

# **The Medicine Room: A Teaching Tool for Elders and Educational Opportunity for Youth**

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Recognizing the knowledge and understanding Elders hold about sacred medicines, plants, and their uses the First Nation University of Canada and Elders joined efforts to develop a Medicine Room and offer workshops to youth. In 2009, through a partnership with Elders and researchers, plants for the Medicine Room were collected at different stages of growth for display. Starting in 2011, schools in and around Regina were invited to visit the Medicine Room. During the visits, Elders spent time with the youth, shared their knowledge about protocol and examined the plants with the youth. This paper examines the ways in which this process was developed and carried out. The results of an evaluation which was conducted after 10 visits from over 300 students and 23 teachers reveals that the youth really appreciated seeing and learning about the different types of plants and medicines, meeting and interacting with Elders, and hearing traditional stories and legends.

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## INTRODUCTION

Elders and their knowledge are important in First Nations communities, and the interest for the knowledge that traditional Elders have is particularly special. Just as there are distinct cultures among the

First Nations people, there are distinct perspectives in which Elders share their knowledge. Unfortunately, since colonization, much of this knowledge was lost and it has become necessary to have this knowledge recorded and transcribed in written form as oral tradition is no longer the primary form of learning for young people. The connection to the land that First Nations people possess comes from the belief that every aspect of creation was given a spirit and purpose in the circle of life. This means that they were given plants that would provide foods and medicines for good health, trees that would provide shelter, and animals that would sacrifice their lives to provide food and clothing for the humans (Tanner, 1992). Our mission at the First Nations University of Canada (FNUniv) is to enhance the quality of life, and to preserve, protect, and interpret the history, language, culture and artistic heritage of First Nations people. In our efforts to preserve this form of knowledge, particularly plant knowledge, we have worked very closely with Elders who are familiar with this knowledge and who are willing to share this with others.

The past decade has seen a dramatic increase in the Aboriginal population with a growth of 45% between 1996 and 2006, which is nearly 6 times faster than their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Statistics Canada, 2008). Along with the growing population of Aboriginal people, it was also found that Aboriginal people are increasingly urban with 54% living in urban areas in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2008). A smaller portion of these First Nations people (both status and non-status) lived on reserve than off reserve. As such, only 40% of First Nations people are living on reserve compared to 60% living off reserve. This is slightly higher than the 58% it had been in 1996 (Statistics Canada, 2008). With more and more First Nations people living in urban settings, this traditional knowledge has become less accessible. This raises important issues regarding the loss of interaction with the land which is an important aspect of many First Nation's cultures.

When many people think of Aboriginal healing and knowledge, they visualize it in a reserve or remote community where healing traditions are supported by the culture. But because the numbers of First Nations people living in urban settings are relatively high, and the population is continuing to grow quickly, this context needs to be addressed. There should be no barriers between the urban and reserve or remote communities. This form of knowledge should be made more accessible as the population of

First Nations people continues to grow. As western medicine continues to expand so too should the access to the traditional knowledge; including uses of plants as medicines and cultural healing practices. Elders are important teachers as they teach the importance of responsibility and relationships within the family and community, which reinforces inter-generational connections and identities. Unfortunately, it was found that in 2006 only 4 in 10 First Nations youth living off-reserve interacted with Elders at least once a week outside of school (Canadian Council of Learning, 2009). Without the opportunity to pass on this traditional information to youth, there is a much larger disconnect between First Nations youth and their culture.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

The adoption of holistic methods and traditional ways of life seems to be something that is of particular interest to many. Plants have always played a primordial role in the First Nations culture, and traditional knowledge on how to use these plants is passed from generation to generation with grandparents, parents, and children spending time together in the outdoors learning about the plants and the land. Here we review some projects in which traditional teachings were passed down by Elders, with different approaches that they took to share this form of knowledge. We focused on projects involving Elders, plants, and youth.

