



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

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Moving Forward, Giving Back Transformative Aboriginal Adult Education

When she was 12 years old and still in grade 7, Claudette Michell left home in The Pas, running from racism at school and the effects of residential schools at home. She made her way to Winnipeg, becoming a survivor on inner-city streets. She lived in an abandoned car, and in a tent. She was often hungry. She was picked up by Child and Family Services repeatedly. She ran away. She was placed in locked facilities. She ran again, and again. At the age of 17 she had her first child. The baby's father was in the same lock-up facility. She had no idea how to be a mom. But in that facility she was for the first time exposed to her Cree culture. This started her on a long journey.

She began trying adult education. Her first attempts were unsuccessful. She went back up north and tried a business diploma. She passed, but didn't do well. She wasn't healthy. She struggled with addictions, and was in and out of treatment centres. She made her way to a treatment centre in Norway House, where she met elders and began to learn who she was. "This was the actual starting point for the reclamation of my Indigenous identity," she said. She came back to Winnipeg and stayed at Native Women's Transition Centre, and earned grade 12 at the Aboriginal Centre. While there she saw a leaflet promoting Red River College's Aboriginal Governance program. By now she was deeply interested in learning more about her Aboriginal identity. She went to RRC, graduated, and went on to the University of Winnipeg where she became UW's first Honours graduate in Aboriginal Governance.

Hired to work in the UW's new Department of Urban and Inner-City Studies, she became the backbone of the program, and was an emerging leader in Winnipeg's inner city, deeply respected by those with whom she worked. She had come full circle, back to the North End on whose streets she had survived two decades earlier as a teen, and where she had struggled with the powerfully adverse effects of colonialism and racism and poverty. Her experience was one of personal transformation, and she used her newfound skills to give back to her community, as part of the process of community transformation.

Tragically, Claudette passed away suddenly of a brain aneurysm on October 4, 2012. But her story embodies the enormous potential of Aboriginal adult education. It can be, and in Claudette's case was, transformative.

What makes Aboriginal adult education transformative?

Moving Forward, Giving Back: Transformative Aboriginal Adult Education, offers answers to this question by drawing on the actual experience of Aboriginal adult learners in Winnipeg's inner city. The starting point, as revealed in Claudette's story, is that many people have great potential, even when they are suffering and their potential can't easily be seen. Introducing people to their Aboriginal identity, and helping them to learn who they truly are, and what happened

there is an alternative.

CCPA-MB
309-323 Portage Ave.
Winnipeg, MB
R3B 2C1

phone
(204) 927-3200

email
ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca

website
[www.policyalternatives.ca/
manitoba](http://www.policyalternatives.ca/manitoba)

blog
www.policyfix.ca

twitter
@ccpamb

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to their people, can be transformative. A decolonizing curriculum that teaches Aboriginal people about their histories and cultures, and situates their personal struggles in the context of the broader historical and socio-economic process of colonization is often liberating.

Further, successful adult education is rarely a straight line process. There are attempts, and failures, and more attempts. Good adult education keeps the door open, and tells those who leave that they are welcome to try again.

Location matters too: Aboriginal adult learners do better when they can learn in their own surroundings and alongside others with similar backgrounds. Adult programs physically located in Winnipeg's inner city are most likely to be effective.

Small classes and a warm and personalized environment are essential. They contribute to creating a safe space, where Aboriginal adults can take the risks associated with learning. In such warm and personalized and local spaces, relationships can be built, and trust can be developed.

A holistic approach is also essential: poor peoples' lives are complex; those complexities affect the ability to learn. A central part of adult education involves supporting learners in dealing with problems outside as well as inside the classroom.

Transformative Aboriginal Adult Education
When adult education is practiced in this way, and when it is free or at least affordable for low-income people—a crucial and often neglected condition—it can be liberating and transformational, in at least three ways.

First, it transforms Aboriginal peoples' lives at a personal level: by contributing significantly to healing them from the damage of colonization, and of racism and poverty; by developing the capacity for critical thought; and, in the case of those graduates who enter the paid labour market, by liberating them from the severe restrictions of lives lived in the complex poverty so common in urban settings today.

Second, this kind of adult education can

be transformative at the level of the family, and in the case of Aboriginal people, the extended family. There is often a "ripple effect" by which, once the first person takes the plunge into adult education, others in the family soon follow, and the children and grandchildren of these adult learners do better in school.

And third, this kind of adult education can be transformative at the broader level of the community. Many current leaders in Winnipeg's inner city have grown up poor, returned to school as adults, and graduated from a transformative Aboriginal adult education program. Rather than leaving behind the communities from which they have come, they give back to those communities, contributing to making the broader socio-economic changes that are necessary to break the cycle by which poverty produces poor educational outcomes, which then contribute to still more poverty.

The long-time leaders in this kind of transformative Aboriginal adult education are the Urban Circle Training Centre and UM's Inner City Social Work Program, joined more recently by UW's Urban and Inner-City Studies, all on Selkirk Avenue. Each of these is described in *Moving Forward, Giving Back*, as is North End Winnipeg's Lord Selkirk Park, a low-income community that has been considerably transformed via a community development strategy with a strong, Aboriginal adult education component.

Adult education that is tailored to meet the needs of Aboriginal people in the ways described in this book is an anti-poverty tool that works.

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Jim Silver is the editor of Moving Forward, Giving Back: Transformative Aboriginal Adult Education (Fernwood: 2013).

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CCPA-MB
309-323 Portage Ave.
Winnipeg, MB
R3B 2C1

phone

(204) 927-3200

email

ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca

website

www.policyalternatives.ca/
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