

Aboriginal Learners in Selected Adult Learning Centres in Manitoba

by Jim Silver
with Darlene Klyne and Freeman Simard

Executive Summary

This is a study of Aboriginal adult learners in five Adult Learning Centres (ALCs) in Manitoba. It is based largely on interviews with 74 Aboriginal Adult Learners and 20 staff members in the five ALCs. The objective was to determine what keeps Aboriginal adult learners attending ALCs, and what contributes to their successes in ALCs.

The research project has been designed and conducted in a collaborative and participatory fashion. It is the product of a research partnership. The partnership includes: the Province of Manitoba's Aboriginal Education Directorate; the Research and Planning Branch of the Department of Education and Youth; the Adult Learning and Literacy Branch of the Department of Advanced Education and Training; Directors, teachers and staff at the five Adult Learning Centres; and the authors. All interviews with Aboriginal adult learners were conducted by trained Aboriginal interviewers. Individual interviews were preceded by an initial sharing circle, the purpose of which was to introduce adult Aboriginal learners at each site to the research project and the researchers, to solicit their involvement, and to attempt to break down, to some extent, the barriers between researchers and adult learners.

Most of the Aboriginal adult learners that we interviewed feel comfortable in the Adult Learning Centre that they are attending, and a significant proportion are experiencing considerable success. In a good many cases, remarkable personal transformations are occurring. The main factors contributing to their success include the holistic and learner-centred approach to instruction adopted by the ALCs that we investigated; the strong social, emotional and practical supports provided to learners; the warm, highly personalized and non-hierarchical atmosphere that prevails in the ALCs; the dedication, even passion, of teaching and other staff; and the friendly, non-judgmental and respectful manner in which adult Aboriginal learners are treated by staff. The importance of these factors was emphasized repeatedly in the interviews. Many adult Aboriginal learners told us that they feel much more comfortable in the ALC that they are attending than they

did in their previous school experiences, and many described negative experiences in schools previously attended.

We found that where Aboriginal cultural practices are part of the educational strategy at an ALC, they are much appreciated by Aboriginal learners, and where such practices are not present they are desired by many Aboriginal learners. The incorporation into the adult learning experience of Aboriginal cultural practices and the creation of more opportunities for both learners and staff to learn about Aboriginal culture are strong themes arising from our interviews.

Our conclusions about the five Adult Learning Centres that we investigated are very positive. These ALCs provide evidence of a powerful and effective new approach to education in Manitoba. This is particularly, but we expect not only, the case for Aboriginal adult learners. Most of the ALCs that we investigated could be made even better than they are by incorporating some findings from our investigation that are confirmed in the literature on adult education generally, and Aboriginal adult education in particular. We conclude with a summary of our findings, a discussion of the relationship of our findings to the literature, and some recommendations that arise from the interviews.

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In this paper we report on the findings of a study of Aboriginal adult learners in five Adult Learning Centres in Manitoba. The purpose of the study was to determine what keeps adult Aboriginal learners attending Adult Learning Centres, and what contributes to their successes in ALCs. To find answers to these questions we asked Aboriginal adult learners about their experiences in Adult Learning Centres (ALCs), and ALC staff about their experience with Aboriginal adult learners. We sought to determine what five ALCs are doing to meet the educational needs of adult Aboriginal learners, and how these learners are responding to these educational strategies and initiatives. A distinctive feature of the study is that it is based for the most part on interviews with Aboriginal adult learners, conducted by Aboriginal interviewers.

The paper proceeds as follows. In Part One we describe the methodology employed in the study. In Part Two we briefly describe Adult Learning Centres and their origins. In Part Three we describe our findings, based largely on interviews conducted on-site with adult learners and staff at the five ALCs. In Part Four we summarize and discuss our findings, and relate those findings to the literature on adult education and

Aboriginal education. In Part Five, we advance some conclusions and enumerate and discuss the recommendations that arise from the study.

Part One: Method

This research project has been designed and conducted in a collaborative and participatory fashion. It is the product of a research partnership. The partnership includes: the Province of Manitoba's Aboriginal Education Directorate; the Research and Planning Branch of the Department of Education and Youth; the Adult Learning and Literacy branch of the Department of Advanced Education and Training; Directors, teachers and other staff of the five Adult Learning Centres that we investigated; and the authors. It is also collaborative and participatory in that it is the product of a research methodology that is rooted in the belief that the best source of information on Aboriginal adult learners in the ALCs is the Aboriginal adult learners themselves. Thus the bulk of the information in this paper comes from interviews with Aboriginal adult learners, conducted by trained Aboriginal interviewers.

The research partnership wanted to identify "the magic" (Wynes, November 25, 2002)

This research project has been designed and conducted in a collaborative and participatory fashion

that keeps adult Aboriginal learners attending ALCs and that promotes their success in ALCs. Representatives of the Province of Manitoba's Aboriginal Education Directorate, Adult Learning and Literacy Branch, and Research and Plan-

ning Branch met in early summer and again in the Fall of 2002 with the Directors of the five ALCs to discuss in very general terms the need for and the outline of the study, after which the lead author was invited to participate in planning and to direct the research study. The five Adult Learning

Centres were selected because they are relatively small, have a significant proportion of Aboriginal learners, and represent both urban and rural ALCs. This is not a representative sample of Adult Learning Centres in Manitoba; it does, however, represent several different types of ALCs. Two more meetings with the Aboriginal Education Directorate, Adult Learning and Literacy, Research and Planning, and the lead author, were held in November and December, 2002. After the first of these meetings the lead author prepared a draft research proposal which was circulated and discussed at the second meeting. After the second meeting a revised research plan and interview format were circulated to the representatives of the three lead organizations and to the Directors of the five ALCs. At a third meeting in mid-January, 2003, attended by representatives of the Aboriginal Education Directorate, Adult Learning and Literacy, Research and Planning, nine Directors and teachers from the five ALCs, and the lead author, the draft research plan and interview format were thor-

oughly discussed, and further revisions were made. Most significantly, we agreed to use an open-ended interview format, and to begin the interview process at each ALC with a sharing circle involving Aboriginal learners.

Following the mid-January meeting the research proposal and interview format were evaluated and approved by the University of Winnipeg Department of Politics ethics committee and Senate Ethics Committee. Simultaneously, two Aboriginal interviewers were hired and trained.

In the first week of February, 2003, the lead author made site visits to, and spoke in a preliminary fashion with Directors and staff at, each of the five ALCs.

In the second week of February, sharing circles were held at each of the five ALCs except the Portage Learning Centre, where winter weather conditions forced its cancellation. The sharing circles were announced ahead of time to Aboriginal learners at each site. At each sharing circle the lead author and two interviewers were introduced to assembled Aboriginal adult learners by the Director; the lead author described the research project—both the purpose of the project and how the interviews would be conducted—and advised learners that participation was voluntary and that should they participate we would assure them of confidentiality; the two interviewers introduced themselves and told the assembled learners a bit about their personal background; the assembled learners were then asked to introduce themselves and, if they chose, to tell us a bit about themselves; and finally the circle was opened to questions and discussion about the research project. The purpose of the sharing circles was to introduce adult Aboriginal learners at each site to the research project and to the researchers, to solicit their involvement, and by doing so to begin to break down the barriers between researchers and learn-

ers, and to increase adult Aboriginal learners' comfort level with the project. We believe that this innovation worked very well, and that it increased the willingness of learners to participate in interviews, and improved the quality of the interviews.

The interview format was pre-tested at the Urban Circle Training Centre site during the second week of February, and the lead author and the interviewers discussed the results of the pre-test extensively. Personal interviews were conducted at each of the sites from February 17, 2003 to March 10, 2003. Each interviewee was paid a \$25 honorarium as an expression of our appreciation for the contribution of their time, and an acknowledgement of the value of their knowledge. The interview format was open-ended. It began with the interviewers saying some version of: 'Tell me a bit about yourself. How did you happen to come to this Adult Learning Centre, and what has your experience here been like?' In many cases this question was sufficient to prompt long and insightful responses by learners, and interviewers had to say very little. In other cases more probing had to be done. Interviewers sought to learn more about learners' educational experiences *before* attending the ALC, and their hopes and goals *after* completing the program at the ALC, but their primary focus was on the learners' experiences at the ALC. Probing questions, where these were necessary, included questions about why learners were at the Learning Centre, whether they believed that they were doing well or not and why, and how their experience compared with their previous educational experiences. If learners did not voluntarily say anything about the following, interviewers were instructed to ask about: teachers and methods of instruction; curriculum, and in particular any Aboriginal content in the curriculum; and the supports offered

by the ALC. Interviewers were instructed to ask all questions in as neutral a fashion as possible. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. A total of 75 adult Aboriginal learners were interviewed, 15 at each of the five ALCs. All interviews with adult Aboriginal learners were tape-recorded. Tape recorder difficulties led to one early interview, at the Portage Learning Centre, being lost. The lead author listened to each tape-recorded interview in its entirety, and made detailed notes on, identified themes, and transcribed portions of, each.

While Klyne and Simard were conducting interviews with adult Aboriginal learners, Silver interviewed Directors, teachers and support staff at each ALC. A total of twenty Directors, teachers and staff were interviewed at the five Learning centres: four at the Portage Learning Centre, three at Long Plain Training Centre, five at Urban Circle Training Centre, three at CrossRoads Learning Centre, and five at Horizons Learning Centre. At Horizons Learning Centre, interviews took place at two sites, the Crossways-in-Common site on Broadway Avenue and the Elmwood site on Thames Ave. Interviews with Directors and teachers lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. They were intended to gain insight into: the philosophy and educational strategies of each ALC; the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of learners at each ALC; the successes and problems at each ALC; what each ALC needs to improve the work that they do; and in particular, what seems to work best in keeping adult Aboriginal learners attending the ALC and succeeding in the ALC.

Based on the interviews of adult Aboriginal learners and of Directors and teachers at the five Adult Learning Centres, the lead author prepared a first draft of the paper in March and April, 2003. The first draft was read by Klyne

and Simard, who commented extensively, making important additions and modifications. The revised draft was then circulated to all members of the research partnership: the Aboriginal Education Directorate, the Adult Learning and Literacy Branch, the Research and Planning Branch, and the nineteen Directors, teachers and staff of the five Adult Learning Centres. Each was invited to make comments and suggestions. A meeting was held May 1, 2003, in which two of the three authors and seven government representatives, Directors and teachers participated. Revisions were made based on this detailed discussion, and the revised draft was circulated a final time for comments and suggestions.

Part Two: Adult Learning Centres

Adult Learning Centres (ALCs) are a relatively new phenomenon in Manitoba. They appear to have their origins in two inter-related developments. First, in 1994, the provincial government released *Renewing Education: New Directions*, which set out their plans for educational change. One of their commitments was to "...establish community-based infrastructures for life-long learning which provide high quality education and training for all Manitobans" (Manitoba, 2001, p. 88). At the same time, school divisions were responding to "...an emerging demand for alternative programming for adults and other students who were unable to succeed in the regular classroom" (Manitoba, 2001, p. 89). The result was the emergence of Adult Learning Centres. By 1996/97 ALCs were offering high school credits to adult students.

The Adult Learning Centres appear to have emerged in a completely unplanned way. The

report of a consultant commissioned in 1999 to provide some general observations about ALCs described their emergence in this way:

"There is no evidence that the ALCs developed as a result of considered policy development by the government of the day, nor that there had been a particular identification of needs to be met. Further, no policy was considered for a local, community driven, decentralized, flexible, province wide array of centres designed to meet multiple adult learning needs....there was no prior discussion within government as to the concept, form, or function of an adult learning centre....Since there was no central model or concept for a centre, centres developed very much in relation to the needs of the communities they serve, and both the range of services and the modes of delivery were largely locally determined" (Ferris, 2000, pp. 3-4).

The result is that although ALCs have many things in common, each one is different from the others in at least some ways. Most are relatively small, are located in inconspicuous and rather modest surroundings, and do not look at all like traditional schools. They are generally 'store-front' operations, physically located in premises not originally designed to be used as schools. From the inside, those that we visited have a relaxed, warm and friendly feel to them. The number of students varies from ALC to ALC. The composition of the staff similarly varies— in some cases there are only teachers, in some there may also be a counsellor and/or teaching assistant and/or office assistant, in all cases the number of staff is small. The teaching styles vary from ALC to ALC— in some cases

classes are run very much as they would be in a regular high school, in some cases there are no regularly-structured classes at all and there is complete flexibility in terms of what courses are taken and when. In some cases students enter at one particular time of the year and are put through testing and interviewing before being admitted; in other cases students may begin their studies at any time of the year and almost everyone who is interested is enrolled. Each Adult Learning Centre appears to have its own character.

Adult Learning Centres offer the mature grade 12 diploma. It differs from the regular grade 12 diploma in that it requires that adults complete 8 credits, whereas the regular high school diploma requires the completion of 28 credits from S1 to S4 (or what used to be grade 9 to grade 12). As of July 1, 2003, all Adult Learning Centres are governed by the Adult Learning Centres Act. All Adult Learning Centres are required to operate as non-profit organizations. In the 2002/03 program year, there were 47 ALCs in Manitoba. As of March, 2003, there were approximately 9300 learners enrolled in ALCs, of whom about one-third (32%) were self-identified as Aboriginal. This is more than double Aboriginal people's share of the total population of Manitoba. The total number of mature grade 12 graduates in the 2001/02 program year was 851. Data are not available to determine how many of these graduates were Aboriginal, and what proportion were women and men. The budget for ALCs during the 2002/03 program year was \$12.9 million (data supplied by Adult Learning and Literacy, April 22, 2003).

Part Three: Findings

In Part Three we describe the five ALCs and discuss our findings at each. We divide our treatment of the five ALCs into two parts. We look first at the Portage Learning Centre, Long Plain Training Centre, Crossways Learning Centre and Horizons Learning Centre. We look at each individually, and then we look separately at the Urban Circle Training Centre. The Urban Circle Training Centre has been in operation longer than the other four, works with Aboriginal learners only, and has a more fully developed program than the first four Learning Centres. It makes sense, we believe, to treat it separately.

1. The Portage Learning Centre

The Portage Learning Centre (PLC) is located on Saskatchewan Avenue in the heart of Portage la Prairie, a city of 14,000 located an hour's drive west of Winnipeg. The PLC was established in 1995, initially funded by Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), with a strict employment training focus, academic education being largely incidental. In 1997 HRDC funding ended when training was delegated to the provinces, and in 2001 the provincial government's Adult Learning and Literacy began to fund the PLC, with the result that the focus became academic, with employment being largely incidental. The PLC is now one of 47 Adult Learning Centres operating in Manitoba.

The physical space occupied by the PLC comprises three rooms suitable for 15-20 students each, stacked from front to back on one side of a long hallway that runs from front to

"It's like a stereotype thing, like, Natives do nothing, I get that all the time" (F; 21).

In high school "...there was three to one...white people versus Native people and they always look at you and you're nothing but trash..." (F; 21).

Referring to a Police and Security Studies course at Red River College in Winnipeg: "...racial comments there...drunken Indians...every day was about Natives this and Natives that" (F; 36).

"Here, you're your own person, they don't care what you look like...it's great, I love it—it's non-judgmental" (F; 21).

"We're treated equal...I feel comfortable here" (F; 36).

"You feel accepted when you come here" (M; 29).

"I like coming here, I feel comfortable..." (F; 23).

back alongside the rooms, plus two offices and a larger office space on the other side of the hallway toward the back of the building. The staff of 6 includes the Director, Philip Evans; Case Facilitator and Intake Coordinator, Brenda Foster; teachers Samantha Page and Dave Froese; Teaching Assistant Bev Thiessen; and Administrative Assistant Lee-Ann Flett. In addition, Val Gorlick is the Program Coordinator for an employment program with an on-site office, and Lisa Michell is the Cultural Worker, with an office in the basement where she works two days per week. Gorlick and Michell, while physically

located at the PLC, are paid out of other budgets— Gorlick by Employment and Training Services, and Michel by Probation Services and the Portage Womens' Centre. There is a daycare centre downstairs, in the basement, with spots for four infants and eight other children, and a Young Parents Resource Centre upstairs, on the second floor of the building, both of which are used by some of the PLC adult learners.

There are 90-100 adult learners at the Portage Learning Centre in any given month, and there is a constant waiting list of adults wanting to enter. Approximately 55 percent of learners at the PLC are Aboriginal. We interviewed 15 Aboriginal learners at the PLC, although tape recorder problems rendered one interview unusable. Characteristics of the remaining 14 are as follows: 11 are women and 3 are men; ages range from 16 to 43, with the median age being 22; 11 of the 14 have children; 8 of the 14 are single mothers, and 3 live with a spouse and children; and the highest grade completed for 10 of the 14 was grade 9, for 2 it was grade 8, for one grade 5, and for one grade 10. Aboriginal students at the Portage Learning Centre come from Portage la Prairie, or from one of the communities surrounding Portage— Long Plain First Nation, Dakota Tipi First Nation, Dakota Plains First Nation, or slightly further away, from Sandy Bay Ojibway First Nation and Swan Lake First Nation. There are also some students from Water Hen First Nation.

The fact that a high proportion of the adult learners at PLC are Aboriginal is important. As one 22 year old female learner put it: "There's a lot of Natives here, and that makes me feel comfortable" (F; 22). This comfort in the presence of other Aboriginal learners may be, at least in part, because there is reported to be considerable racism in Portage la Prairie, as elsewhere in the province (see sidebar).

Significantly, adult Aboriginal learners do not feel any of this racism at the Portage Learning Centre. On the contrary, they feel that they are treated equally and respectfully (see sidebar). We found that this was the case at each of the five ALCs where we conducted interviews.

Adult Aboriginal learners come to the PLC for a variety of reasons. One of these is to create a better life for their children, and in some cases more directly to be able to help children with homework. One 28 year old woman, referring to her young school-age son, told us in frustration that: "I'm supposed to be helping him with his homework but I don't know anything", while a 36 year old woman told us that she wanted to show her children that if Mom could do it, they can too, and she added proudly: "My oldest daughter, she's doing very well in school, we do our homework together". A number of adult learners told us that they enrolled at PLC because, contrary to common myths, they just got tired of sitting around at home doing nothing (see sidebar). We found this to be the case at other ALCs as well.