A Traditional Plants and Foods program to promote self-sufficiency and wellness for Indigenous people resulted in a cook book which included foods those Aboriginal ancestors once ate (Krohn & Segrest, 2010). Many of the recipes and items within this project were described because of the Elder involvement during round table discussions and workshops at the North West Indian College in Bellingham, Washington. The program implemented culturally grounded, multi-generational and holistic classes about native foods and medicines to community members. All of this was made possible by Elders sharing their knowledge. In relation to our project here at the FNUniv, the Traditional Foods of Puget Sound Project also recognizes and endorses the use of native foods and medicines to help prevent many modern diseases, while building cultural identity. The traditional food has a great importance to culture and place. They believed that bringing back this knowledge of traditional foods would benefit the health of the Indigenous people and their communities. To make this information accessible to others

within the surrounding communities they had hopes to print a book based on their findings and the recipes that were created from the project (Krohn & Segrest, 2010).

In order to understand the transfer of knowledge and how Elders, adults, and youth perceive each other's stories, a program was created where Elders and adults could share their knowledge with the youth in their communities. Oral tradition was the tool used for sharing the knowledge in this project conducted in an Alaskan Native Community to foster intergenerational dialogue between youth, adults and Elders (Wexler, 2011). The expected outcome of this method was seen to be community change, by exchange and action (communication) between the different generations. The intergenerational exchange took place with adults and Elders sharing their stories with the youth. The youth later produced digital stories and invited the respected adults and Elders as an audience to share these stories with. Being a part of the audience, adults and Elders who took part in the project were given the opportunity to understand how the youth perceived the stories that they presented. This gave them an understanding of the youth's minds. The youth learned life lessons and began to realize how their culture shows up in both overt and subtle ways in the adult and Elders history and teachings. The telling-listening-reflecting through the digital stories invited a rekindling of past relationships. This research project created an arena for intergenerational sharing process that encouraged all ages and stages of life to connect with one another which supports the transmission of cultural knowledge.

The use of native plants, plants used as medicines and the traditional Aboriginal knowledge of plants was also a topic of interest for a study done at the University of Waikato (Wehi & Wehi, 2009). This study was not one done by Elders sharing knowledge with youth but is worth mentioning because it recognized that with the rapid urbanization there is a dislocation of people from their traditional resources. The study recognized that assimilation has much to do with the diminished traditional knowledge among the First Nations youth in this region. The researchers gathered knowledge from the Elders in their region who knew much about the plants that were used as medicines. They then compiled a list of the common uses of the particular plants in this document. Although recognizing the disconnect between the youth and this traditional knowledge that the Elders acquired, this study

was not provided to create an avenue of learning for the youth but instead to provide a teaching tool for youth.

The literature surrounding the topic of the transmission of traditional plant knowledge and the traditional aboriginal knowledge recognizes the disconnection of the youth acquiring these teachings in present day. What most of these studies have recognized was the need for the reversal of deculturalization and despiritualization. Tradition is referred to the past, and what these studies and many others are trying to accomplish is the connection between the past and present knowledge systems. Some of these articles talk about the disconnection of First Nations people and their culture as an answer to many of the current negative issues they are faced with today. The relocation of this knowledge is seen to be a strong component of their self-identity to possess both for First Nations people but also for the medical world as well.

With a strong emphasis on Elder involvement the program located at FNUniv has used many forms of sharing this knowledge with youth and the community at large. A Medicine Room was created to display native plants and medicines, to provide a teaching atmosphere where Elders could share their knowledge with youth, and where youth and the community could come to get a better understanding of the uses, locations, and protocols to picking and storing these native species. For the Medicine Room (plant room) project we found it necessary to use oral tradition to educate youth in the uses of plants as medicines. This was done by Elders, just as it once was in the past within First Nations culture. Teaching circles was the primary use of transferring this knowledge. Hindelang (2006) stresses this important aspect of sharing plant knowledge with youth due to the concern of many plants becoming scarce in various regions. She believes that it is important to share this knowledge so that something may be done about it in the future. When the Elders themselves are no longer with us neither will their knowledge, unless they are given the opportunity to share it.

