MORE HOLISTIC ASSESSMENT FOR IMPROVED EDUCATION OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the desirability and potential of incorporating more holistic methods of assessment in the school system. It examines the role of Indigenous knowledge and concepts and uses surveys to gauge attitudes towards change. The study recommends that assessment can and should be more holistic, and that meaningful changes can result in a more fulfilling educational experience for students.
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PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The Shared Standards and Capacity Building Council (SSCBC), a joint initiative of the Saskatchewan Government and the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN), identified the need for more accurate and fair assessment of learning as a key issue for students, including Indigenous students. Assessment is a key area of education measurement and is inextricably tied to curriculum. One of the primary motivations was the desire to avoid the stigmatization and the making of children into casualties who might be portrayed as failures in the system. Education systems have been attempting to move away from negative forms of assessment, and there is recognition that there may be better ways of performing assessment. The knowledge of Indigenous peoples and the ways in which they traditionally learned and undertook assessment, could shed some light:

This classroom assessment materials project will foundationally place First Nations/Métis ways of knowing within current classroom assessment practices and final instruments through a partnership of the FSIN and the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education…. To support teachers of all students in both First Nations/Métis and provincial systems by foundationally placing First Nations and Métis ways of knowing within classroom assessment practices. ¹

Incorporating Indigenous knowledge recognizes that learning styles can vary culturally, that they could be more holistic, that learning extends beyond the walls of the school, and finally, that learning is a life-long process. Models of “Aboriginal Holistic Learning” have been developed by the Aboriginal Education Research Centre and the Canadian Council on Learning’s, Measuring Success in First Nations, Inuit and Métis Learning (see Appendix A, First Nations and Métis Holistic Learning Model). The idea of holistic learning is increasingly being recognized as valid and valuable within the education system. A Saskatchewan Ministry of Education workshop identified four main areas in “First Nations and Métis Ways of Knowing” that include: (a) relationships with integrity, (b) inquiry-based learning opportunities, (c) encapsulation in language; and (d) place-based learning. As well, approaches such as the Medicine Wheel model or the Circle of Courage - which emphasizes respect for and recognition of the centrality of the learner - will be examined in a following section, “Conceptual Approach.”

¹ SSCBC Assessment Subcommittee: Overall Project Goal, April 30, 2008.
To ensure that the project met the projected goals, the Shared Standards and Capacity Building Council (SSCBC) served as a reference group, and a panel of Elders ensured cultural authenticity.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Western testing systems tend to focus on linear measurement of cognitive functions. This practice can be seen in Alfred Binet’s (a French psychologist) testing to identify those who did not meet certain standards. Such assessment served the goals of mass education and the need to identify elite, highly specialized learners. In essence, the focus was upon the winners, who would come to occupy influential positions, and the losers, who would remain on the periphery. For example, the American military became interested in linear testing methods, such as the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test, so they could quickly sort individuals into particular roles. Also, some authorities believed intelligence testing helped preserve racial purity.²

Linear testing systems came to be the norm in universities, and teachers employed them widely in classrooms. Power in the classrooms lay with the teacher rather than the student. More holistic approaches, such as Gestalt - where the whole person was considered more than the various parts - fell by the wayside.³

Renowned international educator, Sir Ken Robinson, says:

> We’ve been educated to become good workers rather than creative thinkers. Students with restless minds and bodies, far from being cultivated for their energy and curiosity, are being ignored or even stigmatized.⁴ . . . Everyone has real creative capacities. They are born with them. They just have to develop them. . . . As soon as you recognize that creativity is a process, there are many things that can flow from that.⁵

Modern society is faced with an overwhelming barrage of information. This suggests that new tools are needed for those who want to demonstrate a more holistic and flexible view of

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learning - a balanced evaluation based on fundamentals and interesting and engaging assessment formats.

The SchoolPLUS study, directed by Dr. Michael Tymchak, Director of SIDRU, noted that “tectonic” changes were occurring in society and that the education system constantly struggles to adapt. As mass society rapidly changes, many believe that its hold over the lives of individuals is declining.

Issues include the revolution in information-and-communications technology, urbanization, forces of economic globalization, increases in poverty and “at-risk” youth, and the general malaise of society as reflected by increasing uncertainty and violence. Such issues are particularly relevant to Saskatchewan’s burgeoning Aboriginal student population, which is currently about 33% of the student body and is expected to approach 50% by 2020.6

In contemporary education, shifts in thinking call for the focus to be placed on a wider spectrum of student learning for the basic purpose of life success, rather than for potential employment roles. Assessment experts, such as Rick Stiggins, call for radical change in approach that would involve assessment for learning, rather than assessment of learning. Assessment of learning focuses on sorting of learners into the successful and the unsuccessful. This approach tends to ignore the causes of poor performance and tends to blame the student. On the other hand, assessment for learning recognizes that individuals are different and stresses the importance of providing a supportive and effective learning environment. Also, to empower the student, it encourages their involvement in assessing the learning process. To an extent, this changes the role of the teacher and places the onus on the education system to provide the resources necessary for student success.7