At least some of the PLC adult learners emphasized the strong support that they are getting from their family. One said about her family: "They're really happy that I'm going back to school" (F; 21), while another added that "My Mom's really great with that too because she'll be, like, why don't you come over and I can play with the kids and you can do your homework and you can have supper too" (F; 21).

Portage Learning Centre uses a continuous intake, module-based, one-on-one teaching strategy. There is an intake every other week. Intake facilitation is the responsibility of Brenda Foster. She meets with students and tests them in Math and English to determine their circumstances and their academic level, and she not only designs a plan of study with a schedule of

"I just got sick of doing nothing..." (F; 19; one child).

"I just got tired of staying at home, doing nothing" (F; 38; 6 children).

"I didn't want to sit around at home and I just wanted to finish school" (F; 24; 2 children).

"You can work at your own pace but you still have to finish something here" (F; 28).

"It's very flexible...and they actually give you progress reports to see how you're coming along and how you can pick yourself up" (F; 18).

"They let you work at your own pace, they just don't want you to go slower than they know you can handle" (F; 18).

"I get a lot more help here than I did in high school" (F; 23).

"I don't feel belittled when I make a mistake" (F; 36).

"It's not like a classroom where you have to put up your hand and stop the whole classroom from learning, you can just ask a teacher to come over and help you" (F; 19).

completion for each course, but also works out practical arrangements such as daycare and transport to class, and tries to begin to "develop a relationship with them" (Foster, Feb. 17, 2003). Each student is advised about courses to take, and Foster then meets with students on a regular basis, every 4-6 weeks, to determine whether

they are meeting their goals. Students we interviewed were virtually unanimous in saying that they appreciate the fact that there are clear expectations with respect to work (see sidebar).

Learners are assigned work modules in each course. They then work at their own pace, asking teachers for assistance when needed. Learners were close to unanimous in saying that teachers were very helpful, and that they felt comfortable in asking for help, and many expressed the view that they find the environment at PLC to be preferable to their previous experience in high school (see sidebar). We found that this opinion was expressed by adult Aboriginal learners at each of the ALCs. Some students move relatively slowly, others complete modules and entire courses at a rapid pace. For example, one student started Math in November, 2002, and completed the course with a very good grade in late January, 2003 (Froese, Feb. 4, 2003). In the three years from 1999/2000 to 2001/2002, the Portage Learning Centre graduated 78 adult learners with their mature grade 12 diploma. In the absence of the PLC, it is likely that very few of these people would have completed their grade 12.

The learner-centred philosophy of the PLC is important. When asked why people stay and succeed at PLC, Evans says, “we’re very forgiving” (Evans, Feb. 17, 2003). The PLC does not care about a person’s past; everyone who applies and meets the minimum academic standards is given an opportunity. It may not work for an adult learner the first, or second, or even third time, but PLC continues to work with them, and explicitly seeks to ensure that even when students leave, they leave on good terms and are fully aware that the door is open for a subsequent attempt. Foster says: “We do not judge the reasons people leave” (Foster, Feb. 17, 2003). When learners are at the PLC, all staff are made

aware in general terms of their personal circumstances so that they can respond to learners’ needs. If for example someone does not turn up when expected, it may require a simple phone call, or it may be more complicated, requiring staff— generally but not only Brenda Foster— to work with a women’s shelter or probation services, for example.

It is notable that staff consistently go above and beyond what might be considered ‘normal’ job expectations. Driving students to class when a test is scheduled, accompanying students when they have personal problems outside school, continuing to work with students who are in jail, accompanying students too shy to meet with their childrens’ teachers, are examples that are not uncommon. As Brenda Foster observes: “When you show people that you care...they don’t forget that kind of thing” (Foster, Feb. 17, 2003). When asked why students succeed at PLC, Philip Evans replied: “Every member of staff is incredibly committed to what they’re doing” (Evans, Feb. 17, 2003). Students confirmed in the interviews how very helpful and supportive they consider staff to be. As one 36 year old woman put it: “If you don’t have a ride, one of them will come and pick you up...I’ve never encountered anything like this before so it’s been very good”.

Learners feel comfortable speaking with any staff member, but Case Facilitator and Intake Coordinator Brenda Foster plays a particularly crucial role as counsellor. The importance of her role at the PLC, as evidenced by our interviews, speaks to the importance of taking a holistic approach, and having the staff to provide the supports that are needed for the successful implementation of a holistic approach. She was not hired for the position that she holds, but rather for an administrative position, but as she says, the missing piece was the support piece and

“...we saw it very clearly” (Foster, Feb. 17, 2003). She expresses the view, as does Philip Evans, that the social and emotional supports provided in so many ways at PLC are the single most important variable in explaining students’ success. “I find that support is the real key”, she says. Students regularly meet with her to discuss not only academic but also personal problems, and tell us in interviews that they feel free to talk openly with her about personal problems (see sidebar).

The philosophy is that students are more than just students; they are people with lives outside the classroom, and in a good many cases those lives are fraught with difficulties. Many of the adult Aboriginal learners in particular have experienced a great deal of hardship in their lives, and are carrying the pain with them. Brenda Foster, for example, spends lots of one-on-one time talking with students, and says it’s “real tough looking at personal issues....a lot of our students carry a lot of wounds” (Foster, Feb. 17, 2003). Our interviews reveal that this is the case at each of the five ALCs that we studied. Relating to adult learners as people with lives outside the classroom rather than simply as students is consistent with the holistic approach which, we believe, is an absolutely essential component of success in Adult Learning Centres.

Central to the holistic approach is providing a variety of supports to learners. Daycare is a key support. There are only four infant spots in the PLC daycare, and the demand is much greater than that. There is only one other daycare in Portage with infant spots. Demand exceeds supply, and numerous potential students cannot afford private daycare and do not have family or friends able or prepared to provide this essential service. Adequate daycare is a crucial component of an adult learning strategy. As one 21 year old with two children put it: “If that

“People can go talk to her about anything, and it’s totally confidential so it’s absolutely great” (F; 21).

“She’s really good to talk to” (F; 43).

“I feel like I can tell her anything” (F; 23).

“They make it so it’s really comfortable to go see them” (F; 21).

“I can ask anybody here...and they’ll try to help me” (F; 23).

“They’re pretty nice here, nice people” (F; 28).

daycare wasn’t there I don’t think I’d be coming to school”, and she added that “the childcare thing is really big because I know lots of my friends who have kids that just feel they can’t go back to school because of that” (F; 21). This may be especially so for Aboriginal learners, given demographic trends in Manitoba, which show that the Aboriginal population is growing faster than the non-Aboriginal population, and the age structure of the Aboriginal population is much younger than the non-Aboriginal (Silver and Mallett, 2002, pp.5-7; Canada and Manitoba, 2002).

In fact, an analysis of 2001 Census of Canada data for Manitoba shows that for the period 1996-2001, the non-Aboriginal population under 15 years of age declined by 26.0%, while the Aboriginal population under 15 years of age grew by 38.8 % (CCPA-Mb., April, 2003, p.5).

Some Opportunities for Improvements

We have identified a number of areas where we think an already very strong program could be made stronger. Most of what follows is already known to staff at PLC, and in some cases they are actively working at introducing the changes we discuss.

There is some evidence in the adult education literature that a continuous intake, one-on-one style of teaching and learning is not as effective as the use of cohorts (National Centre for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, 2001, p. 30; Beder and Medina, nd, p. 1). Philip Evans and Brenda Foster are now examining how they can develop a cohort component to complement, not replace, the flexible one-on-one approach that so many adult Aboriginal learners told us they appreciate. Brenda Foster describes being in a cohort group in her social work class, and consistent with the literature, she says the support is incomparable to independent study (Foster, Feb. 17, 2003). One possibility currently being considered at PLC is to work with agencies so as to take in 10-12 learners at similar levels at the same time, and then work with them as a group so that the members of the group become mutually supportive, become "... a really cohesive community", able to support each other in a variety of ways, both practical, like transport and childcare, and emotional (Evans, Feb. 17, 2003). This, it is thought, would be likely to reduce the incidence of absences, which are "a very big problem" at PLC (Evans, Feb. 17, 2003), and would reduce the likelihood of learners leaving. This could become especially valuable if Income Security could be persuaded to fund a cohort of adult learners for two years—"we can do a lot in two years" (Foster, Feb. 17, 2003). Some Aboriginal students expressed a

desire for such a development. For example, a 28 year old woman said: "I think what would help me here is if I had a study group....I find it easier to work with someone rather than working on my own". Other learners made it clear in interviews that they felt detached from fellow learners, and isolated. There may be other ways of creating the mutual support among students that is so advantageous. For example, a 'buddy system' could be developed, linking together two, three or even four learners. And a regular system of sharing circles might be instituted, among the several benefits of which would be the promotion of a greater sense of community amongst adult learners.

The institution of sharing circles might create the opportunity for students to be mutually supportive, especially regarding personal problems, in a way consistent with the holistic philosophy used at PLC. Lisa Michel already holds sharing circles at PLC, but they are not well known to most students, judging from our interviews. This may be because Lisa's presence at PLC two days per week is new. Making Aboriginal—and non-Aboriginal—learners aware of Lisa's sharing circles, and making these sharing circles a more frequent, and central, part of the program at PLC, might go some considerable distance toward overcoming the individualism and isolation that can follow from the continuous intake model in which structured classes are not used. Those students who have taken advantage of Lisa's sharing circles and other cultural initiatives have responded positively. One 36 year old woman told us that several of her fellow learners had gone to a sweat lodge and participated in other cultural practices with Lisa "...and they said that was quite an experience for them.... they said it felt so good they'd do it again".

A greater use of sharing circles would also be consistent with the need to add more Aboriginal content to the program at PLC. This is important because of the impact of colonization on Aboriginal people (Silver and Mallett, 2002). Colonization sought to remove Aboriginal peoples' language and culture and spirituality on the grounds that they were inferior to those of the European settlers. Many Aboriginal people have internalized those colonial beliefs in various ways, leading to loss of identity and of self-esteem. This is evident at the Portage Learning Centre, and at all the ALCs. As Brenda Foster puts it: "There's such an identity crisis with so many of our students", having to do with their loss of culture (Foster, Feb. 17, 2003). A greater Aboriginal presence in a variety of ways would help to solve these problems. The presence at PLC of Lisa Michel and Administrative Assistant Lee-Ann Flett, who is also Aboriginal, is important. As one of the authors of this paper said in an evaluation session, when talking about the importance to Aboriginal people of seeing that organizations employ Aboriginal people:

"...there is that perception that... Aboriginal people are accepted because there is one on staff, and the students know, 'oh, they're hiring Aboriginal people', so there is immediately that perception when you're walking in there that they're a non-racist institution. When I walk into a place and see a familiar (ie., Aboriginal) face, your comfort level immediately goes up..." (Klyne, March 3, 2003).

As already shown, adult Aboriginal learners feel comfortable at PLC. However, they also told us that they would like to learn more about their

culture. For example, a 22 year old woman told us: "I don't know my culture...I'd like to learn". Others made similar comments. In pursuit of this two things could usefully be added at PLC. One is the introduction of a Native Studies course. Several students expressed an interest in such a course. This is already being pursued by staff at PLC; it is our view that such a course ought to be offered at all Adult Learning Centres in Manitoba. The other is the need to introduce staff in a more systematic way to Aboriginal history and culture. Staff expressed a desire to learn more. When asked if he thought he knew enough about Aboriginal history and culture, Philip Evans replied: "definitely not" (Evans, Feb. 18, 2003). Brenda Foster responded similarly, saying: "It's an area that needs to be encouraged" (Foster, Feb. 17, 2003). Staff at PLC have benefited from multicultural sensitivity courses offered by the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba, which they found to be "very good" (Evans, Feb. 18, 2003). But more is needed. We believe that one way of doing this is for Adult Learning and Literacy to develop a systematic program of professional development aimed at familiarizing staff in Adult Learning Centres with Aboriginal history and culture. This will be one of the recommendations that we make in Part Four of this paper. At this point what needs to be said is that there is an expressed desire on the part of staff at the Portage Learning Centre to learn more about their Aboriginal students, and steps should be taken to make that possible.

Another area where an opportunity exists for a useful addition to the already strong program being run at the PLC arises from the fact that many and perhaps most of those who successfully complete the mature grade 12 diploma at the PLC end up working for minimum wages in retail jobs at places like Tim Horton's or Wal-

Mart (Evans, Feb. 17, 2003; Gorlick, Feb. 18, 2003). Most such jobs are part-time. Part-time work at the minimum wage cannot support a family. This often creates a sense of futility among PLC students. As Philip Evans puts it, it creates a sense of: “Why bother? Grade 12’s not going to get me anything anyway” (Evans, Feb. 17, 2003). The Urban Circle Training Centre offers a model that might be tried in Portage la Prairie. At UCTC a ten month Health Care Aide/Unit Clerk program is run. Among its distinctive features is the fact that the program was designed to meet a specific market need for jobs. The Health Sciences Centre(HSC) in Winnipeg is a large general hospital, a high proportion of whose patients are Aboriginal people, but a low proportion of whose staff was Aboriginal. The HSC wanted to hire more Aboriginal staff, and worked with UCTC to develop a course. The course is designed both to meet the demand at the HSC, and to meet the very specific needs of adult Aboriginal learners affected by colonization. Graduates of the program start at the HSC at close to \$14/hour, enough to raise a family, and far more attractive to adult graduates than the minimum wage jobs now on offer for most graduates of the PLC. The UCTC model or an appropriate variant could be tried in Portage la Prairie by the PLC. The first step would be to survey the local economy to determine what labour skills are likely to be in high demand in the near future. Then partnerships could be developed with employers in these areas, and a course developed jointly with employers could be designed. This could be done first on an experimental basis, with a class of 15 or 20 graduates of the PLC being invited to take a targeted 10 month program.

2. Long Plain Training Centre

The Long Plain Training Centre occupies the third floor of the Rufus Prince Building, a large, three-story brick building overlooking a bend in the Assiniboine River, just outside Portage la Prairie on the Long Plain First Nation. The building is a twenty minute drive from the main settlement at Long Plain, and a short walk out of Portage la Prairie. In years past the building was a residential school, and in fact Long Plain Training Centre (LPTC) Director Liz Merrick was a student there as a young girl, as was the mother of teacher Yvette Daniels. The third floor has five spacious, sunny rooms and several smaller rooms, and has a warm and intimate feel about it. It is a fine setting for an educational institution, despite its past.

There are approximately 30 students currently enrolled in the LPTC, roughly two-thirds of them women, and all but one Aboriginal, most but not all from Long Plain First Nation. There is a Director, Liz Merrick, who is also now the Principal of the Long Plain School, and so serves on a part-time basis as LPTC Director, plus two teachers, Yvette Daniels and Matthew Wiebe, both in their third year at LPTC— ie., both have been there from the beginning. In addition there is an Administrative Assistant, Adrienne Woods. Three of the four staff are Aboriginal.

In the first year of the program— 2000/01— LPTC was associated with Morris-Macdonald School Division. It is now affiliated with the University of Winnipeg Collegiate. In that first year the LPTC used a one-on-one, work-at-your-own-pace teaching and learning method, but it did not work well. Students worked slowly, problems were not identified in

a timely fashion, and adult learners who were academically weak or who had been out of school for a number of years were getting lost. As a result the decision was made to shift to a more formalized classroom setting in year two. “We really structured it”, as Liz Merrick puts it. The opinion of the Director and two teachers is that this has been a positive move. The pedagogy is similar to what could be found in any regular high school classroom. They introduce the lesson, making use of the board, and then have the students work on exercises/assignments. According to the students, however, it is not like the regular high schools in Portage la Prairie.

We interviewed 15 adult Aboriginal learners at the Long Plain Training Centre, 8 women and 7 men, ranging in age from 18 to 45 years, with a median age of 22 years. Ten of the 15 learners have children, 5 do not. Six are single mothers, two live with a partner and children, one lives with a parent and children, one lives apart from his children. For 8 of the adult learners, the highest grade previously attained was grade 9. Two had completed grade 10; the rest had not completed grade 9. Many referred to the desire for a better life for their children as their motivation for returning to school at LPTC, and it was evident from interviews that if the LPTC did not exist, many would be at home with their children on social assistance.

A prominent theme that arose from the interviews is how positively learners feel about the LPTC teachers, and how comfortable they feel in the learning centre. They feel as if they get all the help that they need, and that they are encouraged and made to feel good about themselves (see sidebar). The teachers are extremely dedicated. Matthew Wiebe is highly regarded by students. Yvette Daniels comes from and lives in the community, knows all the learners and

“...teaching is actually pretty darned great...teachers really go out of their way to help you” (M; 25).

“They accept us...and they always encourage us...we can talk to them... they make me feel good about myself” (F; 43).

“It’s all good, I like it here. I feel comfortable asking the teachers for help” (F; 21).

You don’t feel left out...there’s always help for you here” (M; 19).

their families, does a great deal of the counseling, and is also very highly regarded by students.

Learners also made it clear that there is a comfort level at the LPTC that is the result of its being an almost exclusively Aboriginal place. For example, a 27 year old woman said: “I feel more comfortable here, like around Aboriginal people, than I would in a mixed group”, and a 31 year old woman said: “I can talk to everybody...because they’re the same culture”. Strong parental/family support was also mentioned by many students—encouragement, and also tangible support in the form of childcare and transport. Said one woman: “...they’re really supportive...my Dad would drive an hour to drive me to school”. It is clear to us that the LPTC is a community effort.

The positive attitude to the Long Plain Training Centre expressed by learners stands in stark contrast to the previous school experience of at least several of those we interviewed, for whom questions about previous education evoked a good deal of pain. In some cases the racism they experienced in school appears to have had deep and lasting negative effects. The oldest of the students we interviewed, who

comes from a community other than Long Plain, told us in a soft voice that: "I just couldn't learn because you were getting hit all the time by nuns". A 43 year old woman told us that: "I just felt that I was so lost there, so I just quit". An 18 year old cried when she said: "I guess I just feel bad because the last time at school, like, there was racism there...there wasn't lots but there was some". She added: "I like being here [at LPTC], it's comforting...I can just sit in class and be who I am and not be worried about other people looking at me— that's how I felt in high school". Liz Merrick informed us that relatively few Aboriginal students graduate from Arthur Meighan High School in Portage la Prairie. In 2001-02 there was one Aboriginal graduate at Arthur Meighan, and she says that is about the norm, although in some years there have been a few more. By way of comparison, in 2001-02 the Long Plain Training Centre graduated 25 of their adult learners with the mature grade 12 diploma (Merrick, Feb. 18, 2003).