## OBJECTIVES

In collaboration with Elders, a Medicine Room was developed at the FNUniv. Elders offered workshops on plants and traditional teachings to youth. The objectives of this study were to evaluate the quality of the workshops and find ways to improve the youth's learning experience and

better serve the needs of the community. Community involvement is a cornerstone of success when working with Aboriginal people (Ferreira & Gendron, 2011). When the current project was designed, it was important to have the workshops offered by Elders. Elders are the best resources when it is time to share knowledge in a culturally-sensitive manner.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### *Plant Picking*

During the spring, summer and fall of 2009, 98 specimens from 37 native plant species were collected at different stages of growth by the research team under the supervision of Elder Betty McKenna. For most of the species, we had plant specimens before the flowering stage, during the flowering stage, and during seed production. The plants were hand-picked in a native prairie near Moose Jaw (50.39 N 105.92 W, and altitude 2,300 ft) and in a restored native prairie on the grounds of the FNUniv, Regina Campus. In order to follow the proper traditional Aboriginal protocols, Elder McKenna made an offering of tobacco and prayed before taking each plant.

### *Plant Preparation*

After the plants were gathered they were sent to the FNUniv laboratory where they were dried and restored using Flower Drying Art Silica Gel (Activa Product Inc, Marshall Texas USA). Silica gel absorbs the moisture of the flower with little damage to the plants color and form. The plant was not pressed but was placed in a container with a generous amount of silica gel to cover it. Care was taken to maintain the plants' natural shape. Drying times varied from two to seven days depending on the amount of fresh plant material.

Dried plants were mounted in 29 wooden cases (63 cm x 48 cm) with protective glass covers. Each plant was placed on a piece of foam so that it would not move within the case. The plants were set up on display within the Medicine Room with its name in English, Latin, and when possible, Cree, Saulteaux, Nakota, Dakota, and Dene. These are the five most predominant tribal languages in Saskatchewan. The cases were installed on shelves in a teaching laboratory, which is now known as the Medicine Room. Elders felt it was important to protect the plants with protective glass covers and youth participants were not allowed to touch the plants displayed in wooden cases. There were, however, some plants that were available to the students

to touch and smell. Youth could touch dried tobacco plants with their leaves and seeds. Sage was also placed out in the open for students to smell and touch as they toured the Medicine Room.

#### *Protocol During Youth Visits*

Tobacco plants were grown in a community garden located on the grounds of the FNUniv, Regina Campus. The leaves were collected in the fall and hung to dry within the Medicine Room. It is protocol to present an Elder with tobacco upon asking for guidance or support. Presenting each Elder with a tobacco tie was a way of showing respect for the knowledge we were presented with. To make the tobacco ties, the tobacco was dried and put inside of a cloth and tied with a cloth tie. Both a tobacco tie and an honorarium were presented to the Elder upon each workshop. A tobacco tie is also called a tobacco bundle. Tobacco is a very important part of the First Nations culture and it is used as token of respect and offering. Tobacco is one of the most predominant sacred items found among many tribes and was used for smoking when ceremonies took place. This event carries great meaning because of tobacco being such a sacred substance. It represents relationships between the creator, other humans, animals and plants (Tanner, 1992).

#### *Videos*

During the plant collection in 2009 a series of 5 videos were filmed. The videos capture Medicine Walks and the collection of plants by Elder McKenna and Elder Walter Lavallee. Both Elders were given their knowledge of plants and their uses of medicines from their grandmothers. They would follow their grandmothers around as children and learn from them what the plants were, what the uses were and how important it was to respect and honor them.