Therefore, there needs to be substantive recognition, honoring, and accommodation for individual student goals, including students at the secondary level. Authentic assessment implies a measurement of learning that is relevant and meaningful to the student’s life experience. In terms of learning areas of Indigenous ways of knowing, emphasis is placed on

7 Stiggins, p. 8.
maintaining the integrity of relationships in various areas, using experience-based learning opportunities and utilizing Indigenous language concepts and place-based learning.\(^8\)

Half of the Aboriginal student population does not complete high school, a rate 250% higher than the rate of students in mainstream society.\(^9\) Moreover, in 2001, 41% of Aboriginal children in Canada lived in low-income families. Such societal forces imply the need for dramatic adaptations. Aboriginal peoples have long recognized that emphasizing the shortcomings of student performance only furthers the deterioration of a learner’s self-concept and confidence. Young learners can become turned off to learning and their potential contribution to society is lost. The challenge of the school, then, is to discover the reasons why specific individuals are not motivated or unable to learn and how these situations can be ameliorated.

The challenge of envisioning education from the perspective of holistic assessment means not only considering the wholeness of individuals, but it also means restoring learning or schooling to those who have been marginalized, denied, or rejected. “This restoration may require teachers to courageously adopt learning approaches and structures that promote holistic learning.”\(^{10}\)

The purpose of assessment reform should not be to ‘water down’ standards, but rather to make assessment methods more relevant to the culturally specific and other locally responsive curriculum - a principle that is supported by the Treaty 4 Directors of Education.

**CONCEPTUAL APPROACH**

**Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge**

In 2007 the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) provided some guidance about the nature of holistic learning. A series of workshops with Aboriginal organizations included a dialogue on assessment,\(^{11}\) a need established by earlier criticisms that current assessment systems contained flaws (e.g., being negative in tone and emphasizing failure; failing to take into

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\(^9\) Canadian Council on Learning (CCL), p. 8


\(^{11}\) CCL, p. 16
account Aboriginal cultural and social realities; failing to recognize that education is a life-long learning process; and focusing primarily on intellectual learning and neglecting other aspects of the whole person [i.e., the physical, emotional and spiritual]). Indigenous learning was confirmed to be an holistic and life-long process, experiential by nature because culture is an integral element and learning generally takes place within a community/societal context. Cooperation, rather than competition, is preferred.

Still, there remains the need to develop a national set of standards of assessment indicators, applicable across jurisdictions, one that balances Aboriginal versus mainstream perspectives, values, and needs. The criteria and its interpretations need to be developed with an Aboriginal input and, as such, this paper includes a discussion of Indigenous knowledge, and the research attempts to look beyond the simple techniques of assessment to the fundamental (philosophical) assumptions upon which assessment is based.

**The Learning Spirit: A Foundational Philosophy**

Elders and education experts have spoken of the need to incorporate Indigenous spiritual elements into learning and assessment and the two spiritual elements chosen were *respecting the Learning Spirit* and *the Medicine Wheel Model*.

The first element - the concept of the Learning Spirit - is that human beings are inherently spiritual. Humans have a sense of spirituality, a sense of mission in life, and such urgings must be respected. Learning for secular reasons or for getting a job can demean the value and meaning of education. One of the Elders’ roles is to assist youth in understanding their spiritual purpose and mission in life. Therefore, from an Indigenous perspective, one assumption of holistic assessment is that student motivation to learn comes from inside: It is a spiritual component.

The Learning Spirit could be considered a foundational, philosophical concept of educational development; yet the issue of the motivation to learn is one of the most illusive and difficult concepts to tackle.

The Elders described their learning journey as beginning at birth and building through each life stage (childhood, puberty, parenthood, grandparenthood and old age). They
explained that a child is born with the gift of a learning spirit, which is to be nourished throughout life.12

Little is known about the learning journey that each person travels to arrive comfortably at their own awareness of their gifts, capacities, strengths; which broadly can be seen as the actualization of their learning spirit. This learning journey is a holistic outcome of diverse conditions, contexts, relationships, education, training and connections with a learning universe. Yet, often success in life is narrowly measured by how many years of schooling one has or income one receives.13

Vision and dreams are part of the learning spirit. Under the guidance of Elders you can understand them and they can help in your lifelong learning. …Acknowledging the spirit world and accepting gifts of dreams and visions are a natural part of traditional life. It is an integral part of an individual’s learning journey that must be honoured through ceremony and supportive relationships with respected spiritual leaders of the community.14