The Director and teachers at LPTC feel very positively about the program that they offer. Yvette Daniels says "I'm really proud of the program", and she points to the fact that the program is quite flexible in order to be able to respond in a holistic fashion to the needs of learners outside the classroom. Yvette believes that it helps that she lives in and knows the community and the adult learners and their families very well. Knowing the culture of the community—"I know the way our people think...", she says—and the home circumstances of her students enables her to respond to their needs in the classroom in a more appropriate and more holistic fashion. What is more, there is a sense of community that exists at the Long Plain Training Centre, that arises from its being rooted in the community. "Everybody knows each other...people help each other out", she says.

They "feel more comfortable" at LPTC than in the high schools in Portage la Prairie, where "they felt out of place...they felt they didn't belong" (Daniels, Feb.18, 2003).

There are some problems. One of these is that many of the students at LPTC are relatively young for adult learners, in their late teens or very early 20s. There is a clear distinction between these younger learners— many of whom give the impression in interviews of having given little if any thought to what they are doing—and the older learners, most of whom have much greater insight into what they are doing and why, and a much greater commitment to learning. This is a pattern, it is important to note, that we observed not only at LPTC but at most of the Adult Learning Centres. It is a pattern that is known to the Director and teachers at LPTC as well. For example, last year's class was, on average, quite a bit older than this year's class, and the staff at LPTC say that the difference in the level of commitment is tangible. It expresses itself in various ways, perhaps most notably attendance problems, which are described by Matthew Wiebe as "the biggest challenge being here", and relatively low levels of motivation (Wiebe, Feb. 18, 2003). These attendance and motivation problems are particularly noticeable among the younger students. As one of the authors said during a review and evaluation session, when speaking specifically about the LPTC: " The older, the more dedicated, the more committed, and the more that they had a plan for after they were done their education, you know, they knew what they were going to do afterwards, this was a stepping stone" (Klyne, March 3, 2003).

It is not clear to us what might be done about this issue. The demographics of Aboriginal people in Manitoba, whose population is growing faster than and is younger than the non-

Aboriginal population, together with the fact that Aboriginal students continue to be more likely than non-Aboriginal students to leave high school prior to completing grade 12, mean that there now are and there will continue to be significant numbers of Aboriginal people in their late teens and early twenties who are not in school (See Silver and Mallett, 2002, p. 7; CCPA-Mb., April, 2003, p.5), and for whom the Adult Learning Centres might seem the obvious choice. At the same time, however, it is very clear to us from our interviews and from our review of the literature (see, for example, National Centre for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, 2001, p. 11; George, 1997) that the motivation of the individual adult learner is one of the most important variables in predicting success. As one of the authors, herself a recent graduate of an Adult Learning Centre, put it:

“The people that succeed are the people who are there for a very specific reason, you know, they’re doing it because of their children, they’re doing it because of lost opportunities before and they feel like it’s their last chance, they’re doing it because they know that they can have a better life, so there’s a motive behind it, those are the people that I think are going to be really successful” (Klyne, March 3, 2003).

Some Opportunities for Improvement

The program offered at the Long Plain Training Centre is very strong. The staff are outstanding, and extremely dedicated, and this is evident in the overwhelmingly positive comments about them by learners at the Centre. Many of these learners made it clear to us in

interviews that in the absence of the LPTC, they would not be in school at all but would be at home on social assistance. Thus the LPTC is meeting a very important need. We think that there are some improvements that could be made that would make a strong program even stronger. We concur with Matthew Wiebe’s observation: “This place here has tremendous potential” (Wiebe, Feb. 18, 2003).

One recommendation that arises from our interviews has to do with Aboriginal culture. Liz Merrick has introduced some Aboriginal culture at LPTC. She starts each school year by smudging and blessing the building, and holding a feast, and she has hung an eagle feather over each door (Merrick, Feb. 18, 2003). And this year Yvette Daniels is teaching a Native Studies course, to which the students have responded positively. Nevertheless, there is not enough Aboriginal culture to satisfy the needs of many of the students. A minority of the students do not care about Aboriginal cultural teachings. For example, one student said that Aboriginal culture is “...not really important to me, I’m not really interested...right now” (M; 21). But many feel differently. Many feel that they don’t know enough about their culture and they want to know more. “I don’t really know our culture...I wasn’t raised that way”, said a 21 year old woman, while a 27 year old woman said “There’s a lot of people here that don’t really know” their culture; “I don’t know a lot, I don’t really know anything”. Another student spoke at more length about this matter:

“...the thing is we don’t really learn about our culture here, like, that sharing circle [when the research team introduced themselves and the research project to the students] was the first time we ever had one, and to me it was so new, be-

cause I wasn't raised in or around the Aboriginal culture so to me to know the Aboriginal culture is very important and we see all these nice little things hanging around and you just love to look at them but you don't know anything about them....I thought maybe it would have been incorporated into this school...there might be little hints of it, but...."

She added: "My daughter, she's 22, she *dies* [her emphasis] to know about her culture, but, where do you go...and then she asks me things...." This woman told us that her father had been in residential school where he was sexually abused. "He begged not to go back"; when he was 17 years old he ran away for good. As a result of her father's experience, she told us, her life has not been that good: "...a lot of terrible things happened in my life so I've carried that around for a long time...". And as a result of her father's experience, she lost her culture, and thus her sense of identity. When she was asked what difference she thought it would make to the younger learners if Aboriginal culture were more infused in the educational experience at LPTC, she said, simply but powerfully, "...they'd feel good about themselves". We think that there is a craving amongst many Aboriginal people, adult learners included, to learn about their culture. We will make recommendations along these lines in Part Five.

A second recommendation arises from the experience of those who graduate from the Long Plain Training Centre with their mature grade 12 diploma. Many are either not attempting, or are not succeeding at, post-secondary education, and few are finding good jobs. Yet there are jobs in the community. Yvette examined the labour needs of Long Plain First Nation, and found

that there is a need for, among others, tradespersons (electronics, carpentry, plumbing), teachers and nurses, home care providers, counsellors, and cashiers. This suggests to us the need for a post-grade 12, job-specific training program that would prepare people for jobs in the community. The first step in this process is to identify emergent labour needs in the community, now and over the next decade and more. It may be, for example, that there will be a need for workers in the human services— health care, child care, family support workers, seniors support workers. This is likely, given demographic trends. Once needs are identified, a job-specific training program or programs can be designed, working closely with potential employers. The prospect of full-time jobs that pay above the minimum wage would be likely to serve as the motivator that is needed for some of the younger adults. The benefits to the community of moving people from social assistance to financial independence are considerable, and include greater family stability, a greater likelihood of children succeeding in school, and greater community involvement. We will elaborate upon this recommendation in Part Five.

A third area where improvements could be made is in the provision of child care. The availability of adequate and affordable childcare is a problem now for many adult learners at LPTC (Daniels, Feb. 18, 2003). A high proportion of adult learners have children; many are single parents. The demographics of Aboriginal people in Manitoba make it clear that this is likely to continue to be the case in the foreseeable future. When adequate and affordable childcare is *not* available, one of two results is likely: adults who might otherwise do so will be prevented from attending an ALC, or; childcare difficulties will play havoc with their attendance, and thus their likelihood of success. Any considera-

tion of Aboriginal people and adult education must take the question of child care into account.

We were very impressed with the program being offered at Long Plain Training Centre. The staff are extremely dedicated, and the adult learners feel very positively about the experience. We note, however, that it is a bare-bones operation. There are two teachers. Liz Merrick works only part-time in the role of Director, doing necessary work evenings and weekends in the very dedicated fashion that seems to us to typify the staff at Adult Learning Centres. There are no Teaching Assistants. There is no counsellor—Yvette Daniels does the bulk of the counselling, and does it well, but adds this responsibility to her teaching responsibilities. And yet even with such a skeletal operation, significant numbers of adult learners are graduating with their mature grade 12 diploma. We think that the most significant thing about the Long Plain Training Centre is that it reveals the *possibilities* offered by adult learning centres in Aboriginal communities. Several elements would need to be added to the model now being used at LPTC to enable it to reach its full potential— perhaps most significantly the addition of a job-training program— and we will make recommendations in this regard in Part Five. But it is clear to us that, notwithstanding the difficulties that we cited above, there is a need, given demographic and socio-economic trends, for adult learning centres in Aboriginal communities, and the Long Plain Training Centre provides the outline of how that need might begin to be met.

3. CrossRoads Learning Centre

The CrossRoads Learning Centre is located in a strip mall at the west end of Burrows Avenue, across the street from the Gilbert Park housing project— referred to by many north end and inner city residents as ‘Jigtown’— in Winnipeg’s north end. CrossRoads Learning Centre (CLC) has a large classroom at the back of its rented unit in the strip mall, along the side of which is the narrow hallway where the coffee machine and fridge are located. Behind the coffee machine in the narrow hallway, old computers and tables are stored. At the front of the unit is a second large room with computers around the walls where computer classes are held, and where there is a long study table, beside which the small staff office is located. At any given time a class may be going on in either of the two rooms, students will be working independently at computers, and other students are likely to be working on assignments at the table in the front room. The outside door enters directly into the front room, so that students are constantly coming and going through the classroom.

Darlene Wheeler is the full-time Director/teacher— she teaches three-quarter time, which is six courses, and does the work of Director over and above her teaching responsibilities— and Phyllis Crow is a full-time teacher, doing eight courses. Darlene and Phyllis are experienced adult educators. Three other teachers have responsibility for one course each, offered in the evenings. Kim Cooke works three-quarter time, splitting her day between Administrative Assistant and Teaching Assistant. There are 90-100 students registered at any given time at the CLC, most but not all of whom are working toward their mature grade 12 diploma, many of whom

“...teachers are excellent here, they’re very respectful...they treat all of us equally...they let me know of the potential they see in me and the ability that I have...they definitely make me feel that I can do it...” (M; 24).

“When you first come to this learning centre one of the things they are is very friendly, so right away it puts you at ease...they make you feel comfortable” and “...the instructors...actually take the time to sit down with you and explain...so you actually understand it, and that’s one of the things I really like” (M; 35).

The teachers “... treat you right, treat people the way you ought to be treated...” (M; 22).

“I really like going here because they’re very flexible...they give you lots of time and lots of help whenever you need it...they really want you to make something of yourself when you leave here...it’s nice and it’s small, I wouldn’t want to go anywhere else” (F; 21).

“...the teachers, they’re wonderful, like, they’re understanding....I just don’t feel ashamed here” (F; 19).

“ They’re the kind of teachers that’ll come up and talk to you right away, or, if they think you’re having troubles with something they’ll come and tell you right away and they’ll try to help you through it and they’ll stay that extra hour after school or before school to help you...they’re really nice people...more like friends than a teacher” (M; 21).

live in Gilbert Park. CrossRoads uses a trimester system, with three intakes of adult learners per year.

The CrossRoads Learning Centre started in August, 2000, and so now is in its third year, as is the case with the Long Plain Training Centre. Darlene and Phyllis came from another adult education program with which they were not at all satisfied. Darlene decided to set up her own non-profit Adult Learning Centre to teach adults in the way that she believed, based on her years of experience, would meet the needs of adult learners. Phyllis joined her in the second year. In the Fall of 2000 CrossRoads started with an independent study model, but abandoned it after about two months and shifted to a more structured classroom setting, as was done at Long Plain Training Centre. The independent, work-at-your-own-pace model does not work for adult learners who have been out of school for some time, Darlene argues. In her view: “You’re setting people up for failure”. Now courses are structured around classes held at pre-determined times.

As is the case at each of the ALCs that we have investigated, it is obvious that the key people at CLC, Darlene and Phyllis, are extremely hard-working and dedicated to adult education in general and to their learners in particular. This is reflected in the comments of learners, who are unstinting in their praise of the CrossRoads Learning Centre and its teachers (see sidebar). Learners say that the teachers treat them respectfully, are warm and friendly, and are always available to offer individual help. This is possible not only because of the personal attributes of the teachers, but also because they have deliberately created a structure that is small, non-hierarchical, and highly personalized. Laughter and humour, both say, are key parts of their pedagogical strategy— “there is a lot of humour in our

teaching styles...”, says Phyllis— and that is obvious when one visits the CLC. Judging from the comments of students, and from the number of mature grade 12 graduates— 19 in 2001-2002, of whom 9 were Aboriginal— it works very well.

Such comments stand in stark contrast to the previous educational experiences of many of these adult learners. “My high school experience wasn’t all that good...lot of conflict going around, or racism, whatever...”, said a 22 year old man. An 18 year old woman said she did not like high school “...because of the way the teachers treated me...because of my race, my culture”. At CrossRoads, as at the other Adult Learning Centres, many students made mention of racism when they previously went to school. In some cases they spoke with bitterness about it, and it was evident from the way that they spoke that it had caused them a great deal of pain. Others, however— and this seems particularly to be the case for the men— mention the existence of racism in their previous school experiences in an almost casual way, as if to say ‘well, there’s lots of racism but we all know about that so there’s no need to say much more’. They said this in conversation with interviewers who are themselves Aboriginal. It is as if the presence of racism in schools and in their lives generally is so pervasive that when talking with other Aboriginal people it is simply taken for granted. For example, a 35 year old learner describing his previous high school experience told us in his interview that: “some of the things I didn’t like was...racism, which everybody knows about, but other than that there was not too much that I didn’t mind”. At CrossRoads, however, everyone is treated respectfully and equally, and this was the message that we got from adult learners at each of the Adult Learning Centres that we investigated.

Of particular note at CrossRoads are three young Aboriginal men in their early-mid 20s who were among the adult learners that we interviewed. They each have had very difficult lives, including having been in considerable trouble with the law, but all are now in the process of turning their lives around, and CrossRoads Learning Centre is a central part of the personal transformation that they are undertaking. One 24 year old told us that CrossRoads was there for him “...at a time in my life when I decided to get back into school...”, because he had decided to turn his life around. Regular high school is not an option in such cases. One 34 year woman who in fact tried to return to an inner city high school before going to CrossRoads said: “I’m not a teenager any more and mostly all the kids are teenagers...they can be kind of rough and always trying to bully each other and I found that annoying...”. A 35 year old man told us that it “...would be kind of hard right now to go sit in a high school and try to get your credits again after so many years...younger students, you kind of feel out of place...to actually go back and sit in a high school again would be kind of hard”. Adult Learning Centres work in such cases. A 26 year old man told us of his rough earlier life, and then added: “There’s nothing that could stop me now...” A 22 year old who had some particularly difficult times said about his high school experience that it was: “...not too positive, I really don’t like talking about that”. The pain in his voice was tangible. He told us that he was “...caught up in a lot of stuff in my past, eh, kind of changed my life around for my family...my two kids, my wife...school’s really helped me out, helped me out lots, changing my outlook on life and how I used to be...it’s helped me out with my family and stuff...feels good from the life style the way I used to live and where I used to be and it’s a big change”.

“It’s my kids, mostly, my kids, my wife, really good support...my family too, my mother, my father support me lots too” (M; 22).

“I just want my kids to be proud of me, that’s all” (M; 26).

“...I need to better myself for my children, they need a better life than they have now” (F; 21).

“It really hurts me when I look at my kids...they need something better. I’m not going to make their lives miserable because I had a shitty life” (F; 21).

The young man then expressed his determination and his regrets: “It’s all on yourself, if you want to learn, or if you don’t want to learn, sometimes people, it’s not their time to go to school, they just don’t want to go to school, like me when I was younger, I didn’t want to go to school, now I want to go to school, I’m kicking myself in the ass, I should have went to school when I was younger...”.

These are remarkable personal transformations, about which several things are notable. First, these young men are motivated to improve their education. They have a sense of purpose. It is not fully clear to us what prompted their decision to turn their lives around, but two things were advanced by the men themselves. One is the desire to make a different and better life for their families. Many learners at CrossRoads, including these particular men, told us this (see sidebar).

The other, in the case of at least one of them, is the role of an elder who entered his life while he was incarcerated, and who introduced him to his culture through sharing circles and sweats. “He’s the one who got me out of where I was in,

helped me out to straighten out my life and look out for my kids....so I guess my elder was the biggest thing helping me out” (M; 22). We will say more about this later. The point that we think needs to be emphasized here is that at the point that these young men decided to make a break with their past and to turn their lives around, CrossRoads was there for them. Without CrossRoads, or some other Adult Learning Centre, they would be very much less likely to complete their grade 12 and therefore might not make the personal transformation that they appear now to be in the process of making. Adult learners have to be motivated; for those who are, the Adult Learning Centre is an essential part of the process of transformation.

Some Opportunities for Improvement

There are several opportunities for improvements at CrossRoads Learning Centre. The first is that, as strong as the program is, it is a bare-bones operation. It is, quite simply, understaffed. It is the remarkable operation that it is—it is appreciated so whole-heartedly by its students—solely because of the skills and dedication of its two full-time and one three-quarter time staff. But the pace that is required of them may well not be sustainable in the long run. As Darlene Wheeler—referred to by one of the adult learners as “...the ultimate teacher”—observes: “Adult Learning Centres will lose dynamic, effective people who just cannot maintain the pace...”. The challenge and excitement of building their own organization from the ground up has been a big part of the motivation to date, but it is our view that the Adult Learning Centres are important enough to this province’s future that we need to be thinking about how to sustain them over the long term, and build on their successes. In the case of CrossRoads, there

is no counsellor. Each teacher plays the role of counsellor, as is the case at Long Plain Training Centre, but people, however dedicated, can be expected to do only so much. The holistic approach is, in our view, an essential characteristic of Adult Learning Centres. Adult students have personal challenges, and these affect their ability to learn, and thus dealing with personal issues becomes a *central* part of the educational process at ALCs. The personal counselling function has to be fulfilled at each ALC. This may be done in the form of a staff person dedicated to personal counselling and related functions, as at the Portage Learning Centre, or it may be done by some other mechanism, but however each ALC chooses to perform that personal counselling function, it is essential that there be sufficient staff at each ALC to make it possible. In adult education, it is a central part of the learning process, and at the moment CrossRoads does not have sufficient staff to perform this function over the long haul. As Darlene Wheeler put it, in describing some of the particular difficulties experienced by her students, including some cases where students were lost: "We don't have the supports to deal with it". Phyllis Crow, herself an Aboriginal woman, believes that what is needed at CrossRoads is "a person who would understand our Aboriginal students". She herself, in addition to teaching 8 courses, does a good deal of informal counselling of students. She says: "On Friday you're just drained...to hear the same things over and over....it just weighs on you...how do people really survive, you know? It's amazing how they can live day to day and come to school at the same time". It is similarly amazing how teachers and others at the ALCs that we investigated maintain their pace.

