



Culturally Responsive Indigenous Education

What is CRIE? Culturally Responsive Indigenous Education is grounded in embedding traditional teaching methods, and authentic content into the approach of teachers who work with all learners. CRIE demonstrates to First Nations learners and others that their culture(s), values, family, elders, language(s), and knowledge is not only welcome in the classroom; but actively embraced and encouraged. This can mean for example, having a practice of ensuring that the First Nations language of the territory the learner is living in is supported, developed and revitalized in the school context.

Educators who are culturally responsive make efforts to be aware of their own values, own worldviews and own beliefs and realize they are in a position of power and influence. They are sensitive to not imposing their own value system on their students; but instead give space physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually for the students to have their cultural practices acknowledged and celebrated.

CRIE is based on the concept that school systems strive to not only value, but support traditional cultural knowledge (ITK) and ensure that no school, nor educator nor administrator forces students to abandon traditional knowledge. This approach to Indigenous education seeks to ensure that revitalization and retention of traditional knowledge is a central focus of curriculum preparation and pedagogical approaches. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples has affirmed that Indigenous children have a right to an education that respects their culture, language and identity. I would argue that all learners living in what is referred to as Canada have a right to learn about these aspects of Indigenous nations.

This means that learners have opportunities to become fluent in their own language in the schools they attend. This means that elders, traditional teachers, parents and other community resources are welcomed in the school to ensure that students learn culturally authentic content. It also means that students acquire traditional knowledge at school such as; traditional crafts, plant knowledge, medicine teachings, hunting and fishing skills, alongside knowledge that will prepare them for the reality of earning a living and raising a family in the world today.

CRIE also requires curriculum planners and teachers to identify what are authentic resources and learn about the nations whose territory they work in so that, they can be supporting their students' rights. CRIE values First Nations learners having role models who are First Nations, and seeing themselves, their families, their nations and the natural world reflected in what they learn. It also values all students having direct access to culturally safe Indigenous pedagogy and content.

Traditional Knowledge Connects to the Curriculum and to the Strength of our nations

Traditional knowledge is infused across the curriculum in the CRIE model of Indigenous Education. Traditional knowledge can be incorporated into the study of any subject including ESL. Traditional knowledge also includes worldview and values. This curriculum is based in the values we held about living in a good way with all of our relations. The phrase; Kakina ni Dodem, ``All My Relations`` is found in many first languages and it means we must have good relations with all people, animals, birds, bugs, reptiles, fish, plants, rocks and the Creator. This worldview of connectedness was disrupted through colonialization.

Most important, perhaps in considering traditional knowledge, is the need for each teacher to consider what local knowledge, you as a teacher, can gain from the elders in your community. Are there elders who remember how teachings relevant to the readings you provide your ELLs? Who have heard stories about wellness? Who



have values about how others could be treated? Who know stories, songs, dances, ceremonies, etc. ? Access to local knowledge will depend on the community you live in and its relations to both traditional and current relations with Indigenous nations. Finding this out can be challenging depending on the wellbeing of the community you are in and the relations your school has with the elders in the community.

You could start by asking the elders you do know and if they don't carry that knowledge; also ask if they might know someone who does. You could also start by asking your students, their parents and their relations if they know of any Indigenous stories that could be shared. Or perhaps, depending on the ESL level you teach, have students do a rich performance task that includes one option of interviewing an elder or writing a story from an oral one.

Elders, faith keepers, traditional teachers, medicine people, healers, drummers, grandparents, parents and Indigenous Arts people are all sources of both traditional and modern knowledge. When approaching people who you are hoping will share their knowledge, it is important to consider protocols for asking for their knowledge. In most cultures, money is not what is shared but there are specific protocols. In many nations, an offering of tobacco is made but in some food is offered. In some protocols, something sacred is offered (a gift from the heart), while in some cultures it is something that provides warmth such as a blanket. You need to know what the elder is expecting to be offered as a sign of respect. For example, several elders we know will only take traditional tobacco without the chemicals of commercially grown tobacco. If you can ask others in the community about how to approach an elder, do this first. Or be upfront with the elder and explain you are learning about protocols.