I believe that the four components of the self (heart, mind, body and spirit) must be valued in order for the learning spirit to be nourished on the learning journey. The learner must be supported to believe in the self as a lifelong learner with many learning gifts and capacities. The approach to the learning experience must therefore value the learner’s learning spirit, its gifts and capacities….The learning journey must begin from a place that values the learner’s self, experience and knowledge. Other necessities for nourishing the learning spirit include an approach that is holistic, learner-centered and that focuses on the self as a lifelong learner.15

Without the work of the Elders, it would be easy for anyone to forget his or her chosen path. Unfortunately that is what is happening to our chosen young today: they have little or no path openers in their lives.16

What is Holistic Learning? The Medicine Wheel Model

The second Indigenous spiritual element chosen to be incorporated into learning and assessment is the Medicine Wheel model. The Medicine Wheel is a method that describes a perspective on life and holistic development and it can also identify one’s strengths and weaknesses to bring about a state of balance.

12 Ibid., p. 19.
15 Ibid., p. 25.
Developmental issues that can be explored using the Medicine Wheel are personal progress based on the development of strengths or the revealing of a student’s weaknesses at a critical juncture or in the context of life-long learning. Other elements that could be introduced apart from the “four aspects of being” are the recognition of life-long learning; a sense of, and respect for, place; and the importance of relationships.

**Valuing Pragmatic, Collective and Life-Long Learning**

If students perceive that what is being taught in schools is irrelevant, then will assessment outcomes reflect this if the student “tunes out”? Is an important part of the key to successful teaching and assessment to find a way to “unlock” or enable the student to acknowledge, express, and take ownership for their learning goals? This appears to be especially critical around the elementary to high school transition period.

The value of collective learning as a preferred model is especially important for social and cultural learning. Group learning helps a student become involved through positive peer pressure. The trick is to give each student fair recognition of their individual effort within the team. Honest assessment of self and others in the group helps to arrive at a fair assessment.

Faculty and the Parent Council of Oskayak School have experimented with various programs and initiatives. The academic program has been altered and adjusted to incorporate First
Nations perspectives, cultural development, and revitalization. First Nations spirituality has become a central foundation, whereby each spring the school offers a cultural camp outside the city where students can learn and celebrate in a natural environment.\footnote{Battiste & Barman, pp. 321-323.}

Oskayak School uses the Sacred Circle as a broad perspective for understanding and developing its educational offerings. . . . This symbolism represents unity, interdependence, and the harmony among all beings in the universe . . . these cyclical patterns and recurrences constitute the reality in which humans can understand purpose and meaning.\footnote{Regnier, R. (1995). The Sacred Circle: An Aboriginal approach to healing education at an urban high school. In M. Battiste & J. Barman, \textit{First Nations education in Canada: The circle unfolds} (pp. 316-317). Vancouver: UBC Press.}

In contrast with the regular lessons, which focus away from self, the Healing Circles focuses on self. Students are encouraged to view one another from a perspective of ‘sacredness’ or ‘the good’ as reflected in the Medicine Wheel teachings. As students discuss and interpret their experiences and feelings, the teacher guides the movement to harmony.

Dr. Martin Brokenleg, Lakota educator and expert in reclaiming at-risk youth, identified hostile school environments as characterized by discouragement and punishments that breed boredom and irresponsibility. His \textit{Circle of Courage} approach, based on Aboriginal youth-development philosophy, emphasizes meeting the universal needs of belonging, mastery,

- 1: Belonging
- 2: Mastery
- 3: Independence
- 4: Generosity

\textit{Figure 2.} The Circle of Courage.
independence and generosity. His experience with this approach has demonstrated the development of more respectful and effective Aboriginal learners.\textsuperscript{19} The Circle of Courage is another way of honoring the Learning Spirit.

However, if a sense of spiritual meaningfulness is not achieved as part of Brokenleg’s first stage of \textit{belonging}, then the subsequent steps of \textit{mastery} (i.e., success that results from a sense of belonging); \textit{independence} (which follows from mastery); and \textit{generosity} (the ability to “give back” by those who are successful) will not be realized.

\textbf{METHODOLOGY}

This research project incorporated questionnaires to gauge student, adult, and teacher perceptions of assessment and testing of instruments such as circular rubrics. \textit{Linear} versus \textit{circular} rubrics were tested, using sample assignments from selected mainstream urban and First Nations rural schools. Student assignments on a selected topic were administered in Grades 5, 8, and 11 classrooms in both a First Nations school and a Regina urban mainstream school over the fall of 2008 and the spring of 2009.

Student responses revealed a sense of balance in:

- \textit{developmental areas}: a perception of spiritual, a sense of life mission, an ability to reflect
- \textit{the physical realm}: well nurtured, habit of exercising, ability to develop strength and pride in body image
- \textit{the emotional realm}: feeling safe, healthy relationships, motivated, sense of belonging
- \textit{the mental realm}: concepts are meaningful, enthusiastic learner, mastery of concepts.

