrate one another in times of success, transcendence and completion.

The relationship with the Elders and the importance of cultural knowing will continue throughout the program. The learning objectives of the culture camp (SISW, 2010) can also be seen as learning objectives of the program, as follows:

- To engage in a learning/teaching dialogical relationship with Elders, ceremonies and traditions of First Nations people.
- To engage in prayer, reflexive thought, and meditation upon questions such as “Who am I?”, “Where have I come from?”, and “Why am I here preparing to enter into and complete the MASW program?”
- To learn actively about traditional First Nations culture, values, philosophy, counselling and spirituality by participating in ceremonies, including daily Pipe Ceremonies and Sweat lodges, and by listening and engaging in learning during the oral teaching of the Elders.
- To learn about Aboriginal culture and community through the experience of practical participation in the Cultural Camp, including the planning, organizing and implementation of the camp, and the development of a strong and healthy sense of community.
- To learn beginning levels of practice, insights and skills in ceremonies used in traditional counseling.
- To learn Aboriginal approaches to counseling.

- To examine personally and analytically questions about being in residential schools.
- In summary, the primary objective of ASW 800 is self-knowledge; the primary method is to contemplate in the presence of the Elders and in the experience of the ceremonies.

An overview of the camp activities may be helpful in imagining the process (SISW, 2010).

Day One & Two: Elders, students and the faculty coordinator meet in the MASW classroom to prepare physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually for camp. Protocols and preparatory teachings are shared by the Elders. Organizing and helping with tasks to set up the camp are undertaken, i.e. Grocery shopping, rock and wood gathering, packing the trailers with tarps, teepee poles, cooking utensils, etc.

Day Three: Setting up the camp. Arrive at campsite by noon.
4:00 pm - opening with Sweatlodge.

Days Four – Seven: Regular Camp Schedule

7:00 Pipe Ceremony

8-9:00 Breakfast

9-Noon Teaching of the Elders

Noon-1:00 Lunch

1-2:30 Students gather in small groups to reflect on Elders teachings, and where appropriate engage Elders in conversation in order to develop further understanding

3:00 Sweatlodge

6-7:00 Dinner

7-9:00 Sharing Circles and Dialogue with Elders

Day Eight: Family Day

7:00 Pipe Ceremony
8-9:00 Breakfast
9-Noon Prepare for Feast
Noon Feast
3:00 Sweat lodge
6-7:00 Supper

Day Nine: Break Camp

7:00 Pipe Ceremony
8-9:00 Breakfast
9-Noon Break camp; leave by Noon

Two major assignments are part of the culture camp expectations. The first is a written journal demonstrating and expressing the student's learning during culture camp. It would include teachings from the Elders, reflections on a student's experiences at camp, and an integration of these learning's into a student's understanding of their own learning and healing work. Students usually find it helpful to keep a daily diary of learning's during camp, the sum of which can constitute inserts into this learning journal. It is due one week after the camp is completed.

The second assignment is a written document demonstrating the effects of the Culture Camp experience in helping the student prepare for the coming year. This Personal and Professional Journey Document is a vision and plan for the Masters of Aboriginal Social Work program that lies ahead. The document, due about three weeks after camp, will deal with personal and professional aspects of a student's life, including their perceived needs, the resources they can draw upon, and their visions for the kind of person and social worker they wish to be.

Traditional counselling (ASW 822).

When courses begin in the fall following the culture camp course students maintain their connection to the Elders and the strong focus on traditional approaches to healing through ASW 822, Traditional Counselling. Like the culture camp, this course is organized and coordinated by a faculty member, and the primary teachers are the female and male Elder who

led the culture camp learning. This course is three hours once a week for thirteen weeks (fall semester).

The MASW educates and trains students to work in the field of balance and emotional well-being. In the western paradigm this role could be termed a counsellor, therapist or mental health worker; the MASW focuses on First Nations approaches to healing with congruent western models as supports. Western approaches that focus on talk therapy have not had a high success rate with First Nations people seeking counselling. We have moved away from that model to the traditional wisdom of the past. The traditional counselling course emphasises the importance of ceremonies, spiritual support and Elders teachings. Each class begins with a smudge ceremony and then teachings are shared on various personal issues. Grief, abuse, residential school trauma, addictions, adoption and foster care are some of the issues that the Elders address and provide direction on healing approaches. There are two sweatlodge ceremonies during the term; a pipe ceremony and a feast are also held during the semester. Students who want to fast or participate in a Sundance are provided with the support they need to ready themselves for those (and other) ceremonies. The Elders are available for personal support outside of class time. There are tears and laughter throughout this class; there are disclosures and confessions; there are breakdowns and breakthroughs.