Elders may be offered an honoraria if you have a budget to do so, but many will not ask for money as this is a traditional taboo to expect money for knowledge. Knowledge is to be shared openly and freely without expectation of financial gain. It is important to cover the costs such as gas, accommodations, meals, etc. so the elder is not at a financial disadvantage for having shared knowledge. Be aware that many elders can use the money to live off of so if you can offer it, do so, but do not expect an elder to tell you how much they expect. Your school board may have a set rate so contact your board lead.

Artists, whether native or non-native, get paid artists fees irrespective of their ethnicity, so find out how much they are offered by your school and follow accordingly. CARFAC has an established fee for different artistic services. Be honest with all presenters if you do not have any funding and some community members give their time voluntarily. You need to find out what your school does regularly and act accordingly. You could investigate the Ontario Arts Council funding for artists in the schools and work with an artist who is interested in applying to come into your school.

Why is local knowledge important and to be valued? Local knowledge is the key to making lessons a valued authentic learning experience for you students. If you cannot find local knowledge to share, so be it; but if you can; it will connect the children to their family, community, nation and local natural world in a personal way that will affirm the value of who they are and where they now live.

Ties to the land and Learning from the Land

Getting our students out on the land to learn from it is an important part of a well-balanced education system. In your development of ESL lessons, seek to include ideas for lessons that can be done out of the classroom in order to strengthen our students' ties to the land around them. In modern times, television, the internet, video games and smart technology are impacting on how our children are learning and what of our cultural practices



and values are being lost. The land around you, the ecosystems, and the seasons will guide you and perhaps offer ideas for truly integrative ESL lessons.

Spirit and Spirituality and Balance in Life and Education

You will see many references to many traditional spiritual values and beliefs in both fiction and non-fiction written by Indigenous authors. There are authentic resources for your teaching but you must consider who wrote anything on Indigenous spirituality due to the proliferation of “outsider” writings on our spiritual paths. At times, the nation or community where you are located may have been converted to other faiths and this may impact on how you access traditional knowledge. ITK includes embedding of spirituality in the resources we share, lessons we provide and the content we chose for our classrooms.

CRIE lessons are framed using traditional spiritual teachings and current pedagogical knowledge. The teaching of balance for example, is one based on the traditional knowledge of several nations. A human to be healthy needs to be in balance: spiritually, physically, emotionally and intellectually. Use that understanding to frame specific lessons, and to analyze literature. Affirm its validity to the wellbeing of all students, families and nations who live in this territory. We know that the knowledge of our elders and ancestors give us the strength to teach in a well-balanced way and this can impact on the lives of ELLs who are newcomers to Canada.

Learning through our Languages

There are dozens of First Nations languages across Canada, and hundreds of dialects. Many of our languages are in danger of being lost and some are no longer spoken at all. Affirm the importance of restoring, revitalizing and protecting the languages of diverse nations. Consider teaching some words from the language of the nation’s territory on which you live. If you are not a speaker of the language of the nation in which you teach , perhaps you could work with a Indigenous language teacher/speaker to develop some lessons that support what you are doing with your students.

Authenticity of Teaching Resources

There are many good and authentic teaching materials, videos and books available for teachers in First Nations schools and there are those that are not authentic. Some are written in a way that is stereotypical, not based on true knowledge or overly generalizes. Ensure that what you are using is a valid representation of the Indigenous nation you are teaching about.

Diversity of First Nations and Cultural practices

The beautiful diversity of nations, cultures, elders, knowledge and values of First Nations across Canada is something to make students aware of. Try to teach about this diversity. By letting students know what nation the content is from and underlining with them that there are hundreds of First Nations as well as other Indigenous peoples in North America they will come to understand that generalizations are to be avoided when looking at content that is Indigenous specific.

Please note that some of this content was developed by Marg Boyle for the IFAW’s Northern Dog curriculum project and has been altered for the purposes of this project. The Northern Dog project is a partnership between IFAW and specific First Nations. <https://www.ifaw.org/canada>