The following four videos were filmed with Elder McKenna: Early Spring Medicine Walk, Late Spring Medicine Walk, Summer Medicine Walk and Early Fall Medicine Walk. These videos were produced to capture the various stages of growth of the plants in a native prairie near Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. The videos follow Elder McKenna during these walks as she shows the different plants that can be found in the area and describes the uses of these plants as medicines. One of the very important messages she wanted to express during the Early Fall walk was that people cannot just go

ahead and mix different plants together. She stressed the importance that the plants must give you permission before mixing. She said that we all have DNA memory located within our bodies from our ancestors from thousands of years and that DNA memory connects to everything on the land. When we put tobacco on the ground and ask in a good way for that plant to come and take care of us by healing, it expands that memory within us, and that plant responds in kind. If we do not go to the Creator first and ask for this blessing, the plant cannot help us in a pharmaceutical way.

The fifth video was filmed in the spring of 2009 with Elder Lavallee. This video was filmed at Piapot First Nation where Elder Lavallee resides. This video shows Elder Lavallee talking about plants. One of the most important aspects of this video was when Elder Lavallee spoke about protocol to picking plants. He said that the number one protocol to picking plants is the use of tobacco. Tobacco is a very vital part of the medicine walks as it is his way of honoring the plants. He begins by stating the reason for going out on his medicine walk and offers the Creator tobacco by placing it on the ground, and asks the plants for their blessing to heal with each of the plants he takes.

The videos are hosted on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/user/medicineroom1>) and are accessible to teachers who can make use of them in the classroom or integrate them into their science curricula. We sent letters to the school districts and First Nations advising them of these videos that teachers could access in addition to the youth visits to the Medicine Room.

#### *Youth Visits to the Medicine Room*

A post-secondary student was hired to organize the workshops. Invitations were sent by fax and email to all First Nations Bands and schools in Saskatchewan and schools located in Regina and areas within a three-hour drive from the FNUniv, Regina Campus. The visits to the Medicine Room were free of charge to schools. The invitation included a list of all the Elders involved in the project and topic areas that could be discussed. Each workshop was accompanied by a 30-minute tour of the FNUniv and a survey. Workshops were up to 45 minutes long and the survey took an extra 20 minutes to complete. Six Elders took part in this project. They are all respected Elders who are known for their traditional knowledge. Each has a special relationship with the land, along with the knowledge of protocol to

picking, storing and using plants, which were passed down to them at some point in their lives. The Elders who took part in this project consisted of three women and three males. There were 10 visits from schools, from January to June and from September to December 2011. Grades ranged from K-12, with over 300 students and 23 teachers.

The students were led to the Medicine Room where the Elder was already awaiting their arrival. Most Elders showed their respect to the plants prior to the student's arrival by praying for the plants, by smudging with sage (both the plants and themselves) as a sign of respect. This was done before students arrived, and students were not expected to take part in this practice but Elders would explain what the sage smell was and reasons for it as they began the workshop.

For each workshop an Elder was seated at one end of the room, students sat around him/her and listened to the teachings and stories that the Elder shared with them. Each workshop opened with a prayer. A book was used by some Elders to show the students the different stages of growth of a plant through pictures. After the stories were finished the Elder led students around the room to view each of the plants and their purposes. Students were then given the opportunity to ask questions.

### *Survey*

Following the workshop, students and teachers were given a brief survey to evaluate their experience with the Elder and the workshop in the Medicine Room. The survey consisted of general questions pertaining to the workshop, presentation, material and Elders. Part One of the survey presented the questions in a Likert Scale format ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree" and allowed for only one response per statement. Part Two of the survey focused on gaining a greater understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the workshop by allowing students and teachers to elaborate. Some questions were designed for teachers only.