Some indicators that were sought included:

- \textit{in the spiritual}: having a spiritual Elder or counsellor, access to ceremony, ability to reflect or meditate, having hope for the future
- \textit{in the physical realm}: having proper nutrition, access to sport, positive reinforcement of body image, feeling of strength

\textsuperscript{19} Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern. (1990).
Surveys of adult and teacher attitudes towards holistic assessment were administered in Regina by Survey Monkey in fall 2009. The results are described in the following.

**FINDINGS**

**Student Balance of Development Dimensions**

This particular exercise asked students to anonymously respond to a set of self-perception questions, indicating where they thought they stood in terms of their personal, holistic development. The structure of the questions reflected a Medicine Wheel approach to progressive development. A second brief questionnaire explored differences in perceptions between students and teachers about the students’ holistic development. Finally, there was a feedback questionnaire for teachers that asked their opinion about the value of this assessment exercise.

**Student Survey on Holistic Development**

The purpose of the student surveys was to obtain an idea of how holistic they perceived their education to be. Twenty-eight students, 14 from Imperial School and 14 from Balfour Collegiate, responded to the survey. The responses by development sector according to frequency were as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Dimension</th>
<th>Usually/Always (%)</th>
<th>I am Trying/Sometimes (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I eat healthy foods</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel healthy</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have proper nutrition</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel strong physically</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I exercise regularly</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Usually/Always  I am Trying/Sometimes

**Emotional Dimension** (%)
- I have hope for the future: 93% (7%)
- I get along with others: 93% (7%)
- I have a secure family environment: 89% (11%)
- I feel free from intimidation: 71% (29%)
- I have positive feelings about my body: 68% (32%)

**Mental Dimension** (%)
- I like to learn new things: 85% (15%)
- I have confidence in my ability to learn: 81% (19%)
- I learn new ideas quickly: 78% (22%)
- School could be more interesting: 74% (26%)
- I relate to what is taught at school: 61% (39%)

**Spiritual Dimension** (%)
- I have reflected on life: 85% (15%)
- I have the ability to reflect/meditate: 73% (27%)
- I have a sense of spiritual direction: 48% (52%)
- I have a spiritual guide or Elder: 21% (79%)
- I attend religious ceremonies: 18% (82%)

**Adult Attitudes Towards Holistic Assessment**

*Adult Survey on Assessment results.* This questionnaire asked adults, based upon their own experiences, to provide their attitudes and perceptions about secondary assessment.

(Out of 30 responses – in order of frequency)

**Question 1:** Which of the following describes you?

Aboriginal: 73%  Non-Aboriginal: 27%

(Responses to questions of high school participation were inadequate for statistical evaluation.)

**Question 2:** Do you think holistic assessment as including physical, emotional and spiritual components as well as mental (intellectual) is a good description?

Yes: 87%  Don’t know: 10%  No: 3%

**Question 3:** Based on your own personal experience of high school, or that of your child, do you think that current secondary assessment is holistic enough?

No: 83%  Yes: 17%
**Question 4:** Should assessment include more than just intellectual development?

Spiritual Development: 70%  
Emotional Development: 67%  
Physical Development: 57%  
Stay as is: 13%

**Question 5:** Given that there is a trend towards more flexibility in curriculum, should assessment methods also become more flexible?

Yes: 87%  
Don’t Know: 10%  
No: 3%

**Question 6:** What might the benefits of holistic assessment be?

- Produce more secondary graduates: 57%
- More remedial info to system: 53%
- More interesting for student: 47%
- More info for parents: 43%
- More info for system: 33%
- No real benefits: 3%

**Question 7:** What should be the benefits of improved assessment?

- Bring out hidden potential and build confidence: 60%
- Better institutional services for Aboriginal students: 50%
- Can help produce more rounded individuals: 53%
- Improvements to policies and programs: 47%
- Celebration of one’s culture: 5%
- Better tracking of Aboriginal student data: 5%