Maintaining the Vision

A dear friend and colleague, Richard Katz (2002) made a point at one of our faculty meetings that continues to resonate within me. His message was that western mainstream culture is so pervasive, so all-encompassing, so omni-present that we must never waver in our efforts to bring Indigenous knowledge, worldviews, approaches back home to the people. We must first live from this way of life ourselves and then we can give it away (Richard Katz personal communication). Colonization and neo-colonization have taken too great a toll (Milloy, 1999; Miller, 1996; Neu & Therrian, 2003). First Nations peoples have had a minimal role in determining their education agenda. Assimilation is the underlying agenda, and, from the earliest years of contact, government policies out powered the needs of First Nations people.

In conclusion, the MASW provides First Nations students with a relevant and viable alternative to mainstream post graduate training in social work. It is acknowledged by our First Nations Elders and communities as an essential program that supports affective healing and self-determination. The input from Elders, community representatives, graduates, current students and future students is essential to maintaining a fresh and contemporary program that remains grounded in the wisdom and depth of an Indigenous worldview. Kim Tootosis (2010), a graduate of the MASW, expressed in her Masters project how life was lived before contact, and gives us a challenge to ensure Indigenous knowledge is retained and incorporated into our contemporary lives:

“Prior to European contact, Indigenous societies in the Americas had strong, viable, and complex societies that ensured healthy family systems and healthy support systems in the wellness, vitality and prosperity of the communities. The life cycle of the individuals, families and communities was based on the foundation of Indigenous Spiritual Law. Individuals were born into a deep understanding of life, were raised and nurtured in accordance with Life laws and contributed to a community as a healthy individual and member. All elements of life and life values were in balance with Spirit (life force) and Creation. All living entities were interrelated. This included the community, the land and all that lived and walked upon the land. A vibrant, nurturing and yet elaborate and distinct society enriched with spiritual laws, family and community values were thriving (p. 8).

References

- Goulet, L. M. & McLeod Y. (2002). Connections and reconnecting: Affirming cultural identity in Aboriginal education. *McGill Journal of Education*, 37(3), 355-369.
- Graveline, J. F. (1998). *Circle works: Transforming Eurocentric Consciousness*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood.
- Menzies, P. & Bodnar, A. (2009). The Role of the Elder within a Mainstream Addiction and Mental Health Hospital. *Native Social Work Journal*, Vol. 7, 87-107.

- Miller, J. (1996). *Shingwauk's vision: A history of Native residential schools*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.
- Milloy, J.S. (1999). *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879–1986*. Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press.
- Neu, D., Therrian, R. (2003). *Accounting for genocide: Canada's bureaucratic assault on Aboriginal people*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood.
- Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. (1996). Retrieved from http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/webarchives/20071124124457/http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/sgml_e.html
- Sanderson, J. (2010). Culture brings meaning to Adult Learning: A Medicine Wheel approach to program planning. *Pimatisiwin: A Journal of Aboriginal and Indigenous Community Health* 8(1) pp 33-54.
- Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, (1976). *Mission Statement*. Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre. Saskatoon, SK.
- School of Indian Social Work. (2002). *Master of Aboriginal social work accreditation candidacy report*. Indian Social Work Faculty, First Nations University of Canada, Saskatoon, SK:
- School of Indian Social Work. (2010). *MASW course outline, ASW 800*. Indian Social Work Faculty, First Nations University of Canada, Saskatoon, SK:
- Stiegelbauer, S. M. (1996). What is an Elder? What do Elders do? First Nations Elders as teachers in culture-based urban organizations. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*. XVI (1), 37-67.
- Tootoosis, K. L. (2010). *Validating the resilience of the spirit and overcoming the impact of residential school: A narrative research study*. (Unpublished Master's Project). First Nations University of Canada, Saskatoon, SK.

NATIVE SOCIAL WORK JOURNAL

*Indigenous Social Work
Practices and Theories*

*The Native Social Work Journal is registered with the Canadian
Association of Learned Journals*

Volume 8, August 2012

© 2012 Native Social Work Journal

Published by the Native Social Work Journal
Laurentian University
Sudbury, Ontario

Printed by the Laurentian University Press
Sudbury, Ontario

Cover Artwork by Leland Bell

ISSN 1206-5323
All rights reserved

**NISHNAABE KINOOMADWIN
NAADMAADWIN**