## RESULTS

### *Likert Scale*

The results have yielded a number of conclusions regarding the overall success of the Medicine Room. Mostly all feedback was extremely positive. Using the Likert Scale (Table 1) of the evaluations, it was concluded that over 95% of the respondents thought the workshop was well organized

and were pleased with the material they learned. Over 90% of the respondents stated that the Elders covered their material clearly, responded well to their questions, and encouraged participation. Over 85% of the respondents stated the workshop met their expectations as well as their needs/interests. The highlight of the workshop for most was seeing and learning about the different types of plants and medicines, meeting and interacting with an Elder, and hearing traditional stories and legends. The majority of the negative feedback relating to the workshop was a result of logistical issues with the building or tour such as noise, smell, crowding, and having to sit or stand uncomfortably. The tobacco plant, its role in traditional Aboriginal healing and ceremony, the demonstration of making the tobacco tie, and giving the students and teachers the seeds to take home were mentioned as the most interesting and defining parts of the workshop.

Table 1. Questions related to the workshops in the Medicine Room. Participants answered according to the Likert Scale.

Questions:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Partially Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The material was very good	47%	50%	3%	
The material was practical to my needs and interests	36 %	54%	11%	
The workshop was well organized	58%	40%	4%	
The workshop met my expectations	38%	49%	10%	3%
I am pleased with the material I have learned	65%	31%	4%	
Elders covered material clearly	64%	30%	6%	
Elders responded well to questions	60%	33%	4%	2%
Elders encouraged participation	49%	46%	4%	1%

### Questions

There were a variety of answers given when we asked “*What was the best part of the workshop?*” Most of the responses related to seeing the plants and medicines in the room, learning how the plants are used in medicinal ways, and/or hearing stories and legends relating to traditional healing and spirituality. Several of the participants identified various specific components of the workshop as their favorite part. For example, two respondents stated that the question and answer portion of the workshop was the best part. Another five stated that the prayer and spiritual aspect of the workshop was the best part. For one of these students being able to hear an Elder speak Cree, which the student identified as his/her “*native language,*” was the best part of the workshop. A student said that the best part of the workshop was that she “*learned all the medicine that Indians used*”.

There was also a tremendous amount of positive feedback regarding the Elders who facilitated the workshop. One student said that the best part of the experience was “*how comfortable it was*”. Respondents identified the Elders in general as the best part, while some stated that meeting and talking with them was the highlight of the workshop. Again a large number of the respondents enjoyed listening to the Elders speak and hearing their stories. Additionally, three participants liked the Elders’ attitudes, with one identifying the Elder’s sense of humor as the best part of the workshop. Another couple respondents stated that the knowledge the Elders were sharing was the best part as it was very “*powerful stuff*.”

Many of the students and teachers enjoyed hearing the stories and legends the Elders told during the workshop. In relation to the plants and medicines a large majority of the students and teachers enjoyed seeing the plants and medicines. Sixty-nine respondents identified the seeing and learning about the plants in general as the best part of the workshop. Twenty-nine others enjoyed learning about the tobacco, seeing the tobacco tie demonstration, and getting to see a tobacco plant in the various stages of its lifecycle. Specifically, two participants liked learning about the different types of sage, while the remaining six found the smudging or lighting of the sage to be the best part of the workshop. Finally, one participant felt that seeing the Saskatoon berry plant was the best part of the workshop.

The responses regarding *what people liked least about the workshop* varied as well. The majority of the attendants reported they liked everything

about the workshop, but for some, there were issues, either with the workshop content, the way it was presented, or the logistics of the space in which it was held. Nearly half of all the participants (100) stated that they liked everything about the workshop and would not change anything. Thirty-five attendees did not answer the question. The remaining responses centred on two main ideas: 1) the way in which the workshop was delivered and 2) the content of the workshop itself. Finally, many of the respondents did not like some aspects of the plants and medicine portion of the workshop. This list includes: only getting to see the plants (13); the yellow flower (1); the flowers (1); the tobacco (1); the strawberry (1); and the chokecherry bush (1).