**Question 8:** To whom should holistic assessment data be reported?

- To students: 77%
- To system: 73%
- To school: 70%
- To parents: 63%

**Question 9:** Can holistic assessment provide students with a more positive secondary education experience?

- Yes: 97%
- Don’t Know: 3%
- No: 0%

**Question 10:** Please provide additional comments:

- Changes in this direction are needed.
- I think this is a step in the right direction in term of education for all.
- The more knowledge you have of yourself the better confidence you have.
- Get a new word instead of Holistic!
• It would provide students with a positive experience by making them feel proud of themselves and who they are.
• Holistic Assessment is a great resource. It will help one come to know their own identity.
• Emphasis should be on the development of the whole person.
• Being a student teacher, holistic assessment would benefit everyone by introducing new ways of giving feedback to students and allowing the students a chance to be in an enriched environment.
• I really appreciate that you are doing this study. I think it is going to be beneficial to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.
• I am glad to know this research will benefit many and changes can be implemented for a more inclusive society.
• I would have liked this when I went to school. It sounds like a good idea.
• In today’s society there are more programs and services than before. This is great to see in today’s society.
• It would reflect our uniqueness as human beings. We are made up of the sum of our parts. If one part is in trouble so the others follow.
• There are many factors that affect the mental preparation for measuring student achievement. Tapping into the other facets would add the dimension for success on the rights and wrongs dictated by the teacher.
• I think more holistic assessment is really important for engaging students in the materials. It is much more than the memorization of facts for a test, only to be forgotten afterwards. It takes into account the many different learners in a classroom.
• There is much to be gained by making assessment more balanced holistically. The data derived from a variety of holistic assessments will provide key information, but it must be sensitively analyzed and utilized for the improvement of instruction, program and services, not to further marginalize the most vulnerable students, who are Aboriginal.

Teacher Attitudes Towards Holistic Assessment

Teacher Survey on Assessment results. This questionnaire asked secondary teachers to anonymously indicate their perceptions about whether or not secondary assessment should be more holistic. Percentages are based on the percentage of responses out of the total of 30 respondents.

Question 1: Which of the following best describes you?

Elementary: 56%    Secondary: 48%    Post-Sec: 7%

Question 2: Have you ever utilized holistic assessment methods, such as circle rubrics?

No: 38%    Yes: 36%    Don’t Know: 26%
**Question 3:** Do you believe that the current assessment system in your school is holistic enough?

- Currently assessment methods are imbalanced 43%
- It is too narrow, assessing intellectual performance mainly 37%
- Current assessment undervalues the spiritual 23%
- Current assessment methods are fine 13%
- No opinion 7%

**Question 4:** Are you willing to employ more holistic assessment methods?

- Yes: 57%  Sometimes: 27%  Perhaps: 13%  No: 3%

**Question 5:** What might be the benefits of holistic assessment be?

- More informative for teacher 77%
- More interesting for student 70%
- More informative for parents 66%
- More informative for system 63%
- Benefit society by producing more graduates 27%
- Will not provide any real benefits 3%

**Question 6:** Given that there is a trend towards more flexibility in curriculum, should assessment methods also become more flexible?

- Yes: 80%  Don’t Know: 13%  No: 0%

**Question 7:** To whom should holistic assessment data be reported?

- To students 90%
- To parents 87%
- To schools 77%
- To systems 63%

**Question 8:** Do you think that it is possible to provide meaningful grades for post-secondary admission using holistic assessment methods?

- Yes: 46%  Don’t Know: 40%  No: 10%

**Question 9:** Please provide any additional comments on holistic assessment.

- I do use the medicine wheel approach to teaching, in problem solving, conflicts and behavior issues. When students are aware of the wheel and understand the concept of its balance, they are more willing to understand and become more empathetic to another being’s situation. The awareness of wholeness makes sense to them. Wholeness creates a whole new understanding of the world around them as well as raising a sense of awareness to self-regulation.
I believe that by not providing holistic assessments, we are not providing our students with the full benefit of assessing their valuable knowledge and experience. I also believe that education means learning with the heart and the mind. As it stands, the education that we provide students is based and assessed through ‘brain’ knowledge only.

I would need more information on exactly what the holistic assessment would look like and what areas that it would cover. I would like to see more emphasis in giving the students credit for humanitarian contributions as well as good citizenship in the classroom and the community. Some students may not have high academic success scores but may benefit their school community as well as make many other worthwhile contributions that are for the greater good of all.

Holistic assessment seems to be a newer term that I am not entirely familiar with. However from what I have read, believe I am already employing a somewhat holistic assessment with my elementary students. As a secondary teacher, I believe that these assessments would also work in a high school setting. The problem with these assessments is that once the students leave the school environment for higher education or for employment, these assessments are not as commonly used and it is a shock to the student not to be treated and assessed in this same familiar fashion. Not only that, but once you become an adult and a professional, there is little room for error. In some cases there is no room for error; a professional must be a professional and some errors cost jobs and even lives. In general, holistic assessment seems more appropriate for more intimate and personal settings and will not be as applicable in more formal or impersonal settings (such as classes of hundreds of students where the professor could not possibly know all of the students in the course.)

I have had conversations about this with colleagues. Teachers feel apprehensive about changing assessment practices too much as it will not fulfill the requirements that post-secondary institutions have for admission. At the same time, how can post-secondary institutions change their requirements before schools change their assessment practices? It’s like ‘the chicken and the egg.’ There likely needs to be collaboration between the elementary, high schools and post-secondary institutions.

Successful adults have skills in areas such as the abilities to organize, cooperate, work in a group, persevere, demonstrate work ethic, revise, learn from mistakes, problem solve, etc.

If it is truly well-balanced assessment it should be an accurate picture of student learning.