Second, CrossRoads needs better space. Darlene spoke about the need for "facilities that are conducive to learning" and Phyllis, inter-

viewed separately, said that the computer classroom in particular, into which the front door opens directly, is "...not really conducive to learning". Both mentioned improved space as a priority. At none of the ALCs that we examined are the surroundings palatial, nor do we consider elaborate surroundings to be an essential component of Adult Learning Centres. However, physical surroundings should be comfortable, warm and intimate, and should include the availability of quiet space for individual study, classrooms in which classes are not interrupted by students passing through from one place to another, and a common space where students and staff can gather in a relaxed atmosphere for a cup of coffee and some socializing or group study. These minimal standards are not now being met at CrossRoads.

Third, the situation at CrossRoads raises again the question of the ages of adult learners, and how their age relates to the question of motivation. As argued above, adult learners succeed if they are motivated to do so, and motivation appears to be correlated, at least to some extent, with age. The two interviewers identified that as an issue at CrossRoads. The staff are aware of this, and point to the connection between age and attendance. Attendance is a problem at CrossRoads, as elsewhere, and appears to be correlated with age: the younger the learner, the more likely that attendance is a problem. This is likely a function of motivation. Darlene Wheeler observes that the younger CrossRoads learners, those in their late teens-very early twenties, are less likely to have a sense of direction, and more likely to exhibit "I don't care attitudes". It is possible, she suggests, that some of the younger adult learners, those in their late teens, are coming because "word has finally gotten out" that at an Adult Learning Centre 8 credits are needed for the mature grade 12 diploma, as

opposed to the 28 credits needed to graduate from high school, and for some young adults, “they see it as a quick fix”. If this were in fact the case, it is the view of the authors that it would be an undesirable situation. The Adult Learning Centres are doing a wonderful job for adults who are motivated to improve their educational standing. Even when motivated, achieving the mature grade 12 diploma is a tough haul for many, given their past educational experiences and their often difficult personal circumstances, but ALCs are succeeding with such difficult cases. Younger students with “attitude” and in search of a quick fix may well change the atmosphere in ALCs in a way that is detrimental to the entire project. We do not know what the answer to this issue may be. Darlene Wheeler, while acknowledging the problem, expresses the view that the ALCs are simply going to have to learn how to meet the needs of young adults, and she is committed to doing so. Kim Cooke, the teaching assistant at CrossRoads, works very closely with many of the learners there, and she also identified age as an issue. Many of the younger ones, she says, are “not quite ready...” to do the work needed to earn the mature grade 12 diploma, but she expresses the view that nevertheless, they are picking up valuable things by attending. “You can see them get stronger and stronger”. We are reminded of the philosophy that is overtly expressed at the Portage Learning Centre, which is that adult learners may come to the PLC a first time, and then leave, and then come again, and perhaps leave a second time, and then come yet again a third time, and each time a learner leaves every effort is made to ensure that they leave on good terms so that the door is open for another attempt. Adult education is a *process*, and for people with difficult personal lives and relatively weak academic foundations, it may well take several attempts to

achieve the mature grade 12 diploma, but each attempt is an important step in the process. This may be the case for the younger adult learners at ALCs. But, alternatively, it may be the case that younger adult learners may choose for any of a number of reasons to leave high school to attend an ALC. This is not the purpose for which ALCs are intended. The issue of young adults—those in their teens or very early twenties—in Adult Learning Centres is one which, in our opinion, requires further consideration.

Chances for success at CrossRoads would be improved if more emphasis were placed on an orientation session at each of the three intake periods. At the start of the 2001-2002 academic year, CrossRoads held a one-week orientation session with a focus on instilling study skills, time management, and organization skills. “It worked very well”, according to Darlene Wheeler, and Phyllis Crow said the same, but it was not done during the 2002-2003 academic year, in large part due to the demands on their time. Both are committed to reinstating the orientation sessions. It is apparent, Phyllis Crow points out, that many of their learners “...haven’t developed the necessary skills” to thrive in a school setting, and have “...no comprehension of what it means to study”. Some of these skills and attitudes need to be consciously taught at the beginning of the term. We consider this to be a crucial component of what Adult Learning Centres do. Adult learners who have been out of school for some time and who may never have had a satisfying school experience need to acquire some skills that can be used to help them to learn. We will make a more specific recommendation in this regard in Part Five.

A related issue is the extent to which students do or do not feel a sense of community with fellow students. There is some evidence that at least some students at CrossRoads feel iso-

lated from each other. For example, one 19 year old woman said: "That's where my trouble is, because I get too shy to talk to people...it will take a long time for me to get used to them", and she added, "I get shy to work in groups..." This is a problem because of the strength that students working together can give to each other, and the impact that a sense of collectivity would have, for example, on attendance, and part of this can be engendered with an orientation session at the beginning of each term. Another approach to creating a sense of collectivity that we think is useful is the use of sharing circles on a regular basis. The young man referred to earlier who began to learn about his culture from an elder while incarcerated said: "A lot of people they don't speak up" but "...with the sharing circle, people open up and you do speak, you'll be able to release those frustrations and whatever it is that's bothering you...As for myself I'd be speaking about what's bothering me and getting that out of the way"

Sharing circles would have the added benefit of contributing to the building of cultural awareness. This is a problem for many of the Aboriginal students at CrossRoads. Phyllis Crow argues that many urban Aboriginal youth "...have no idea of their roots...they don't know who they are". She adds: "It really saddens me, you are not Aboriginal anymore...." Darlene Wheeler says the same: "They really don't know who they are..."; it's a "cultural identity crisis". Phyllis Crow offers a Native Studies course, but says that it is "...really quite difficult because when you try to talk about ceremonies...they have no clue". And it is worse than that. There is fear. When an elder was brought in last year, "...they were really afraid", says Darlene Wheeler. Sporadic attempts to hold sharing circles have been met with suspicion by some of the Aboriginal students. This is a product, at least in

part, of the long struggle between Christianity and traditional Aboriginal spiritual beliefs. A conscious attempt was made by Canada and by the Christian churches to eliminate Aboriginal spirituality. One of the young men referred to above who is in the process of turning his life around expressed a strong desire to know more about his culture— "I think it's really important, you gotta know...what Native people went through..."— but his wife considers it "...to be witchcraft". This is part of the "cultural identity crisis" that causes so much suffering for so many Aboriginal people. It means that the staff at CrossRoads must proceed with caution in introducing Aboriginal cultural content, because they quite rightly believe that it is important to be respectful of people's beliefs.

It is our contention, however, that the principle of respect for people's beliefs is precisely the rationale for introducing the regular holding of sharing circles. Many, although admittedly not all, of the Aboriginal students at CrossRoads are curious about their culture and in some cases are hungry to learn about who they are. Some would come to regular sharing circles. For these students, a greater sense of collectivity and personal identity would begin to emerge. Some would attend sweats, and engage in smudging. Some would not, and this of course is their choice. But for those who did, we believe that the benefits would be great, and would warrant the considerable difficulties that would undoubtedly arise from the attempts by staff to navigate these cultural contradictions. Aboriginal students have a right to learn about their culture, and about the attempts to eliminate their culture, and to come to terms with who they are and how they came as a people to be where they are today. And when they do, the benefits are considerable. Those benefits include

Crossways

"I like the atmosphere...it's really comfortable, I don't feel pressured...that I have to be working with everybody at the same pace. I like that we can work at our own pace....I feel comfortable with the teachers if I have questions, I don't feel stupid, and they accept that everybody's different. They don't show favouritism to anyone. Everyone's equal to them..."(F; 23).

"...it seems like they always have time, even when they seem super busy and they're running around like chickens with their heads cut off they seem like they always have time, they never push you aside, even if it's something really little" (F; 21).

"...and they welcome you, the staff welcomes you back if you leave, like, with no explanation, they still don't, like, judge you if you left, and if you come back..."(F; 20).

"...feels safe here, I feel comfortable...nobody judging anybody, there's no racism at all" (M; 34).

"...the teachers are caring enough to help me through my struggles, I've lost some people in my life, they've been there for me, they've stood by me, they never gave up on me, they never gave up on me, you know, and that's the great thing about this. I find Horizons to be a very open-hearted and strong organization with a good group of people that would be there for you no matter what...they care, that's a big part of it, they really care..." (F; 46).

Elmwood

"...when I came here the teachers were very nice and really wanting to help....It's been

a stronger personal and collective foundation upon which to build academic success.

4. Horizons Learning Centre

The Horizons Learning Centre has three sites, all in Winnipeg: the Crossways-in-Common site on Broadway, the Elmwood site on Thames Avenue, and the Portage Place site on the third floor of Portage Place in downtown Winnipeg. We examined the operations at, and interviewed Aboriginal learners and staff at, the Crossways and Elmwood sites.

The Crossways site is located in the basement of Crossways-in-Common, which is the former Young United Church now turned into a large, multi-purpose community centre that houses a chapel, a soup kitchen and drop-in centre, community organizations' offices, housing facilities and meeting spaces. Horizons is located in the basement of the building. At the foot of the stairs leading to Horizons' basement space is a small kitchen with cooking facilities, fridge and a small table. This is the central gathering place for learners at Horizons' Crossways site. From the kitchen one follows a hallway which forms a quadrangle around a large basement gym, to which Horizons has access on a charge-per-hours-used basis. The gym is currently being used for afternoon science classes, since enrollment is too large for the two regular classrooms. On the outer edges of the quadrangular hallway are two computer-ringed classrooms, each of which accommodates 20-25 students, and two much smaller rooms, one of which is a photocopy room and the other of which contains a study table at which students write admissions and other tests. In addition there is a slightly larger office which serves as the administrative centre of Horizons' three sites, and in

which Horizons' Director and Administrative Assistant are located.

The Crossways site is staffed by two full-time teachers, Elspeth Campbell and Ken Funk, plus three part-time teachers, including Beatrice Barahona who is the overall Horizons Director and who teaches two courses at Crossways. Classes are offered in the evenings and on Saturdays, as well as weekdays. There are approximately 60 students at the Crossways site, 15 or 20 of whom are Aboriginal. In the 2001-2002 academic year Horizons graduated 28 learners with their mature grade 12 diploma, 8 of them from the Crossways site, and at least 3 of those 8 were Aboriginal students. Structured classes are offered at scheduled times, although as is the case at PLC, LPTC and CrossRoads, there is a good deal of flexibility. This is so both in terms of students coming and going, and in terms of the fact that in any given class, students are working at different levels. For example, English classes are held at a scheduled time, and in each English class there are students working on Grades 10, 11 and 12 English. Relatively little instruction is done for the class as a whole, although there may be an occasional lesson done on the board; most instruction is of the more individualized, one-on-one variety, or is done in small groups. The result is structure, but with a good deal of flexibility.

Horizons' Elmwood site is located in a non-descript industrial strip mall off Watt Street, next door to a low-income housing development. There are two relatively small classrooms, side by side, with a third very narrow computer room beside them. The two general purpose classrooms are fitted out with wooden fold-up tables and chairs squeezed very tightly together. A front hallway the width of the space runs perpendicular to the classrooms, and is entered off the strip mall's parking lot. At the back of the

good, challenging, but good...and fun...better than any of the other ones I've been at....

I really like the teachers and what they teach and the environment is more at my level and that's what I like too....they don't make themselves seem like they're at a higher level than us in any way...and that's really what I like, because I don't like it if somebody acts like they're better than me or make more money and they show it, or whatever, I don't like that and that's what they don't do and that's good" (F; 25).

"I can see the changes already in my life and I like the setting, like, where it's informal...you can relax and you can share your problems, like, you have a lot of the same problems as other students, where it's not like 'there's the rich and there's the poor', like we're all in the same boat here it feels and that's really helpful, it makes me feel like I'm not so alone, like, in my struggles... I found strength, like, I took Family Studies and I found that I have inner strength that I count on now when things get bad and I found that there's a lot of strength there that I never knew I had and it really helps in tough situations..." (F; 42).

"I took a drama class. It was really, really fun...and it just makes me think of what more I could do" (F; 25).

space is a good-sized kitchen with a fridge and microwave oven. The space is plain and utilitarian, and small— too small. The Elmwood site currently has 90-100 students registered. During the 2001-2002 academic year, 20 students graduated from the Elmwood site with their mature grade 12 diploma.

We interviewed 7 learners at the Crossways site, and 8 at the Elmwood site. Their profile was relatively similar. Of the 15 interviewed, 11 are women and 4 are men; the median age is 30 years, which is older than those interviewed at Portage, Long Plain and CrossRoads Learning Centres; 11 of the 15 have children, and of those 11, 8 have more than one child; 9 of the 15 are single mothers; and for 10 of the 15, the highest grade previously completed was grade 8 or 9.

Those adult Aboriginal learners that we interviewed at the two sites are extremely positive in their overall evaluation of the programs and the instructors. Learners feel comfortable, they find the instructors to be friendly and very helpful, and they emphasize, as is the case at all of the ALCs, that they are treated as equals and with respect, and without the racism which is such a constant in their lives outside the learning centres. Selected learner comments about their respective sites are shown in the two accompanying sidebars, the first for learners at Crossways and the second for those at Elmwood.

The comments made by adult Aboriginal learners at the Crossways and Elmwood sites of Horizons reflect the philosophical approach of the Horizons instructors. Horizons, like CrossRoads and Long Plain Training Centre, was established three years ago when six teachers left another adult education centre with which they were not satisfied, in order to set up their own operation. Five of the 6 are graduates of the Winnipeg Education Centre's Education pro-

gram, and so were adult learners themselves. "We earned our degrees after being an adult", observes Beatrice Barahona. Elspeth Campbell attended the Winnipeg Education Centre (WEC) as a single mother, and says: "Most definitely that I went to school as an adult makes a difference, and most definitely that I went to school as a single parent makes a difference....I know the trials and tribulations of being a single mom and having to get to class on time". She argues that the mainstream public school system works well for most young people, but if you have been "bashed and battered" by life it doesn't work well. Many of her adult learners have been bashed and battered— "often times all they've heard in their lives is they're stupid..."— and so it often takes a while to get them "out of their shell", but once they develop some trust, they "take off". Ken Funk graduated from WEC in 1996 wanting to teach the toughest junior high classes, and after a stint teaching in Korea ended up in adult education, and he loves it because it means "helping people who are making life changes", and "there's a daily reward". Linda Parker and Rachel Mitchell at the Elmwood site are also WEC graduates, and their passion for their work is unmistakable. There is a "certain sort of passion in adult education", says Rachel, adding that "nobody's here at 9 and gone at 4, that doesn't happen". Linda, who estimates that she put in 40 to 50 unpaid hours the month before we visited Horizons and who says what is obvious— "I care deeply about what I do"— reiterates the importance of their WEC roots: "A lot of our best practice came from an understanding of what it is to be adult learners". Echoing Elspeth, she observes that for some of their students, attendance at Horizons may well be the first time someone in a position of authority has reached out a hand to them and said they care; adult learners will say to her, "...that's the first time

anyone's said that to me". At both the Crossways and the Elmwood sites, the organizational structure is flat, non-hierarchical, intimate and personalized. The instructors are able to identify with their students, and vice versa. Their approach is holistic, in that they see the adult learners as whole people, with needs beyond the classroom, and they are constantly prepared to respond holistically and wholeheartedly to learners' needs.

What is remarkable is that the instructors at Horizons are typical of the people we interviewed at every one of the five Adult Learning Centres involved in this study. Much of the very considerable success of ALCs is attributable to the energy and passion and commitment of their staff, and to their determination to run organizations characterized by a non-hierarchical structure and a commitment to equality and human dignity, and a belief in the human potential that lies within each of us.

Many of the adult Aboriginal learners at ALCs face very considerable difficulties, and have been "bashed and battered" by life. Many of the adult Aboriginal learners that we interviewed referred to their shyness as a very great obstacle to their success. One adult learner at Horizons described his difficulties as being attributable to shyness. "Like me, like I'm really shy, I can't speak in front of other people, I just get all shaky..." He believes that he may have a speech impediment: "...the way I pronounce the words they don't come out right...and that's probably why, too, I'm shy, like, talking, afraid to make a mistake, a word coming out wrong...". However, later in the interview it came out that the deeper problem is the low level of self-esteem that he has always felt, and that has been accentuated by instances of racism:

"When I was going to school in Thompson, eh, there was a lot of racism, well, I didn't know anybody, like I'd be alone, the first day, there was nobody else coming from my community, so I didn't have nobody...these guys, where the lockers were...they were just calling me down and I didn't know what to say, I just stood there...I didn't want to say nothing because I didn't want to fight or anything so I just, like, kind of, like, put away my books and I just left and didn't look back or anything, or respond to them. Sometimes I think about that all the time too, why couldn't I have said something, just stood up for myself and, but I didn't want to get into trouble".

He has borne this and other pain all his life. "As a youth I went through a lot of abuse, alcohol, family violence and, like, I'm really shy and a keep-to-myself person". He still faces racism now that he is in Winnipeg, and he says: "I don't know how to deal with that, I just avoid it and run away from it...sometimes I would like to speak out and say something but, uh, I'm afraid what the result would be, get into a fight or something". Yet about Horizons Learning Centre he says: it "...feels safe here, I feel comfortable...nobody judging anybody, there's no racism at all... everybody seems to be friendly and the teachers are great, they help a lot".