There was a section of the evaluation that was made for teachers only. Not all teachers had the opportunity to complete the survey because some had to assist their students in filling out the evaluations and did not have time to complete the section designated for them. There were a total of 23 teachers surveyed. When asked *if the workshop was helpful in promoting health and science concepts to their students*, most teachers thought that the workshop was helpful. Nine of the teachers mentioned that learning about how plants are used medically promoted health and science concepts. Many of the teachers focused on how the workshop provided an introductory look at how plants are used as medicines and their natural healing properties. Seven of the teachers acknowledged how this workshop taught their students about the important connection between the earth and humans and how we must respect the earth and all that it provides for us. One teacher said *“any opportunity for students to make connections between their studies and traditional ways of knowing from Elder Betty is awesome”*. Some of the teachers mentioned how the Elders demonstrated the sacred connection between humans and Mother Earth and how they honour that respect through their healing work. Five of the teachers also noted how the structure of the workshop was helpful. Not only did their students get to see the plants, but also they got to interact with Elders, and learn from them. According to one teacher, the students remained engaged, curious, and interested throughout the entire workshop.

## CONCLUSION

This project is an important way to promote Aboriginal learning from an Aboriginal perspective as Aboriginal Peoples in Canada have long advocated their own values, cultural traditions and ways of knowing. Their

perspective of learning integrates all knowledge and experience throughout each stage of one's life. This includes the native plants, medicines and traditional foods as well. Our program here at the FNUniv is guided by our Elders, their knowledge and their desire to share their worldview with others, especially the youth. The desire to share the holistic method of life, to transfer this knowledge and to create an avenue of culturally grounded, multi-generational wellness is something that is of great importance for the FNUniv and the Elders involved. Having Elders as an integral part of the learning process for youth can be beneficial to the students themselves and their community. It was noted that having Elders involved in the school can develop positive self-esteem in Aboriginal students, which would have a positive effect on their future goals in life. Other benefits include: enhancing cultural perspectives, building relationships with the Aboriginal community, promoting awareness of cultural traditions, addressing social and cultural issues while providing a mentor or role model for the youth which focuses on Aboriginal identity (Saskatchewan Learning, 2001).

To address the concerns located within the evaluations we have made efforts to make the setting of the Medicine Room more comfortable. For example, we have already secured funding to get rugs for students to sit on so that the environment in the room is more comfortable for them. In addition, we can accommodate larger classes by taking half of a large class on a tour of FNUniv while the other half are in the Medicine Room and then switching so that each get equal time. We feel that this project has excellent potential to provide a unique First Nations learning opportunity to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in an urban setting.

We are also pleased to mention that we have received funding from FNUniv to continue running this program through the 2012-2013 school year. We are particularly interested in measuring more accurately the effectiveness of the Medicine Room as a teaching tool. We acknowledge that the Medicine Room is only one step for youth to learn about sacred medicines, plants, and their uses. One visit is not sufficient to re-establishing the connection with Creation. The Medicine Room is intended to provide access to urban and surrounding First Nation (and non-First Nation students) to Elders who can speak about traditional plants and medicines. It is an opportunity to see that First Nations people were and are scientists and that science is accessible to them. For many, this may be their first interaction with an Elder while

for others Elders may be very familiar. There cannot be an expectation that students will re-establish a connection with Creation in one visit, but the workshops can provide students with the opportunity to be introduced to such prospects. We have made the Medicine Room available for students and it is our hope that teachers and schools will build on the concepts they learn about in the Medicine Room. In Saskatchewan, the incorporation of Aboriginal content in K-12 curricula is mandatory so we feel that the Medicine Room is a teaching tool that teachers can incorporate into their curricula. We are now developing new questions on the survey that will be assessing how teachers might use the knowledge they learned during the workshops in their classroom. We will be especially interested in examining if the teachers/instructors learned new tools/knowledge that might guide them when delivering traditional knowledge content in their classroom.

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