The problem that I see with holistic assessment is that in the new Outcomes and Indicators curriculum we are bound to assess based on the outcomes desired, none of which address the physical (outside of the phys ed. curriculum), the emotional or spiritual. I was unable to answer question 5 completely because I think the real benefit will be for students who don’t fit the “academic only” mold that we expect them to fit in during the formative years of their adolescence. There are many facets of adolescents that could be assessed so they can have a more complete picture of who they are and what their potential is if more than just their intelligence is assessed. Unfortunately, the system does not support this kind of approach to assessing students in secondary students.

I have not had the opportunity to learn a lot about holistic assessment. I am very interested in expanding evaluation techniques to include this. I am interested to see how it works across the various curriculums.
It would have been nice to have space to comment or give other answers after all of the questions. Some of the provided options were not in line with my thinking. All in all, especially at this time of the year (first reporting), there is no time to teach or assess more than what is already done. I think it is very important to offer balanced education but in order for that to happen we need a very major restructuring, not just another area to assess. All the best with your survey.

**Teacher Comments on Circle Rubrics** (see Appendix B, Circular Rubrics)

Circular rubrics were used by teachers at Kahkewistahaw School and at a Regina Public school as an alternative to linear rubrics in fall 2008 and spring 2009. Teachers gave the following responses when asked about their experience in utilizing circular rubrics.

- **Q:** Did you like using circular rubrics as a way to assess learning outcomes?
  **A:** The circle rubric is an excellent way to show exactly a student’s strengths and weaknesses.

- **Q:** Did you like using the “no fail” concept as indicated by the circular rubrics?
  **A:** The rubric focuses on the strengths and not the failing points.

- **Q:** Do you feel the use of circular rubrics is a more holistic and/or fair way of providing assessment feedback to students and parents than traditional assessment approaches or linear rubrics?
  **A:** The circular rubrics show the student’s assessment in a whole compared to one another.

- **Q:** Do you think that circular rubrics can be a useful means of providing feedback to the school system regarding learning deficits and therefore future learning resources?
  **A:** I think that this rubric shows excellent feedback…it shows overall strengths and weaknesses.

**DISCUSSION**

**Interpretation of Student Perceptions of Holistic Development**

The survey results suggest that students perceive themselves as being well adjusted in the measures of physical, emotional, and mental quadrants. However, when it comes to involvement in the spiritual, the results are more tentative. Students feel they have the ability to reflect on their lives (73%) and, in fact, do (85%). However, after that, the results suggest that the majority (52%) do not feel they have a sense of spiritual development, that most
(79%) do not have what they consider to be a spiritual guide or Elder, and even more (82%) do not attend religious ceremonies. Assuming that spirituality should be included in the curriculum, this suggests a lack of adequate content to address their needs.

**Analysis of Adult Survey on Holistic Assessment**

Results from 30 adult respondents indicate assessment can and needs to be more holistic. For example, 83% responded that “current secondary assessment” is not holistic enough. Ninety-seven percent indicated that more holistic assessment would provide students with a more positive secondary school experience. Eighty-seven percent tied the increasing flexibility of assessment with increased flexibility in curriculum. Finally, 87% agreed that defining assessment in terms of four components of human development was reasonable. Seventy percent felt that spiritual development needs to be included. In terms of individual comments, respondents stated support, in general: “This is a step in the right direction,” “Changes in this direction are needed,” and, “I would have liked this when I went to school.”

**Analysis of Teacher Survey on Holistic Assessment**

In response to Question 3, of the 30 teacher responses (roughly half worked at the secondary level), 80% indicated that assessment methods could be more holistic and balanced. Ninety percent believed that more holistic assessment should be reported to students; however, teacher responses also indicated substantial uncertainty as exactly what holistic assessment entailed. Sixty-four percent either did not use holistic assessment or were not sure what it entailed. The majority of responses indicated a willingness to employ more holistic assessment methods.

In terms of specific responses, teachers reinforced the concept that learning is more than just intellectual: “Education means learning with the heart and mind;” “Students should get credit for humanitarian contributions as well as good citizenship.”

While the surveys administered in the fall of 2009, via Survey Monkey, used modest sample sizes, the results clearly indicate the desire for modifications in assessment approaches.
Implications for Curriculum: The Example of “Spirituality”

Elder statements about the Learning Spirit suggest a developmental order in which the spiritual is foundational: "Learning is founded upon the spiritual, then is followed by the physical, emotional and mental aspects."\(^{20}\) The spiritual has to do with an individual’s sense of him/herself as a spiritual being - of having a sense of purpose, of being, and of a mission that is supported in life. Elders or spiritual guides, both Indigenous or non-Indigenous, can assist in fostering such understandings. In this sense, the individual must be properly nourished physically, that is, have the opportunity to thrive and become strong. The emotional components revolve around the sense of being accepted, content, motivated, and able to express oneself. Mental development builds upon these previous foundations and leads to the understanding that there is a purpose and framework to learning and why it is important to learn.