Others at Horizons and at the other ALCs have described similar, pain-filled lives. They are, in part, the product of colonialism, and the internalization of colonialism, and the erosion of self-esteem and severe identity confusion that are among its consequences. Aboriginal students come to an Adult Learning Centre feeling "a little bit apprehensive" about educational insti-

“...more cultural awareness...youth today they don't have an idea of their Native background, like me, I've grown up not knowing about pow wows or traditional stuff like that, all my life growing up I haven't seen a pow wow...”[until coming to Winnipeg] (M; 34).

“I want to know the history of our people...like, all I see is movies...” (F; 25).

“...grade 5 or 6 I was going to Hugh John MacDonald and I had Native Studies there...it was probably the best course that I've ever taken...we went to pow wows...it was exciting to learn your history....I want my children to know...that they have a proud feeling inside” (M; 30).

“...Native Studies, I wouldn't mind learning about that so I can teach my kids at home...” (F; 38).

tutions, and it takes a while to earn their trust: they “don't trust teachers, don't trust school” (Funk, March 6, 2003). That trust has to be earned. Only the highly personalized, friendly, non-judgmental and holistic approach that characterizes Horizons and the other ALCs will work with those many people who have been “bashed and battered” in this fashion.

Some Opportunities for Improvements

The matter of trust would be helped if Horizons were to add to an already strong program, a greater Aboriginal cultural component, and some Aboriginal staff. We have made this case above, and adult Aboriginal learners at both Horizons sites expressed a similar interest (see sidebar).

Sharing circles were also identified as a useful addition at Horizons. The sharing circle at which we introduced both ourselves and this research project was apparently the first one in which the students we interviewed at the two sites had participated, although sharing circles are used in at least one of the courses offered at Horizons. As one learner put it: “...from my own experience, sharing circles have benefited me, spiritually, mentally, physically, emotionally, and if that can benefit... other students that would be great, I wish we could have more of those...I'd like to see more of that happening. It would be great for the other students too” (F; 46).

Considerable interest was expressed by Horizons' instructors in professional development opportunities to learn more about Aboriginal culture. However, several concerns were expressed. One was that there is little time available for professional development, and to be away on a Friday, for example, means a three-day weekend for students, which adds to the attendance difficulties. The other concern is the multicultural character of Horizons, and the fact that some Aboriginal people are not interested in traditional Aboriginal culture, and some even consider it something to be actively avoided and even opposed. This concern was expressed at CrossRoads, as well. It is our view that these concerns notwithstanding, a greater understanding of Aboriginal history and culture is crucial in a city like Winnipeg with its large and growing Aboriginal population. The multicultural character of Horizons and other ALCs should not be an impediment. Opportunities to learn more about Aboriginal culture should be optional. Adult learners, whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, should be able to choose to take a Native Studies course or not, and to participate in a daily sharing circle, or not. The use of the sharing circle ought to be seen as simply

another means of creating a sense of community among adult learners. Horizons has done that already. At the Elmwood site, learners help each other "...a lot, it's like a family...we help each other out" (M; 30). At the Broadway site, "...we all help each other, it's like a big family..."(F; 38). The students, "...they're like family too, you know, like I've got close to quite a few of the students, I've made some good friends..."(F; 46). The instructors recognize the value of this. "There's tremendous benefit to creating community, working in groups...", because one's fellow students "...are tremendous resources" (Parker, March 3, 2003). The sharing circle is simply an extension of this reality, with the added bonus that it is consistent with the holistic approach that all the Adult Learning Centres practice, and it is rooted in the traditional Aboriginal cultural practices that so many Aboriginal students desperately want to make contact with. We will make recommendations regarding the use of sharing circles specifically, and Aboriginal cultural practices more generally, in Part Five.

A second area where change would be beneficial is in the use of more tutors or teaching assistants. Numerous students mentioned this: "...I think they need some tutors here, some more tutors...there's not enough tutoring" (F; 20); "...they're dealing with so many students they probably need a tutor or something or a teacher's aide..."(M; 34). Part of this need for teachers aides flows from the multi-level classroom strategy that is used at Horizons. As one student put it:

"...I just wish that we would have more tutors...because I found with a tutor, I managed more work, I was able to understand better, if I said, well, I don't get what's going on, then she'll show

me...then I was able to move on. Without a tutor and me doing grade 10, some people doing 11, and the teacher spending a lot of time with the grade 12s, it's hard for me and others to move on" (F; 39).

The teachers are well aware of this need. For example, Elspeth Campbell, who teaches the English class being referred to by the student above, says: "My dream is to have full-time tutors with me in the classroom all year" because "our students very much need one on one" (Campbell, March 6, 2003), and with one instructor in a class, not enough of this personalized attention is possible. There are two part-time teaching assistants available for math, where they are "a huge help", according to Ken Funk, especially given the multi-level character of the classes.

What is notable is that at Horizons' Crossways site, it is teaching assistants that are identified as the most immediate need, while at their Elmwood site Linda and Rachel are very much in need of administrative assistance to do some of the paperwork and to answer the phone, which they now do themselves on top of their teaching load. "The phone can be a going concern", says Linda, with 20 calls per day, from students or from prospective students who need to hear about adult educational options and who need the information immediately because "they've got knots in their stomachs just over making this phone call". At CrossRoads, by contrast, it is help with counselling that has been identified by staff: they recently hired Kim Cooke to be part-time office assistant and part-time tutor. It is our opinion that each of the four Adult Learning Centres examined so far could use additional resources, but in each case they would choose to use the resources differ-

“Thank goodness for this program, there was a time (she pauses, and cries), there was a time when I just thought there was nothing out there, nobody has an understanding, no help...I don’t know...just like you want to give up, nobody wants to help, you know, I kept on searching where to go, what to do, I guess after all that searching I just found this place, yeah, the doors opened as soon as I came in....”(F; 34).

“Before I came here I was a quiet person, I wasn’t very talkative, like I was a shy person, I guess an angry person also. I was living in a blaming life, I blamed everybody, I didn’t understand why people were so cruel and I was ashamed of being Aboriginal because of seeing our own people on Main Street being sniffers...drunk, I was really ashamed of being Aboriginal, and I guess you could say Urban Circle opened my eyes to see the truth and to know the truth. That’s what the Centre did for me” (F; 26).

“Well, spiritually, I didn’t know who I was and...I was kind of lost, out there, and when I came here, I found myself, like, searching, I was lost, but I found myself, I was wandering around, looking for something I couldn’t find, but when I came here...I really know where I’m going to now, because I was lost before but now I found myself”(F; 30).

“...I was working, and there was just a part of me that was empty, looking for something and not knowing what it was...not feeling wanted.... This is the place to come and search for what you’re looking for, where you’re coming from and stuff, and where you want to go, and a lot of people can’t do that because they don’t know who they are or

ently. This is completely appropriate, given the community-based character of the ALCs. Each operates a little bit differently than the others, and so each would use additional resources for slightly different purposes. At Horizons, the staff believe that instructors should do the counselling since this enables them to better understand the students and to develop a closer relationship with them. “I learn a lot about my learners” from counselling, says Linda Parker. Whether counselling is done in this fashion, which seems to work well at Horizons judging from learners’ comments, or is done by a counsellor as is the case at Portage Learning Centre, where it seems to work well judging from learners’ comments there, it is clear that there is a counselling function that needs to be met given the holistic approach that defines the operations of the ALCs examined here. It is also clear that one-on-one, personalized attention in the classroom is advantageous, and that in some cases this can best be met with tutors/teaching assistants; and that an office assistant is an important component of an ALC’s operations, not only because the work of an office assistant is necessary and important, but also because those who are teachers can be expected to do only so much. It is our very distinct impression that additional resources are needed by the Adult Learning Centres that we have investigated.

At Horizons’ Elmwood site, Linda Parker has invested a good deal of time and effort in developing a positive relationship with the local Employment Insurance office. The consequence has been that the EI office now works closely with Horizons Learning Centre in enabling adults on EI who declare themselves as students to put together an education plan, and to complete their mature grade 12 diploma. Generally, grade 12 is not considered to be a training program for EI purposes, and thus adults on EI

cannot use their benefits for this purpose. However, it is obviously beneficial for adults on EI to get a grade 12 diploma to better prepare them for additional job training. The point here is that staff at the Horizons' Elmwood office have had to develop this option themselves. It would be very beneficial if Adult Learning and Literacy could work with agencies such as EI and Income Assistance to ensure that those adults who would benefit from a mature grade 12 diploma are made aware of the option, and to ensure that bureaucratic and funding obstacles can be removed.

Finally, we believe that, as is the case at CrossRoads, the physical space being used at Horizons' Elmwood site is not suitable. Learners are very cramped, with work tables jammed closely together, and there is no space at all in which to work quietly.

5. Urban Circle Training Centre

The Urban Circle Training Centre is now in its 13th year of operations. It started out in the heart of Winnipeg's north end as a program intended to prepare Aboriginal women who had been volunteering in a clothing depot for jobs in the retail sector. It has grown and evolved considerably since then. We interviewed Ruth Murdock (Co-Director), Eleanor Thompson (Co-Director), Carol Hawkins (Academic Instructor for the Adult Education and Employment Program), Colleen Robinson (Life Skills Coach and Counselor for the Health Care Aide/Health Unit Clerk Program) and Lorraine Desmarais (Life Skills Coach and Counselor for the Adult Education and Employment Program).

The UCTC is currently located in a retail strip mall on McPhillips Street close to the Gar-

where they've come from....If you don't know what you're looking for, you just go out and try to fill that hole with something...." (F; 36).

"A long time ago I wouldn't actually say I'm an Indian...I'd say, oh yeah, I'm metis, like it was nothing to me, and now I find that I'm more proud, like you feel proud to be native, here, going here, you really feel proud" (F; 42).

"I quit smoking pot...before I started school [Urban Circle] it was like every day, all day long...what I was doing in high school was getting high and failing". But now, "I wouldn't mind being a Native awareness teacher... to teach the younger generation about colonization and all that stuff just to let them know before they start drinking and getting high and everything else. It sounds weird but I want to be an Indian, like, my culture, I want to know it all..." (F; 20).

"It's really emotional for me, I was never given a chance. I knew right from kindergarten I was different. Everybody was up there and I was down here....I always wanted to do this and when I came here it was like I found something, they gave me this hope that I could do it....I got my Indian name and went to a sweat and a part of me got healed....they help me a lot" (an Urban Circle student speaking at the initial sharing circle. She was not one of those interviewed formally).

“I swear my life’s changed, for the better....I’m getting over my shyness, a lot, a lot from here, because before I was like, I was severely shy, I’m super shy, and now it’s like they’re just people too....I’ve gotten over my shyness to a point....Confidence, a lot of confidence, you have to have a lot of confidence in yourself to succeed....I had really low self-esteem for the longest time” (F; 25).

“It has helped me a lot....I don’t put up a mask like I used to. I’m very shy but I’ve come a long ways.... (F; 46).

“When I started here, I was this little, like, a clam-shell, peeking once in a while, you know....” (F; 30).

“You’re here to learn about yourself...it helps you come out of your shell” (F; 26).

“I’m still shy a little bit....It’s helping me to speak up more, and not to shy away from something...because usually when that would happen to me I’d just walk away from the problem and I couldn’t face it, I’d just hide my feelings....” (F; 37).

“Even the look, just going to apply for a job....the look that they gave me, that always made me scared and then not go back, and I think a lot of times people don’t know that, but, you gotta fight back, you gotta look people in the eye and basically say no, you’re not going to take this away from me because this is what I want” (F; 36),

den City Shopping Centre in north Winnipeg. The space includes four large classrooms plus a large computer room, and numerous staff offices. However, the UCTC is now in the final stages of returning to a new home at 519 Selkirk Avenue— it is scheduled to open in June, 2003— where they have renovated a building in a way specifically designed for their use, and intended to reflect in its architecture the Aboriginal themes that characterize Urban Circle’s educational approach. Urban Circle now runs a mature grade 12 diploma program, plus 3 additional job-specific training programs. We will focus on the grade 12 program.

The Urban Circle Training Centre mature grade 12 diploma program is different in several important respects from the programs at the previous four ALCs. All the adult learners are Aboriginal, and only a limited number— usually 24— of adult Aboriginal learners are admitted to the mature grade diploma program each September. The intake process is rigorous: applicants must submit letters indicating why they want to be in the program, transcripts of their previous educational experience, and letters of reference; they are tested for reading comprehension; they are interviewed; and they are asked to take part in a sharing circle with other applicants. The intake process is intended to provide an opportunity for applicants to reflect on whether the Urban Circle approach is the right one for them (Thompson, Feb. 20, 2003). Those admitted must have completed 2 high school credits, so that during the 10 month program they are working to complete 6 credits.

The Urban Circle Training Centre offers education and training that is specifically Aboriginal. All adult learners are Aboriginal. The majority of the instructors and staff are Aboriginal. Programs are delivered in “a culturally appropriate context”, which includes “utilizing

the philosophy of the Medicine Wheel” (UCTC promotional materials). The design of the new building on Selkirk Avenue is Aboriginal. The intake and admission process make the Aboriginal cultural orientation of the program clear to prospective learners so that they can make an informed choice about whether such a program is the right one for them.

We interviewed 15 adult Aboriginal learners at Urban Circle, 13 women and two men. They range in age from 20 to 51 years; the median age is 35 years. All of them have children; 9 of the 15 have more than one child; 8 are single mothers; 7 live with a spouse or partner. The highest grade achieved prior to Urban Circle was grade 8 or 9 for 8 of the 15 adult learners interviewed; 3 had completed grade 10; 3 had completed grade 11.

Those attending Urban Circle go through what seems to us to be a personal transformation that is truly remarkable. They become changed people. Lives of pain and despair are transformed into lives of hope and pride. That was made apparent to us over and over during the interviews (see sidebar).

The pain that is carried by so many Aboriginal people is evident in these comments. It often is expressed, as observed earlier, as shyness, which in turn reflects the low levels of self-esteem felt by many Aboriginal people—a product of colonization and its internalization (Silver and Mallett, 2002). That is the case for the adult learners at Urban Circle as well. But the program at Urban Circle helps adult learners to overcome that shyness, and build their confidence, pride, and self-esteem (see sidebar).

Many of these adult learners have had very hard lives. For many of them, their previous school experiences were filled with pain (see sidebar).

“I’ve been through, oh, how would you say, through racism, and that’s what really hurts me....going to a public school....that really hurts when you’re called down. I learned how to shut them out, but inside, I was really, really hurting....Here, you’re not called down, you know....you’re equal”(F; 34).

“In high school I wasn’t comfortable....The way they looked at me like I was a different human being from another planet, that’s the way I felt....People were so cruel....”(F; 26).

“Well, I don’t think there’s anything good I liked about [a Winnipeg inner city high school]....I wasn’t comfortable”(F; 42).

“...I had a hard time when I was going to school”(F; 37).

“...you could just tell all the racism was there....I just didn’t like the way other people treated me”(F; 20).

“The negative messages that were given in school, not only from the teachers but also from mainstream society itself, my peers, you know, I was a ‘dirty little Indian’, and you know Indians don’t amount to very much and that’s the messages that I carried throughout my life and coming to Urban Circle they’re helping me to re-write those messages. I’m starting to find myself....I know what I wanted to do but all the negative messages I received in the school system— I let them hold me back and it’s just so different here, they help you, they give you the tools you need to discover who you are and what you want to do in life”(F; 35).

“...I’m really struggling...paying rent and paying phone, getting groceries and he’s not doing anything, and we’re fighting and he’s saying ‘well, why don’t you work instead of going to school’”.

“On the way coming from home to school on my bus-ride... ‘oh my hydro bill, what am I gonna do, my phone bill’, you know...”.

The experience at Urban Circle is, for many adult learners, different from and better than their previous school experiences. But that does not mean that life suddenly becomes easy. Many continue to struggle in their personal lives. Gangs, alcohol, drug abuse, “I’ve been through it all”, one woman told us. And staff at Urban Circle say that in many ways it is getting worse. Carol Hawkins says that they now deal with “a lot of gang issues”, and these find their way into the classroom in various ways. “The issues are so great, and they seem to be getting greater”, says Lorraine Desmarais, which is precisely why the holistic approach used by Urban Circle and the other ALCs is so essential.

Yet despite these difficult lives, the adult Aboriginal learners at the Urban Circle are transforming their lives. How does this happen? We think that there are at least three things that are distinctive about the Urban Circle program: the constant focus on job preparedness; the life skills component in the first month of the program; and the infusion into the program of Aboriginal cultural awareness. We will discuss each of these in turn.

i. Job-Preparedness

The staff see the adult learners’ experience while at Urban Circle as only the beginning.

Everything is geared to learners’ successfully making the transition from education to paid employment. In fact, the mature grade 12 diploma program is referred to by Urban Circle as their “Academic Education and Employment Program”. Their literature describes the program by saying that it “includes academic upgrading for a Mature Grade 12 Diploma”, and adds: “It also includes job preparation skills, a 6-week work placement and employment at the end of the program” (emphasis in original).

Job preparedness is built into every program offered at Urban Circle. In addition to the Life Skills course, about which more below, there are courses designed by grade 12 instructor Carol Hawkins: Skills for Success, Academic Writing and Career Exploration. These are separate courses, but when she teaches them she weaves them together, so that, for example, an Academic Writing assignment might link to a Career Exploration theme.

In these courses Carol Hawkins takes students to post-secondary education institutions and to job-sites, and brings in many speakers so that students feel they are part of a network. In Career Exploration students visit all post-secondary education institutions, with a full day on each campus. Students do three informational interviews with employers and/or post-secondary institutions as an assignment, thus building face-to-face skills and confidence and exposing students to opportunities. They also do a work placement. “The possibilities are endless in terms of work placement”, she says. This too develops work skills and confidence, provides exposure to workplace cultural norms and expectations (thus building on the life skills course), and adds to job networking possibilities. With respect to the latter, American author William Julius Wilson argues that inner city unemployment of Black American youth is partly

due to their not being part of personal networks which enable one to learn of jobs by word-of-mouth (Wilson, 1987). Urban Circle learners also do an interview skills component in which interviews are videotaped and reviewed, and employers are brought in to provide feedback.

