

APPENDIX 2: ELDERS IN THE CLASSROOM*

It is the Elders' responsibility to guard sacred knowledge and to maintain the ceremonial oral tradition of knowledge transmission. The Elders bring with them traditional knowledge and perspectives passed down from generation to generation through the oral tradition. The reference to Elders' wisdom has lately been termed Indigenous knowledge or traditional knowledge. Their traditional knowledge and wisdom will give insight to teachers willing to reshape curriculum, validating First Nations, Métis, and Inuit content and perspectives.

Elder Expectation

When you invite Elders, it is important that you are clear on what you expect from them. If you are asking them to contribute with their knowledge, wisdom, and guidance, then say so. Some Elders may not be familiar with what teachers and curriculum writers are trying to do, so explaining what is required of them is essential to a good working relationship. You want them to contribute First Nations, Métis, or Inuit content and perspectives. The Elders need to feel confident that they will be of assistance. Let them know that you see their role as wisdom keepers and they need to draw upon their personal experience, cultural

* Source: King, Anna-Leah. "Elders in the Classroom." Adapted with permission of the author. Available as appendices to the resources on the following website: Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation. "Unit Plans: Science—Secondary Level." Stewart Resources Center. <https://www.stf.sk.ca/portal.jsp?Sy3uQUnbK9L2RmSZs02CjV/LfyjbyjsxssfEZJZhE4gE=F> (18 Feb. 2015).

knowledge, and teachings to contribute to the process. The Elders will share what is acceptable and give caution for what they view as sacred knowledge that is only to be shared in the context of ceremony.

Elders need time to think before they answer. Do not be impatient and feel they are not answering soon enough, as they will answer your questions in time. Some Elders are reflective, philosophical thinkers. They will review holistically what you have asked of them. A concept that you think is simple and straightforward has many different dimensions to First Nations speakers, and they must put the concept into the context of the whole and analyze the dimension of its interrelatedness. Sometimes they translate what you are saying to themselves in their language. They think things out in their mother tongue first and then find the words of closest approximation in English. Not all words and concepts are readily translatable. That is why letting the Elders know what is expected of them beforehand is important because it gives them time to think it over and to find some area of common ground.

Protocol for Inviting Elders

Please note that there are Elders for each of the Aboriginal groups (five distinct language groups of First Nations in Manitoba, Métis, and Inuit). It is important to identify each of the separate Aboriginal groups—First Nations, Métis, and Inuit—and their respective protocols.

Elders need to be approached in a respectful and traditional way, with consideration for the diversity of belief systems held by individual Elders. Each First Nation has its own protocol and it is important to seek guidance from people who know the Elder you wish to invite. One way of addressing the issue is to allow Elders to take tobacco from a bowl or a pouch of tobacco. In this way the person can accept or decline the tobacco and everyone is respected. Gifts are appropriate for those Elders who do not accept tobacco, and honoraria are used to indicate their service is valued (Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre).

Elders can be asked to lead the gatherings with prayer and ceremony. First Nations gatherings always begin with prayer and ceremony. It is entirely appropriate to ask this of them. It may not be what you are familiar with, but you will soon realize the benefits of respecting First Nations protocol and ceremonial practice. The Elders may want to begin with a smudge on the first gathering and offer prayer for the task at hand and the team that has been brought together. The Elders are well aware that any given group put together is there to learn from one another and so blessings towards this endeavour are prayed for. Sometimes, depending on the size of the project, a pipe ceremony may be requested. Each Elder may have a slightly different approach to opening and closing a ceremony. Some may speak for a while. Others will ask you to share so they can become more familiar with everyone. The Elder will take it from there.

Elder Care

Elders do not expect anything, but it would be nice to assign one person to see to their needs. Offer them a comfortable seat and debrief them on the expectations for the gathering. Introduce them to everyone and generally make them feel welcome. See to it that they have water, juice, coffee, or tea. It is good to have a snack for them at coffee break. Invite them to pray over the food before you eat. Allow them to be first in line for lunch or let them know you will serve them. This is an example of First Nations protocol. These are small things, but kind gestures go a long way with Elders. They appreciate when younger people make efforts to lighten their load. These gestures make the Elders feel welcome and cared for in a respectful way.

Gifts

It is appropriate to have a gift of appreciation for the Elders. Even when Elders are paid for their time through an honorarium, some teachers also provide a small gift, such as a basket of teas or jams.