As curriculum becomes more diverse, so should assessment. In essence, holistic curriculum can effectively become the measure of holism of student learning. An example of more diverse curriculum is the move from subject- to project-based learning at schools such as Scott and Balfour Collegiates in areas of potential student interest such as environmental studies, traditional land-based skills, or forensics. Curriculum related to appreciation and respect for the environment is currently being developed in which Indigenous knowledge is used as an important basis.

According to provincial curriculum documents, spirituality can be defined as:

a search for meaning, the desire to find out and know the truth about things and oneself. The meaning of a thing or a person’s life is that for the sake of which it exists and without which the thing or person lacks context, place connectedness, embeddedness.\(^{21}\)

In other words, spirituality relates to motivation.

\(^{20}\) This is somewhat comparable to Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs,” the difference being that the foundation is built upon the spiritual rather than physical.

Spiritual development is intended to support children and youth’s sense of self worth, and feelings of belonging, and increase students’ abilities to sustain themselves through difficult or challenging times. Research has shown that the resilience of children and youth in overcoming social factors that put students at risk is improved when they have received support for and respectful attention to a positively-focused form of spiritual development. Spiritual development offers students opportunities to reflect on, question, talk about, and experience things that they care deeply about and find important such as their need to feel that they have something of worth to offer the world. Such opportunities seem particularly important to counteract our society’s present materialism and tendencies to focus on image rather than inner qualities. While it is not religious education, it supports students in understanding, appreciating, and respecting the religious beliefs, spiritual traditions, and wisdom of others.22

Principles of teaching spiritual development in public education include:

- Sensitivity to the spiritual integrity of each child/youth – care is taken to avoid actions that might “crush the spirit,” . . . policies and practices are supportive of the spiritual development of both students and teachers . . . is supported implicitly and indirectly through the provision of well thought-out experiences . . . activities and units that focus on spiritual development . . . qualitatively assessed and not judged or graded.23

The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education document notes:

- Spiritual development is not religious education and does not involve inculcation into any one religious, spiritual or secular set of beliefs . . . spiritual education has long been a goal of education in Saskatchewan . . . when students’ needs are met, parents and guardians are supportive.24

Spirituality can be a highly controversial topic and any curriculum that incorporates it would have to do it in a way that does not subscribe to any particular religious belief. However, current curriculum guidelines do provide room for the development of units relevant to spirituality.

Spiritual development is one of the goals of education in Saskatchewan. It is incorporated … across subject areas, and through qualities and elements of school routines, relationships and rituals. The central aim of spiritual development is the cultivation of inner strength along with the development of an outward focus of care, compassion and respect. The needs of the spirit are recognized as part of the development of whole persons.

23 Ibid., p. 248.
24 Ibid., p. 249.
Spiritual development refers to the exploration of a larger and more general framework of ideas, questions and experiences related to the search for meaning and purpose – ones that recognize and nourish the human spirit in positive and respectful ways . . . . Elements of spirituality include: developing understanding of, and appreciation for, the many ways that humans across time and space have met the spiritual needs and expressed spiritual ideas and feelings; and appreciating the spiritual dimension as a source for the development of a deep and encompassing vision of that which matters most in human life.25

**Potential Curriculum Concerning Spirituality**

The “Vision Quest” as a developmental unit could be an exploratory next step. It should be noted that a Vision Quest is not inherently linked to any particular religion or dogma. It is a universal practice in many traditions, comparable to forms of meditation in some traditions or to therapeutic psychological exercises. A Vision Quest involves a serious and sincere desire to seek inner spiritual guidance. The seeker must come prepared with a specific intent or question when embarking on this process. In terms of preparation, the process would be guided by an Indigenous Elder who has a relationship with the school. The students would be oriented about the appropriateness and relevance of what they were embarking on.

The Quest could occur near the end of elementary education and involve a measure of self-preparation, self-sacrifice, and discipline. At a beginning level, this could mean a minimum of one day of fasting prior to the Vision Quest (conducted in a safe area) and an attempt to stay awake, focus, concentrate, and meditate during the night on the objective of the quest. The normal result of such a process is a significant realization that answers the petitioner’s question. Elders would assist in the process by orienting the student to the millennia-old practice and using their experience to assist in interpretation.