In the Health Care Aide/Unit Clerk programs— job-specific training programs that are separate from the mature grade 12 program— all of this is done as well. The life-skills course occupies the first four weeks and then one day per week thereafter; and job placements are arranged in the Health Science Centre or personal care homes. Crucially important is the fact that the employers have been involved with Urban Circle in the form of a partnership in developing these job-specific courses from the beginning. Such partnerships are “fundamental to our success”, says Co-Director Eleanor Thompson. Urban Circle links with the employer, arranges job placements for adult learners, works with the Health Sciences Centre to help them to become more culturally sensitive to Aboriginal employees, and does cross-cultural training workshops “for our students to feel accepted there”. Graduation from this program is “...almost a guarantee that they’ll get a job”, says Colleen Robinson, and it is a good job, at close to \$14/hour, which means that “...it’s worthwhile, not training for a minimum wage job, it’s enough that families can get off social assistance”. In the Health Care Aide program, 21 of 24 adult learners graduated last year, and all 21 are employed, and at good wages. Twenty-one of the 24 had been on social assistance prior to attending Urban Circle (Robinson, Feb. 20, 2003).

So Urban Circle does not just graduate students and send them out cold into the world. They prepare students from the first day for employment. “It’s about economic empower-

ment”, says Eleanor Thompson. “Students come here wanting to get off social assistance, to get off the dependency of that horrible cycle of poverty. That is the prime motivator” (Thompson, Feb. 20, 2003). And it works.

ii. Life Skills:

Every program at Urban Circle has a life skills component which involves the first four weeks of the program, and one day per week thereafter, and each program has a life skills coach. The life skills component is structured as a course for credit. It is, therefore, not an add-on, but rather is central to the educational experience at Urban Circle. The life skills focus is unique. In the Academic Education and Employment Program (mature grade 12), Carol Hawkins teaches the academic component and Lorraine Desmarais, herself an Urban Circle graduate, is the life skills coach and instructor of the Life Skills course. Although called “life skills”, the course at UCTC is different from what is often thought of as life skills, because it is specifically tailored to meet the needs of Aboriginal people who have experienced the adverse effects of colonialism. Students learn about themselves, in an introspective fashion, and then locate their personal situation in the context of colonization, and work through that to develop the skills to deal with life in the dominant culture, but to do so as an Aboriginal person who feels comfortable with her/himself. The pain that so many Aboriginal people carry is acknowledged, and talked about, and is identified as being a consequence of colonization. It is not a blaming process, nor a shaming process. Rather it is a healing process, and a learning process, and it provides adult learners with the self-understanding and the self-esteem that they need to navigate their way through the dominant culture.

The shield “had a big impact on me because I was able to be an adult and I was able to forgive those people the harmful things they did to me and when I learned about residential schools I guess that opened up the reasons why our people are the way they are in today’s society...So I’m not ashamed ...of being Aboriginal....Life skills and the sharing circles really opened me up, I was able to talk for myself, and I really enjoyed the sharing circle because you know you have that trust in the circle, this group, your fellow students and you can talk to them about anything, they’re there to listen, so I think that sharing circle, it does really help” (F; 26).

“With the life skills and the shield I’ve learned that with my pressures and everyday problems that there are people out there with the same situations and they are still trying to thrive and succeed....sometimes I would get down and think I was alone but I’m not alone, there are other people out there, and here at Urban Circle we are able to help each other and learn from each other in situations like that (M; 35).

“One of the biggest components here was the life skills course and that was absolutely amazing...” (M; 32).

Life skills, like everything at Urban Circle, is based on the holistic character of the Medicine Wheel. The Medicine Wheel has four quadrants: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Urban Circle says all four are important. They do not just deal with adult learners as students. They deal with them as people, in a holistic way. Learners cannot learn math if they are not empowered to cope emotionally with the pain they carry inside themselves. Part of this has to do with the remarkable level of commitment of the staff who phone, talk to and counsel their learners. But also, the life skills component teaches adult learners how to cope themselves. They learn creative problem-solving, effective communication, conflict resolution, stress, anger and time management, organizational skills, and building self-esteem. And they use sharing circles— they talk with each other about their lives in a collective setting. This bonds them to each other.

In the life skills course there is what is called a ‘shield week’. Learners create a shield— a pictorial/symbolic representation of their life story, with photos and other mementos signifying important parts of their life journey to date. Then each student tells her/his life story to the group— the highs, and the lows— as much or as little as s/he chooses to share. Again, once you have shared your life in this way, opened up and told your story and revealed your pain to others, and they to you, there is a tight bonding that occurs. A group is built. Group support is developed. Many graduates of Urban Circle become life-long friends.

And all of this is done in the context of decolonization. Built into the life skills course is a focus on the bigger reality of which each learner is to a greater or lesser extent a product. “Where we’re at is the result of something greater than us as individuals”, says Co-Director Ruth

Murdoch. It is the result of colonization— the deliberate attempt to strip Aboriginal people of their language, culture and spirituality, in short, to strip them of their identity and sense of self-esteem. To facilitate the colonization piece a non-interference method is used. The life skills coach identifies his/her own colonization/oppression, therefore allowing the student to identify where they are at in relation to their own journey. One of the Medicine Wheel teachings as developed by Myra Laramee, principal of Winnipeg's Nijimahkwa School, identifies four stages of healing — the victim, survivor, warrior and healer. But this transformation is a process, a function of the Urban Circle approach in its totality. Simply describing what happened to Aboriginal people is, in itself, not enough. Colleen Robinson took Native Studies at the University of Manitoba, but that form of learning did not have the same effect. "I could write down all the facts and it never affected me....until I came here and became part of the sharing circle and 'yeah, that's what happened to my family'" (Robinson, Feb. 20, 2003).

In short, part of the life skills course is immediately 'practical'— anger management, conflict resolution and communications skills, for example. And part is deeper. Part is to re-build, piece by piece, the battered self-esteem and self-confidence of a people who have suffered the effects of colonization and who have carried that pain inside themselves for years. This is the metamorphosis that happens at Urban Circle, the truly remarkable process of personal transformation that learners here go through as they reclaim their identity as Aboriginal people, and as they then learn the skills needed to survive in the dominant culture, as strong Aboriginal people. This is the two-fold character of life-skills. It becomes the *foundation* upon which the process of learning Math and English can take place.

"The life-skills component they have here is unbelievable. You get a sense of who you are, it helps you identify who you are..." and enables you "...to release some of the stuff that you've been carrying so long.... This program is so powerful, it's exactly what I've been looking for and I'd recommend it to other women, not only other women, other men" (F; 35).

"When we did the shield I was really scared, not scared, but shy, and I was nervous and I didn't know what to do but everybody...welcomed me...and I felt comfortable. I never had that experience before, to talk about myself in front of a whole class...all the hardships that I had from my earlier life...and it made me talk about the situations that I didn't want to talk about...I felt relieved...when I did my shield, and to talk about my personal stuff too...." (F; 37).

"It was an eye-opener for me...that first month I was coming to school with a whole bunch of, like a weight on my shoulders and everything...it taught me how to put it away for a while" (F; 34).

"When we did our shields, it like opened the door" (F; 36).

“This way we can support ourselves as a group or mini-family to get ourselves through the week....It’s like we’re a bunch of brothers and sisters when we come here....” (F; 35).

“It’s like a family” (F; 44).

“I think of them as family” (M; 51).

“...we’re like family” (F; 30).

“...we all care for each other too, you know, like if someone’s missing for two days well we better, where is she or where is he, you know, what’s happening with her...we don’t want to leave anybody behind, we all started together, we should finish together, you know, keep this group going....” (F; 34).

“The people are great, it’s just like having your own little family here” (F; 36).

“As a group we work together and it’s like a sense of belonging...every day it’s, like, coming here as a family....” (F; 46).

Another way in which this collectivity is achieved is through ‘clearing space’, which can happen each morning, for 10-15 minutes, as opposed to the weekly sharing circles. As to the clearing space: “It’s like a buddy system, like you’re comfortable with that person and you come here and you discuss your problems so that you don’t have to bring it all day with you, so you try to get it off your chest, and you do that every morning, and that really helps because sometimes you come to school and you’re upset about something and you’re stressed and just talking to somebody helps a lot” (F; 42).

Lorraine Desmarais is the life skills coach for the Academic Education and Employment Program. She herself is a graduate of Urban Circle, and has experienced the life skills and the use of the shield from both sides, as life skills coach and as adult learner. She says, “I just wanted to...get a job, get off assistance and become independent....but I got a lot more than an education and training. I learned about myself” (Desmarais, Feb. 20, 2003). She adds:

“It’s the hardest thing I ever did but the best thing I ever did....it really gave me my identity after searching for years, never feeling I belonged anywhere”. But now, “I don’t have to try to fit into the mainstream, I can be me”.

And the skills learned— practical and emotional— are directly transferable to workplace and family. “Everything I learned here was transferable, when I left here I grew in every area”, she says. Ruth Murdoch confirms that this is the intent. “There’s a skill set that they need to leave this environment”, she says, and our purpose here is “...to give them all the tools to facilitate their journey”. In the case of Lorraine Desmarais, the greatest impact of the life-skills learned at the Urban Circle has been on her family and her four children. She became a much better parent. That is “...the greatest impact of my entire life. That has been my measurement of my own growth”.

The approach taken at Urban Circle is holistic, starting with introspection. But it not just this. Each adult learners’ personal situation is located in the context of an historical process that has affected *all* Aboriginal people, collectively. And everything about Urban Circle— the shield, the sharing circles, the common backgrounds, the life skills course— creates a sense of a being part of a group. “We’re not just a classroom, we’re a group....We’re a very different kind of school....I feel like this is my family”, says

Colleen Robinson. And this sense of family is felt by all the learners, and is part of the strength of Urban Circle(see sidebar).

Related to this is the relentless support system provided to Urban Circle learners, a support system made possible by the energy and dedication of the staff. Urban Circle is successful, says Eleanor Thompson, “because of the passion of people who work here”. Carol Hawkins concurs: “The staff is very dedicated to the program. For example, the participants are given unconditional 24 hour support during and long after program completion”(Hawkins, 1997, p. 4). And that is certainly reflected, as is the case at the other Adult Learning Centres being considered here, in the comments made by adult learners (see sidebar).

iii. Aboriginal Culture:

The third distinctive feature of Urban Circle is the Aboriginal culture that is infused throughout the program. The sharing circle is used regularly. Morning smudges are practised, along with a prayer to the Creator. All the students are Aboriginal. The majority of the staff are Aboriginal. The philosophy is based on the Medicine Wheel. “For students, it comes alive for them when they see the Medicine Wheel”, says Ruth Murdoch. “The wheel is so multi-dimensional...it compels us to be continually looking at where we are”. And it compels a holistic approach. The first four weeks, and one day per week thereafter, are the life skills course which is rooted in Aboriginal culture, in the philosophy of the Medicine Wheel, commitment to a holistic approach and to the de-colonization of Aboriginal adults who have, in one way or another and to a greater or lesser extent, internalized their colonial oppression.

“There’s a big support system here....they won’t give up on you. If you want to quit they won’t give up on you, they’ll be right there knocking at your door and that is the reason why Aboriginal people are here” (F; 26).

“...overwhelming encouragement here to stick with it, especially when you think you wanna give up” (F; 32).

“When you feel like quitting, like giving up, they’re there for you....Lorraine [Desmarais] will come at your door, you know, not in a mean way, you know (laughter)...but she’ll come there to encourage you, ‘come on back’, you know....(F; 34).

“They’re very supportive about everything...it makes me feel so good knowing we have the support of the instructors here....This is a challenge for me because I’ve been out of school for such a long time and I find that the supports here are tremendous”(F; 35).

The Native Studies course is distinctive in that it begins from the self, in that it is related to the learners’ personal experiences. The course outline says: “The seminars have been developed for those who seek more information about de-colonization of our Aboriginal/First Nations people”. The outline adds:

“Aboriginal/First Nations adult learners require the knowledge to explain to the individual members of a community who they are, who their people are, and how they relate to other nations. They need to articulate how our history relates to their personal self-esteem and

identity today and to the reclaiming [of] their cultural identity...the goal of the course will be met when the student can educate the general public about the pain and oppression First Nations/Aboriginal people endured (physical, emotional, spiritual and mental) and have survived as a result of the colonizers”.

Other courses have been modified to be culturally appropriate. Carol Hawkins has taken the English curriculum and modified it to make it more culturally appropriate (Hawkins, 1997). It is not just that Aboriginal authors are used, although they are, and frequently local Aboriginal authors and poets are brought into English classes. Rather the curriculum is rooted in the notion of belonging, and the need to belong. So for example Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a novel used in English. It focuses on the oppression of African Americans. Oppression happened to many people, not just Aboriginal people, and is expressed in literature and the arts, and that is the theme of the English course. The Career Exploration course examines such themes as workplace culture and ethics, racism and discrimination in the workplace, non-violent intervention, human rights— all important themes for everyone, but tailored and crafted to meet the specific needs of Aboriginal adult learners. And the courses interconnect and overlap in a way consistent with the Medicine Wheel philosophy of the interconnectedness of all things. The teaching strategy is very experiential, getting students into the community, into workplaces and post-secondary institutions, having them develop their interviewing skills and conflict resolution skills, and of course all of this is done in the context of Aboriginal culture, and the development of the life skills to overcome colonization and to be able to work

in the dominant culture and become economically independent while remaining an Aboriginal person able to practice Aboriginal culture and secure and self-confident as an Aboriginal person. It is “...a model of living life that is different from our Western approach”, says Ruth Murdoch. “It’s about the empowerment of a nation”.

The Urban Circle approach has grown and evolved over more than a decade. It constantly evolves to meet the changing circumstances and needs of its students. It is a dynamic and exciting and highly effective program, from which much can be learned by other adult educators. As such, Urban Circle Training Centre represents an opportunity that should be developed. We believe that in addition to educating adult learners, consideration should be given to developing a training program by which Urban Circle would become a training site for other adult educators working in Adult Learning Centres.

The holistic approach used by Urban Circle is not easy to describe by means of the written word. “It will not come off the page...”, says Ruth Murdoch. You need to *experience* it. That is what we are recommending: that those adult educators now working at Adult Learning Centres who feel the need to improve their understanding of Aboriginal culture and its use in adult education be given the opportunity to experience the Urban Circle approach, and to take from it whatever parts they conclude would benefit their own ALCs. The centre-piece, the people at Urban Circle believe, is the Life Skills course. So the training program could involve people from other Learning Centres spending four weeks at Urban Circle during the main part of the Life-Skills course, “because that piece is crucial”, as Ruth Murdoch puts it. Two types of benefits might flow from this approach. First,

people already working in Adult Learning Centres could take back from Urban Circle to their ALCs whatever they think might fit in their own ALC. Second, a core of people might by this method be created who at some future point might be able to fully replicate what Urban Circle does by establishing a second Urban Circle. Certainly the need is there, and certainly the success rate warrants replication. Thus two kinds of training would be taking place at Urban Circle: the educating and training of adult learners, as is done now; and the training of adult educators now working in the Adult Learning Centre system. Further, with respect to the training of adult educators, two objectives might be considered: one is imparting to existing ALCs some of the experience gained at Urban Circle; the other is laying the basis for replicating in its totality what is done at Urban Circle.

Part Four: Summary and Discussion

What we have found in our examination of five Adult Learning Centres is the following.

First, the ALCs represent a powerful and effective new approach to education in Manitoba. This is evident at each of the five ALCs that we investigated. Their friendly, informal, personalized environment, their dedicated, warm and energetic staff, and their holistic approach to adult education works exceptionally well for adult learners generally, and for Aboriginal adult learners in particular. That these characteristics of ALCs are important variables in their success is consistent with the literature on adult education.

Second, most of the ALCs could be made even better than they are by incorporating some findings from our investigation that are confirmed in the literature on adult education gen-

erally, and Aboriginal adult education in particular. These include the following: making greater use, where possible, of group-based learning, including the use of sharing circles; rooting educational strategies in the experiences of Aboriginal people and in the culture of Aboriginal people to a greater extent than is already done; making greater use of a life skills component and considering the development of additional job-specific training courses modelled on the successful initiatives developed at the Urban Circle Training Centre; and introducing strategies to promote in Aboriginal adult learners a greater commitment not only to individual transformation but also to community transformation.

a. Diamonds in the rough: what makes Adult Learning Centres so effective?

The first thing that strikes someone entering any of the Adult Learning Centres that we investigated is the friendly, informal and respectful atmosphere that prevails, and the remarkable energy, warmth and dedication of the staff. They exhibit a passion for adult education, a commitment to equality and human dignity, a belief in the human potential in each of us. It is impossible not to be impressed by the work being done in these unpretentious and highly effective learning centres. We agree with Peter Ferris who, in a study done in late 1999-2000, expressed his respect and admiration for the "commitment and dedication" of the adult educators he met over a four week period, and who said: "...I could not disguise my enthusiasm for what is taking place. Adult learning centres are, I believe, the most innovative and progressive responses to a huge need for a range of adult education delivery that I have experienced." (Ferris, 2000, p. 1). This enthusiasm for the work

of the ALCs is reflected in our interviews with Aboriginal adult learners, a large proportion of whom are unqualifiedly positive about their experiences and about the staff.

Our second observation is that a very large proportion of the adult learners that we interviewed carry with them a great deal of pain. This was unmistakable in the interviews. Most have had hard lives; a great many suffer from lack of self-esteem. A large proportion of them faced racism in their previous school experiences, and in some cases it has scarred them deeply. The roots of this damage are to be found in the impact upon Aboriginal people of colonialism, and the internalization by many Aboriginal people of the racist belief system that lies at the heart of colonialism. The ideology of colonialism, Howard Adams has argued, "... claims the superiority of the race and culture of the colonizer", and many Aboriginal people "...have internalized a colonized consciousness" (Adams, 1999, p. 6, and Introduction). That is, they have come to believe, in a culture which constantly denigrates them, the false claims of their inferiority. Hart describes how devastating the consequences of this process can be:

"Once Aboriginal persons internalize the colonization processes, we feel confused and powerless....We may implode with overwhelming feelings of sadness or explode with feelings of anger. Some try to escape this state through alcohol, drugs and/or other forms of self-abuse" (Hart, 2002, p.27).

The consequences for education are clear:

"Aboriginal people start to believe that we are incapable of learning and that the colonizers' degrading images and beliefs

about Aboriginal people and our ways of being are true" (Hart, 2002, p. 27).

This echoes the argument advanced by Brazilian adult educator, Paulo Freire, who wrote that:

"self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing, and are incapable of learning anything— sick, lazy, and unproductive— that in the end, they become convinced of their own unfitness" (Freire, 1970, p. 49).

It is clear from our interviews that many adult Aboriginal learners suffer in this way. In the interviews it was often expressed as extreme shyness. Beneath that shyness lies the lack of self-esteem and self-confidence that comes from a lifetime of having internalized a colonized consciousness. The damage done to Aboriginal people by this process, and the pain that they carry because of it, make essential the warm and friendly environment that characterizes, and the respectful and egalitarian staff who work at, the ALCs that we investigated. It is particularly significant, given the frequency of their references to racism and the negative baggage carried from previous educational experiences, that of the 74 Aboriginal adult learners who were interviewed, not a single one said that s/he had experienced racism at an Adult Learning Centre, and most extolled the friendly, helpful, respectful atmosphere and staff. We are of the opinion that this is the single, most significant explanatory variable for the very considerable success of Adult Learning Centres.

This view is confirmed by the literature, which is quite clear on the importance for adult learners, including Aboriginal adult learners, of a warm, friendly, informal and respectful environment and staff, and a flat, non-hierarchical structure. For example, a recent survey of Aboriginal literacy programs in Canada concluded that:

“It is doubtful that there is a more important consideration in sustaining an Aboriginal literacy program than the provision of a safe and welcoming environment where learning can take root and grow...” (Sabourin and Globensky, 1998, p. 239).

These authors also remarked upon “...the dedication and commitment that practitioners have brought to their Aboriginal literacy program initiatives”, calling them and their programs “...diamonds in the rough, labouring...above and beyond the call of duty...to serve the needs and aspirations of learners” (Sabourin and Globensky, 1998, p.8). This certainly rings true for those Adult Learning Centres that we investigated.

Tremblay and Taylor reached the same conclusions in their study of an Aboriginal Employment Preparation Program delivered at the Grand River Polytechnic Institute on the Six Nations Reserve in southern Ontario:

“...establishing a cultural environment characterized as warm, comfortable, nonthreatening, fun, enjoyable, open, respectful, and empowering was essential for creating an effective climate for learners to learn” (Tremblay and Taylor, 1998, p.43).

Peter Martin, writing about Aboriginal adult education program planning, observed that the

promotion of “...emotional warmth in the classroom cannot be over-stressed”, and he referred to:

“...the necessity of having instructors with warm, supportive personalities. The instructor’s attitude toward the students will affect the students’ academic progress and their level of motivation for continuing their studies. Instructors with warm positive attitudes are particularly necessary for Aboriginal students who have endured hostility, racism and alienation in previous educational experiences” (Martin, 1993, pp. 170 & 172).

The staff at the Adult Learning Centres that we investigated were all of these things, and more, and they have created, often in difficult circumstances, the kind of environment in which Aboriginal adults, many of whom “have endured hostility, racism and alienation in previous educational experiences”, are experiencing educational success.

Another essential reason for their success is the holistic approach to adult education that characterizes the work of the Adult Learning Centres that we investigated. By holistic we mean that Aboriginal adult learners cannot be treated simply as students, but must be treated as whole people: as people whose often difficult lives outside the classroom and whose frequent lack of self-esteem and self-confidence are every bit as important to their prospects for completing grade 12 as is their facility with Math or English. This means that instructors in ALCs are much more than ‘just’ teachers: they are counsellors and confidants and encouragers; they are people in positions of authority who are respectful and egalitarian; they are friends who provide rides when needed, who knock on doors when learners are absent, who help out with

childcare arrangements, and who respond supportively and non-judgementally to a myriad of real-life needs. These activities and attributes are as important as teaching— one without the other would not work for most adult Aboriginal learners. The ALC and its staff must deal, and in those ALCs that we investigated do deal, with the whole person. Dealing with the whole person is an approach to adult education, and to life, that is found in the traditional Aboriginal concept of the Medicine Wheel, which requires a consideration of peoples' mental, physical, emotional and spiritual needs.

Support for this holistic approach and for the Medicine Wheel can also be found in the literature. The previously cited study of Aboriginal literacy programs concluded that:

“All Aboriginal cultures firmly believe in the power of ‘wholeness’ and know the importance of maintaining balance within self and harmony with all things within the Creation. In order to achieve ‘wholeness’, the four aspects of self which include the spirit, heart, mind, and body must be aligned, and the task of balancing these energies, both internal and external, is a continuous process” (Sabourin and Globensky, 1998, p. 252).

Aboriginal adult educators Diane Hill and Priscilla George make the same argument. Priscilla George, speaking about Aboriginal literacy programs, makes the simple but powerful observation that “...literacy programs mean much more than just learning to read and write” (George, 1997). Hill argues that, given the effects on Aboriginal people of colonization, a holistic approach to adult learning is essential:

“Reversing the generational damage done to the psycho-social development of Aboriginal individuals, families, communities, and nations must begin with a more holistic model of education. In using holistic processes of learning and teaching, Aboriginal learners can be helped to explore the negative attitudes they direct against themselves, others, the educational system, and against Western culture as a whole” (Hill, 1999, pp. 12-13).

The ALCs that we investigated use a holistic approach, and we consider this to be an essential ingredient in their success.

b. Areas for improvement: how can Adult Learning Centres be made even better?

As good as the Adult Learning Centres that we investigated are, there are areas where improvements could be made, and we will comment on these, based on our interview results and our review of the literature.

(i) the importance of group-based learning

First, a theme that arises frequently in the literature is the importance of group-based learning, and of creating a sense of collectivity, and of belonging, amongst adult learners. Many of those we interviewed expressed a desire for, or where it was already being used an appreciation of, group-based learning opportunities.

Learning in groups has deep roots in adult education. Recent adult education literature has defined this group-based approach as cohort groups. “Cohorts are usually defined as groups

of students who enroll at the same time and go through a program by taking the same courses at the same time..." (Imel, 2002, p.1). A recent major American study that followed 41 adult learners for a year reported that:

"...an unexpected finding was that being part of a 'cohort'— a tight-knit, reliable, common-purpose group— was extraordinarily important to participants....the interpersonal relationships that these adult peers developed in the cohort made a critical difference to their academic learning, their emotional and psychological well-being, and their ability to broaden their perspectives". The report added that: "...for most participants their learning group became something very much different than 'just a class' or 'just a group'....participants spoke of the group as 'like a family', or a band of warriors, or fellow strugglers— in short, a cohort. These cohorts served as dynamic transitional growth spaces that helped learners make good use of each other by providing both the challenge that encouraged learners to grow and the support they needed in order to meet those challenges" (Kegan et al, 2001, pp. 14-15).

Cohort groups can also make possible the critical reflection that leads to deep transformational learning. In transformational learning, adult learners reflect on long-held, taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs about themselves and their place in the world, and replace them with a new belief system. Such transformational learning is especially important for Aboriginal learners who suffer from low levels of self-esteem and self-confidence as the result of the internalization of colonialism. Cohort groups promote such learning. Imel, for example, observes that in cohort groups: "... students are encouraged to challenge assumptions and engage in joint knowledge construction with

each other and the instructor, and transformative learning frequently occurs" (Imel, 2002, p. 3).

Diane Hill also advances an argument for group-based learning for Aboriginal students, rooted in traditional Aboriginal ways of learning that include the importance of the oral tradition and of story-telling:

"Because Aboriginal teachings stem from an oral tradition, the use of dialogue plays an extremely important role in traditional Aboriginal learning processes. Small group discussions, individual interviews, and activities that encourage questions and answers are used to develop the Aboriginal adult learner's capacity for oral discussion and presentation. Engaging Aboriginal adult learners in dialectical discussions and public presentation helps them to reclaim their skills for oration and story-telling— the two most vital elements of a traditional Aboriginal educational practice ..." (Hill, 1999, p. 109).

The development of skills in oration and story-telling requires working in groups.

This group-based approach can find expression in the use of sharing circles. Sharing circles can be used to respond, in holistic fashion, to the pain carried by so many of the Aboriginal adult learners who were interviewed for this project. It has been said that the sharing circle "is a powerful tool for healing because, as Indigenous people we have many common experiences that have caused much pain in our lives, the circle presents an opportunity to release this pain and to support each other through it" (Clarkson, Morrissette, and Regallet, 1992, p.51). Diane Hill makes a similar case:

“Circles provide the Aboriginal adult learner with a forum for venting painful feelings and for examining unhealthy relating patterns that stem from one’s negative life experiences. Thus, knowledge of feelings and skills in identifying the roots of one’s behaviour are key components in the creation of an understanding necessary for building and preserving all of one’s relationships that begin with the family and extend outwardly to one’s clan, community...” (Hill, 1999, p. 111).

This is certainly consistent with the experience at Urban Circle, where regular use is made of sharing circles and, on a smaller scale, of ‘clearing space’.

The literature on the use of cohort groups in adult education also identifies the importance of what is done when groups are first formed. Imel, for example, argues that, “if cohorts are to evolve into a cohesive group, initial experiences as a cohort are critical in group development”, and she observes that the literature advises adult educators to: “Spend time at the beginning of the cohort developing group relationships. The success of the cohort depends on the ability of its members to form a cohesive collaborative group” (Imel, 2002, pp. 2 and 4). We think that this speaks to the importance of an “orientation” session at the beginning of a term. Some ALCs that we investigated have used orientation sessions and, consistent with the literature, have found them useful, but the pressures on their time have prevented their doing so to the extent that they believe, and that the literature confirms, to be desirable. There would be benefits, we believe, to be derived from efforts invested in orientation programs for adult cohorts at Adult Learning Centres.

We conclude, both from the literature and from the interviews with Aboriginal adult learners, that there are advantages to group-based learning. That this is so is very clear from the experience at Urban Circle Training Centre, where building a sense of solidarity, of belonging, among cohorts of adult learners is a major part of the educational strategy, and where the first four weeks are devoted to a life skills program, offered as a course, which serves among other things to bind the learners together as a group, as “a family”, as many of them reported. Not every ALC can or necessarily should do what Urban Circle does— each ALC has its own distinctive approach and that is one of the strengths of ALCs. The very considerable flexibility that characterizes Portage Learning Centre, for example, is recognized by Aboriginal adult learners there as being advantageous. However, opportunities should perhaps be sought wherever possible for deriving the benefits of group-based learning. We note that such opportunities are currently being pursued in at least one of the ALCs that we investigated, the Portage Learning Centre, as a complement to their flexible, continuous intake approach, and we endorse this development.

(ii) the importance of rooting adult education in learners’ experience and culture

Second, there is a good deal of evidence in the literature supporting the view that successful adult education strategies are rooted in the experiences of learners, and in the learners’ culture. Brookfield, for example, argues that: “The belief that adult teaching should be grounded in adults’ experiences, and that these experiences represent a valuable resource, is currently cited as crucial by adult educators of every conceivable ideological hue” (Brookfield, 1995, p.4). Imel adds: “Because work with adult learners

begins by respecting their culture, their knowledge, and their experiences, adult literacy educators must seek to understand learners' individual and community contexts....Only by understanding the experiences and communities of the adults they wish to serve can adult literacy educators develop viable programs" (Imel, 1996, p. 4). Aboriginal adult educators have made the same case. A Director of an Aboriginal literacy program says: "Learning has to relate to experience, and experience relates to and reflects culture. You cannot learn unless you rely on the experiences and culture of the participant. That is why learning about and retaining our culture is such an important part of our programming" (Sabourin and Globensky, 1998, p. 243). Antone, Miller and Myers make the same case: "...Native students require an approach to adult education that is designed in such a way as to draw on prior life experiences" (Antone, Miller and Myers, 1986, p. 70).

Authors like Diane Hill and Priscilla George have developed an approach to Aboriginal adult education that responds to the debilitating effects of the internalization of colonialism by rooting the education of Aboriginal adults in their experiences as Aboriginal people, and in seeking to replace their colonized culture with a decolonized culture. This is consistent with recent studies in the adult education literature.

Diane Hill works out of the First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI), which is located in the Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory near Deseronto, Ontario, and is run by the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte. Her starting point in developing an indigenous approach to the education of Aboriginal adults is to identify and acknowledge the damage done to Aboriginal peoples' culture and worldview by the process of colonization. Colonization

"... required a concerted attack on the ontology, on the basic cultural patterning of the children and on their world view. They had to be taught to see and understand the world as a European place within which only European values and beliefs had meaning; thus the wisdom of their cultures would seem to them only savage superstition". (Hill, 1999, p. 5).

The immense psychological damage done to Aboriginal people by this deliberate strategy has been discussed above. Hill argues that the solution lies in the development of "... a system of education that supports the cultural revitalization of Aboriginal people" (Hill, 1999, p. 6).

This pedagogy of cultural re-vitalization then creates the foundation upon which a positive learning environment can be built. Hill links this approach directly to the idea of transformational learning, by arguing that:

"...a philosophy of education based on a traditional Aboriginal cultural philosophy supports a transformative process of education. It provides Aboriginal adult learners with the opportunity to transform the perceptions that they hold of themselves, others, and the very universe surrounding them by introducing them to an alternative form of knowledge that is based on a traditional Aboriginal cultural world view" (Hill, 1999, p. 122).

Hill links this Aboriginal approach to adult education, to that strand of the adult education literature that promotes the virtues of critical reflection and transformational learning:

“In using the learning processes associated with critical reflection (Brookfield, 1991) and perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1985), I, and those who have been working with me, have been able to help Aboriginal adult learners to perceive themselves, their own culture, and the cultures of other people more broadly. In many cases, the individual transformations that have resulted from the use of these processes have led to the development of a learning community that has encouraged the building of supportive relationships and has fostered an environment where individual and cultural differences are more acceptable” (Hill, 1999, p. 137).

The strand of adult education theory and practice rooted in the ideas of critical reflection and transformational learning is aimed at changing the ways in which oppressed people interpret or make sense of their experiences, and thus the way they see and think of themselves, and the way they are able to act in the world. This approach to adult education is important for Aboriginal people because of their experience with colonization, and their internalization of colonial oppression, and the need to transform that way of interpreting the world and to substitute for it a de-colonized way of interpreting the world and their place in it. This is the pedagogy of de-colonization.

The work of Jack Mezirow, for example, is predicated upon the understanding that “...it is not so much what happens to people but how they interpret and explain what happens to them that determines their actions, hopes, their contentment and emotional well-being, and their performance” (Mezirow, 1991, p. xiii). The purpose of adult education becomes to bring into

consciousness, to subject to critical enquiry, the assumptions and beliefs and ways of seeing and interpreting that people carry with them and that shape their understanding of the world and of themselves. Mezirow’s early work focussed on American women returning to college and undergoing dramatic changes in self-perception and self-identification after challenging culturally prescribed norms and assumptions regarding the roles of women. They underwent what he called a process of perspective transformation:

“Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167).

In his more recent work he develops the concept of transformational learning, which involves critical reflection on existing, taken-for-granted assumptions, and their replacement with a new and transformed way of seeing.

“In order to be free we must be able to ‘name’ our reality, to know it divorced from what has been taken for granted, to speak with our own voice. Thus it becomes crucial that the individual learns to negotiate meanings, purposes, and values critically, reflectively, and rationally instead of passively accepting the

social realities defined by others”
(Mezirow, 1991, p. 3).

Mezirow, like many adult educators, was influenced in his thinking about transformational learning by the work of Paulo Freire (Mezirow, 1995, pp. 44 and 58). Freire held that people had to become aware of the broad socio-economic forces which shaped their lives and shaped their ways of interpreting the world, if they were to develop the capacity to act on the world, and it was the task of adult educators to develop that awareness. This process of ‘conscientization’ is the means by which people “achieve a deepening awareness of both the sociocultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality through action upon it” (Freire, 1970, p. 27). In this process adult learners come to re-define their own experiences, to re-define their sense of themselves, and to be empowered as a consequence.

The virtues of this approach have been argued at the governmental level here in Manitoba. The 1989 Manitoba Task Force on Literacy advanced the same line of reasoning: “For us literacy involves a critical awareness of the forces shaping our society and the capacity to participate in movements to change this society for the better...It is within this broader vision we see the necessity of raising the level of consciousness of our people about their ability to learn and to liberate themselves from oppressive circumstances” (Manitoba, 1989, p.33).

This tradition finds expression in the work of numerous other authors. Brookfield, for example, emphasises the extent to which this approach to adult education involves critical reflection upon hitherto unexamined assumptions:

“Developing critical reflection is probably the idea of the decade for many

adult educators....As an idea critical reflection focuses on three interrelated processes: (1) the process by which adults question and then replace or reframe an assumption that up to that point has been uncritically accepted as representing commonsense wisdom, (2) the process through which adults take alternative perspective on previously taken for granted ideas, actions, forms of reasoning and ideologies, and (3) the process by which adults come to recognize the hegemonic aspects of dominant cultural values and to understand how self-evident renderings of the ‘natural’ state of the world actually bolster the power and self-interest of unrepresentative minorities” (Brookfield, 1995, 2).

This approach to adult education is consistent with the theory and the practice of Diane Hill and Priscilla George, and of the Urban Circle Training Centre. By rooting their approach to adult education in the experiences of Aboriginal learners, and creating the opportunity to reflect on those experiences in a critical way aimed at identifying the broad socio-economic forces that shaped their lives and their way of interpreting their lives, and by substituting for those colonial ways of thinking a new way of thinking rooted in Aboriginal culture, these Aboriginal theorists and practitioners have been working to develop a pedagogy of de-colonization for Aboriginal people.

This approach is most highly developed at Urban Circle Training Centre, and there is much that can be learned from their experience.

(iii) the importance of efforts aimed at job-preparedness, and of a well-paid job at the end of the process, for

purposes of motivation:

Absences are a big problem in Adult Learning Centres. This is in part a function of the damage caused by the internalization of colonialism, and in part a function of the difficult circumstances being faced by many Aboriginal adult learners, especially those with children, and it is particularly a problem, we have observed, among younger adult learners. We believe that working to create cohort groups where possible, and to introduce sharing circles and variants of sharing circles like 'clearing space', will help in improving attendance by creating a sense of collectivity and of belonging. The availability of adequate childcare facilities is also an important aspect of attendance.

But it is clear that intrinsic motivation is a crucial factor. Many of the adult learners whom we interviewed told us that those who succeed at ALCs are those who are motivated to do so. This is reflected in the literature. For example, The Adult Student Persistence Study, aimed at understanding "...the forces that support or discourage an adult's decision to stay..." in adult education, reported that:

"....Adults who mentioned a specific goal, such as 'help my children' or 'get a better job', when asked why they had entered a program were more likely to persist than those who either mentioned no goal or said they were doing it for themselves" (National Centre for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, 2002, p. 11).

Priscilla George makes the same argument: Aboriginal adult learners must be ready to learn, must be willing to learn (George, 1997).

There is some evidence that this readiness is related to age. Tremblay and Taylor, for example, found that:

"Another concern related to the difference in the performances that were found between the younger learners (18-25 years old) and older learners (26 years or older) in both levels of the program. It was the younger learners who had problems associated with attendance and punctuality both within the program setting and the community work placements. It may be that the younger learners were limited by their lack of experience; they were not yet ready to change their existing behaviour patterns.... This was an important finding because over half of the learners in both levels of the program were young adult learners. This is especially important in the Native context because this population (aged between 18-24) is projected to grow by 43% by 2011" (Tremblay and Taylor, 1998, p. 43).

This is certainly consistent with our findings.

We believe that the motivation problem may be linked, in part, to the kinds of jobs that are available to those who graduate from an Adult Learning Centre with the mature grade 12 diploma. In too many cases graduates end up working in fast food outlets or other service sector jobs on a part-time basis at or near the minimum wage. With such jobs they cannot support a family. Thus the incentive to work hard to complete the mature grade 12 diploma in order to get out of the cycle of poverty is reduced. If completion of the mature grade 12 diploma resulted in a job that paid enough to

pull a family out of poverty, or qualified an adult learner to take a 10 month job-specific course that would lead to such a job, then there would be a much greater incentive to attend regularly and to complete the program.

The Urban Circle Training Centre offers such 10 month programs: the health care aide/unit clerk, and the family support worker programs. These programs combine specific job training with an academic component, and are developed in partnership with employers who are prepared to employ graduates at starting wages that can support a family. Graduates benefit because they can move their families off social assistance and into financial independence. Employers benefit because they have well-trained employees and, as at the Health Sciences Centre, because they have Aboriginal employees who, because they are Aboriginal, are better able to relate to and to meet the health care needs of the high proportion of patients who are Aboriginal. More such programs are needed. In the Portage la Prairie area where the Portage Learning Centre and Long Plain Training Centre are located, for example, it would be a matter of identifying those areas where employees, and especially Aboriginal employees, are going to be needed in the future, and then partnering with employers to design a training program that would lead to the employment of Aboriginal graduates at a living wage.

A crucial component of any academic program aimed at preparing Aboriginal adult learners for eventual employment is a life skills course. This is the approach used successfully by the Urban Circle Training Centre in both their Academic Education and Employment Program (mature grade 12), and their more job-specific training programs. In both cases adult learners start with a four week life skills course. "The goal of the life skills program is to have students

become increasingly skilled to handle life's challenges. For example, students practice assertive behaviour and conflict resolution skills in the classroom and are encouraged to apply these skills to their personal and professional lives" (Hawkins, 1997, p. 4). It is significant that the life-skills component is offered as a course for credit. The same approach— ie., making life skills a course for credit— is used successfully by the University of Manitoba's ACCESS program. They refer to it as remediation: "Integrating remediation into the formal process through a credit course or program is the most effective tool and produces the greatest success, chiefly because students can see a direct link between the activity, which may be difficult for them, and their goal" (Levin and Alcorn, 1999, p. 25). Tremblay and Taylor found the same: "...the inclusion of life-skills as a key curriculum component was found effective". When the life-skills component is rooted in an Aboriginal cultural approach, as at Urban Circle, the effect is still more positive (Tremblay and Taylor, 1998, p. 33).

(iv) the importance of community, as well as individual, transformation:

It is not enough simply for successful graduates to find jobs, even if those jobs pay well enough to pull them and their families out of the cycle of poverty. The full potential of Aboriginal adult education is not realized if those who graduate leave their communities behind; they are needed to contribute to the building of the Aboriginal community. Moses Coady, driving force behind the Antigonish Movement, condemned that education which "...effectively stripped the ordinary people of their brightest and best, thus depriving them of the energy, brains and leadership that would let them improve their own lot in society" (Crane, 1987, p.

228). Paulo Freire made the same argument. Those Aboriginal adults who successfully complete the mature grade 12 diploma are needed to contribute to the Aboriginal community as a whole. There is some evidence that this happens. Ruth Murdoch and Eleanor Thompson argue that Urban Circle graduates are much more active in the community— in community centres, with youth groups, at their children's schools, in neighbourhood associations, etc.— than they were before they attended Urban Circle. The same may be the case at other ALCs. This is an hypothesis well worth investigating. However, this desirable outcome could be, and should be, pursued more intentionally by designing and offering a course in Community Development or Community Economic Development that would count for credit for the mature grade 12 diploma. The course would deal with the principles of community development, and would include a strong practicum/experiential component with Aboriginal adult learners working with effective community development organizations, and wherever possible, effective Aboriginal community development organizations. Learning the principles of collective approaches to development, and being exposed to community-based organizations doing such work, would increase the likelihood that graduates of Adult Learning Centres would become active in their communities. The development of communities from the bottom up through the active and informed involvement of members of the community themselves is a long-term solution to many of the problems of Aboriginal, and many other, communities (Loxley, 2000; Silver, 2000).

Part Five: Conclusion and Recommendations

Adult Learning Centres are a very exciting educational innovation, and an important addition to the tools available to the province to build a better future for Manitobans, and in particular a better future for Aboriginal people. Given the demographics of Manitoba— which suggest a continued and significant growth of the Aboriginal population both in absolute and relative terms for quite some time into the future— such initiatives are particularly important. Their importance is accentuated by the fact that, generally speaking, the regular school system has not yet made the changes needed to reflect Aboriginal educational needs, as documented in a recent study of Aboriginal education in Winnipeg inner city high schools (Silver and Mallett, 2002).

The importance for Aboriginal people of the work being done by ALCs is not just that individuals can transform their lives, as important as that is. It is that Aboriginal people as a whole, Aboriginal people collectively, can benefit from appropriate and effective forms of education so as to take charge of their lives. As Ruth Murdoch, Co-Director of Urban Circle, puts it: "It's about the empowerment of a nation" (Murdoch, February 20, 2003).

The five Adult Learning Centres that we investigated were chosen specifically because they had a relatively high proportion of Aboriginal learners and as a result, it may be the case that the recommendations that follow apply *only* to ALCs with high proportions of Aboriginal learners. On the other hand, the demographics of Manitoba are such that the education of Aboriginal people will in future be a central concern for all educational institutions, including all ALCs. We are of this latter view, and therefore we believe that the recommenda-

tions that follow will have relevance, to varying degrees, to all ALCs in Manitoba.

Each ALC is a little different from the others, which is one of their strengths— they shape their efforts to the needs of their community and their learners. Each of those we investigated is doing very good work. That is abundantly evident from our interviews: many Aboriginal adult learners are benefiting enormously from their attendance at ALCs. Also evident, however, is that a very good thing can be made better still. The recommendations that follow are rooted in that belief and are offered in that spirit.

We recommend that:

1. Additional funding be directed at Adult Learning Centres, both to make much needed additional resources available to existing ALCs, and to increase the numbers of ALCs operating in Manitoba.

The Adult Learning Centres are very effective in moving adult learners, including Aboriginal adult learners, from dependence to independence. The interview evidence is that their holistic and learner-centred approach, warm and friendly environments, and caring and respectful staff create an environment in which significant numbers of adult learners are succeeding. The ALCs do this despite being under-staffed. Each of the ALCs that we investigated is in need of additional staffing: to meet the high counseling demands that follow from the use of the holistic approach; and/or to add teaching assistants to make possible more individualized attention to learners; and/or to provide administrative assistance in order to free existing staff to concentrate on teaching and counselling. Without additional funding to add staff, the possibility of losing existing staff due to burnout seems to us to be high. In addition, in some cases the physical space in which ALCs are

housed is not sufficiently conducive to learning, and additional funds are needed to meet minimal standards.

Even at Urban Circle Training Centre which, after 13 years, has a larger budget and program than the other ALCs that we investigated, “the funding is really an issue” (Thompson, Feb.20, 2003). The many sources that have to be tapped for funding to sustain their highly effective educational strategy, the evaluations that eat up valuable time “year after year after year”, the bewildering array of applications and reporting requirements, mean that “funding is inefficiently done”, and that “the energy that it takes to sustain the diversity and level of funding that we have is enormous”, says Co-Director Eleanor Thompson. We are firmly of the belief that *all* of the very effective ALCs that we investigated are in need of additional and more sustained funding.

In addition, we believe that *new* Adult Learning Centres should be added in areas where the demand for the mature grade 12 diploma is high. And we believe that the experience at Long Plain Training Centre in particular reveals the significant potential for the development of ALCs in rural Aboriginal communities. The ALCs work. We believe that adding more would be cost effective, and that a cost-benefit analysis of Adult Learning Centres would make that clear. We agree with Peter Ferris, who argued in his earlier study of Adult Learning Centres that “...a wider economic analysis of the centres would be worthwhile...I believe such a study would be very much in the interests of the centres” (Ferris, 2000, p.15). When people are moved from economic dependence to independence, the benefits to society as a whole are very significant. Additional investments in ALCs would, in addition to their many other benefits, be very productive investments.

2. Aboriginal culture be promoted at all Adult Learning Centres, by the increased use of sharing circles, additional educational opportunities for staff and adult learners, and by making the hiring of Aboriginal staff a priority.

There is strong evidence that adult learners benefit when their education is rooted in their experiences, and there is evidence— especially from Aboriginal scholars and practitioners— that Aboriginal adults are more likely to learn in an environment that is culturally Aboriginal. Aboriginal students have a right to learn about their culture, and about the attempts to eliminate their culture, and to come to terms with who they are and how they came as a people to be where they are today. And when they do, the benefits are considerable. Those benefits include a stronger personal and collective foundation upon which to build academic success. Several steps can be taken to increase the extent to which this is the case at ALCs.

a. Sharing circles be offered on a regular and voluntary basis at all Adult Learning Centres.

Many Aboriginal adult learners carry with them a burden of pain that is the product of colonialism and racism, and that is a major obstacle to the achievement of educational goals. Sharing circles are a means of dealing with that pain, and with the day-to-day problems that come with hard lives, in a safe and supportive environment. Many Aboriginal adult learners are searching for the sense of meaning that comes with a knowledge of their own culture. Aboriginal students have a right to learn about their own culture, and about the attempt to eliminate their culture, and to come to terms with who they are and how they came as a people to

be where they are today. And when they do, the benefits are considerable. Those benefits include a stronger personal and collective foundation upon which to build academic success. Aboriginal people experienced and skilled in the use of sharing circles can be called upon, where necessary, to train staff and adult learners in the use of sharing circles.

b. making opportunities available to staff members of ALCs to become familiar with Aboriginal culture and history.

Staff at several ALCs have indicated to us that they do not feel sufficiently knowledgeable about Aboriginal culture and history, and have expressed a desire to learn more about their Aboriginal students. A systematic program of professional development aimed at familiarizing staff in ALCs with Aboriginal history and culture is recommended.

c. ensuring that Native Studies is offered for credit at every ALC, and that an understanding of the process of colonization and its effects be central to the course.

Many Aboriginal students expressed to us a very strong desire to become more familiar with their culture and history. Making Native Studies available as a course for credit at Adult Learning Centres is recommended. An understanding of the process of colonization is an essential component in the healing process that is the basis for effective learning for many Aboriginal students.

d. hiring Aboriginal staff whenever possible.

Many Aboriginal students observed that they feel more comfortable in a setting where Aboriginal people are employed. Making the

employment of Aboriginal staff a priority is recommended.

3. Group-based learning, including the use of orientation sessions for incoming learners, be promoted in Adult Learning Centres where it is not now used.

The evidence in the literature in support of group-based or cohort learning is strong, and numerous Aboriginal adult learners expressed a desire for more group involvement. Some Aboriginal adult learners feel quite isolated in some ALCs. The use of cohorts can provide very strong peer supports to adult learners, especially where effective orientation programs are conducted at the time that the cohorts are formed. In these cases there is strong evidence— in the literature and from our interviews— that such strong bonds can be developed that a sense of being a part of a family emerges, with very considerable and holistic benefits for Aboriginal adult learners. Full-fledged cohorts will not be possible in all ALCs— and indeed there are considerable advantages, especially in terms of accessibility and the opportunity to work at one's own pace, to the continuous intake model— but where they are not, opportunities can be created to enable other forms of group-based learning to take place. In those ALCs where a full orientation program is not now offered, this should be introduced. In some cases, we note that doing this is dependent upon the additional funding referred to in Recommendation 1 above.

4. A number of successful innovations developed at Urban Circle Training Centre be adapted for use, in whole or in part, in other Adult Learning Centres.

The Urban Circle Training Centre has been in operation longer than the other ALCs that we investigated, and has an all-Aboriginal student body. They have developed over the years some highly effective ways of educating Aboriginal adult learners. What they have learned should be shared to the greatest extent possible. While it is true that not every ALC can or should operate just as Urban Circle does, nevertheless much of what Urban Circle does is transferrable to other Adult Learning Centres to a greater or lesser extent.

a. life skills be made a component of what is learned at ALCs, and this be done by offering life skills as a course for credit.

A central feature of the work at Urban Circle is the use, in all of their programs, of a specially designed life skills component that is offered as a course in the first four weeks of every program. The life skills course teaches a host of practical skills that are transferrable to adult learners' family lives and to their workplaces. It builds a sense of community and of peer support among a cohort of learners. And most importantly, we believe, it addresses the impact of colonization on Aboriginal people, serving as a de-colonization strategy aimed at creating the psychological foundation upon which academic learning can take place.

b. ALC staff who feel the need to learn more about Aboriginal culture and its role in adult education have the opportunity to serve an 'internship' at UCTC to enable them to take back to their own ALCs those aspects of what Urban Circle does that would fit with their own ALC.

The approach that has been taken at Urban Circle does not easily come off the page; it has

to be experienced. The best way to learn about the Urban Circle life skills program is experientially. It is an approach that works. It transforms the lives of Aboriginal adult learners. The first four weeks at Urban Circle are an intense and transformative experience, according to the Urban Circle learners who were interviewed. If Urban Circle were to become a training centre for the staff of Adult Learning Centres, by means of intensive four week immersions at Urban Circle during the life skills program, much that is valuable could be taken back to, and adapted for use in, other ALCs.

c. job-specific programs be developed by ALCs, in partnership with prospective employers, following an economic analysis of what occupations are likely to be in need of trained employees.

The job specific programs offered at Urban Circle work very well. Almost every graduate finds work at a wage high enough to support a family, thus enabling the transition from economic dependence to independence. The prospect of such a job at the completion of studies would be likely to serve as a strong motivator for Aboriginal adult learners. And based on the experience at Urban Circle Training Centre, the benefits to the community of moving people from social assistance to financial independence are considerable, and include greater family stability, a greater likelihood of children succeeding in school, and greater community involvement. The key to this kind of training is determining where the future demand is going to be, and then creating partnerships with prospective employers to design a program that will train people to fill that demand at wage levels that can support a family.

5. Social service agencies be made aware of the Adult Learning Centres, and arrangements be made that clients motivated to learn be directed to the ALCs.

At some of the Adult Learning Centres that we investigated staff are spending time working with social agencies to make them aware of the ALC, and to cut through bureaucratic obstacles that get in the way of those who want to get their mature grade 12 diploma. This ought to be done at a more general level, perhaps by Adult Learning and Literacy, so that all social service agencies are aware of and are prepared to use ALCs, and so that bureaucratic obstacles now in the way of potential learners are cleared away.

6. Faculties of Education be encouraged to use Adult Learning Centres as teacher-training sites.

The approach to teaching at Adult Learning Centres is different in many important respects from that used in most high schools. If more Adult Learning Centres are to be created, as we are recommending, then instructors with the special skills and attitudes necessary to work in ALCs will be needed. Enabling students in Faculties of Education to practice teach in ALCs, and to be exposed to the energetic and dedicated staff in ALCs, would be likely to increase the supply of such teachers. Consideration might also be given to the development of an adult stream in Faculties of Education— in addition to the current early, middle and senior years streams.

7. A course in Community Development be added to those offered in the mature grade 12 diploma program.

The full potential of ALCs is not realized if those who graduate with a mature grade 12 diploma leave their communities behind. That potential is more fully realized when Aboriginal people contribute their skills to the development of their communities. This is community development, or community economic development. The merits of CED are such that all provincial government policies are now evaluated through a "CED Lens". A course in CD/CED that included instruction in the principles of CD and a practicum component that involved working with a community-based organization would increase the likelihood that graduates of the mature grade 12 diploma program would use their skills to contribute to the development of their communities.

9. Research be conducted to determine what steps might be taken to bring more Aboriginal men into Adult Learning Centres:

The considerable majority of adult learners in ALCs are women. Men are much less likely to attend an Adult Learning Centre to complete their mature grade 12. We did interview some men who are attending ALCs and who are highly motivated and are doing well, and in some cases these are men who have had difficult backgrounds and are undergoing a personal transformation as they work for their grade 12 diploma. However, they are in the minority. It would be most valuable to design a research study to attempt to ascertain why men are much less likely to attend an ALC, and to determine what steps might be taken to increase the numbers of men attending ALCs.

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**by Jim Silver
with Darlene Klyne and Freeman Simard**

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