Evaluation of the Vision Quest would be in terms of it having been “completed” or “not completed.” In the latter case, some individuals may not have had the maturity or attitude to properly prepare for or to complete the exercise.26

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Practical Approaches to Holistic Assessment

Specific techniques may be devised in relation to specific types of curriculum. For example, *experiential learning* tends to be evaluated in terms of such elements as preparation, participation, and insights gained. End results - as in the First Nations University cultural-camp experience - are generally a “Complete” or “Incomplete” grade. This reflects a situation where a class that seems simple on the surface contains, in fact, many complex elements, particularly in the relationships among Elders, fellow students, or the environment. Typically, Elders evaluate whether or not a student has made a genuine effort with the right attitude to have gained insights from ceremonies and to have learned basic cultural lessons. Such elements are difficult to quantify and are highly subjective. The performance of an individual is inextricably tied to his relationships within the Circle, hence, again, the difficulties in assigning individual numeric grades. Holistic assessment elements might include participation, change in attitude, demonstration of maturity, ability to cooperate, and the ability to problem solve and demonstrate a sense of spiritual direction in life. Traditional assessment methods were effective in traditional education systems and should be more formally researched and tested.27

Can curriculum be apportioned and an assessment set to suit the pace of the learner? There should a variety of assessment tools available, with the total results spread out so that students can demonstrate their areas of strength. For example, a student who is weak in literacy may be strong in verbal expression. If possible, work with students to get input and concurrence with the type of assessment tools and rubrics to be utilized. For example, some rubrics may be more effective in assessing complex learning activities. Such assessment may place more emphasis on participation or effort. Involvement in self-assessment has proven to build student motivation and commitment to achieve, and students tend to accept the assessment as being more fair.28

Assessment in terms of measuring achievement in a competitive setting should, perhaps, be explained to those students who come from noncompetitive learning environments (e.g.,

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28 Alberta Education. (2005). *Our words, our ways: Teaching First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners* (pp. 119-121).
Indigenous learning environments). For example, there could be workshops on how to best participate in and complete competitive assessments, including practice exercises, for Indigenous students. As well, advance warning and preparation time would be an asset.

The challenge here is to motivate the student to complete assignments, rather than to create a legacy of failed attempts. The real issue may be the need to develop time-management skills, yet the student needs to be reminded of the real-world consequences of late completion of tasks, for example, in work settings.

I accept late assignments. I encourage students to hand in as much as they’ve been able to complete. I mark the completed sections and the incomplete work separately. . . . That way if a student gets 30% on the whole assignment, I can show them that they would have had a 70% or 80% if they had completed all of the work.29

In his study of student motivation in British and Ontario schools, Andy Hargreaves makes some practical, general recommendations for increasing motivation in the face of declining performance.

Improved motivation, it is claimed, is secured in several ways within records of achievement. Firstly, the recording of personal experiences and social achievements broadens the definition of achievement valued by the school beyond the academic domain, stimulates the school to give more emphasis to those other achievements, and thereby increases the amount of success experienced by the pupils, particularly the non-academic ones most susceptible to motivation deficits.

Secondly, where pupils record their own personal achievements on a regular basis, this gives them the opportunity to define and declare their own identity as a way of increasing their self-awareness and independence. Thirdly, the negotiation of records of progress on a continuous, periodic basis between teacher and pupil, involves pupils more in their own assessment and encourages them to take more responsibility for their own learning once they see they have some positive and influential stake in it.

Fourthly, the assessment of subject learning on a continuous step-by-step basis, through a series of graded, hierarchical levels with certificates to be gained at each level, provides students with a clear structure of rewards and incentives. Fifthly, the breaking up of the curriculum into a series of separate levels, or discreetly assessed modules of a few weeks each in length with a ‘course credit’ to be collected at the end of each module, replaces the dispiriting drudge for public examinations.30

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30 Hargreaves, pp. 110-112.
Finally, the use of internet-based, self-assessment resources may be motivating. Interfacing with a computer depersonalizes the process of learning and assessment. While this has the seeming disadvantage of less human intervention, the advantage is that it provides a learning environment for the shy, retiring, unconfident, or insecure student. He or she may realize that the learning process is essentially a question of self confronting a task and making one’s best effort to accomplish it. As well, such formats may diminish the element of racism, especially if the teacher is of a different culture. Finally, such forums are becoming increasingly popular with youth who are growing up with technology.

Secondary Assessment: University Admission

The issue of maintaining strict quantitative/linear assessment at the secondary level to meet university admission criteria is a bit of a red herring. University programs, especially those that are science- and engineering-based, do tend to have strict academic requirements. Yet there are other university programs that require more holistic criteria, such as community involvement, or work experience in social work, or volunteering in hospitals for medicine. As well, within the universities there is recognition that grade inflation and differential standards in urban-rural or middle-class, inner-city schools tend to skew results, that is, a grade of 90 is not always that meaningful.

CONCLUSIONS

The Desire for More Holistic Assessment

The practical implications of this research project were difficult to conceptualize. In terms of outcomes of testing, there was genuine interest shown by many education practitioners in holistic assessment.

There is a genuine desire on the part of education theorists/developers to effect real and radical change in the assessment paradigm. This feeling is generated by a number of factors, including a conviction that one’s identity needs to be tied to a sense of meaning in life. Many learners lack a sense of personal direction which, in turn, is reflected in the school dropout
rate especially, for example, among Aboriginal students as they progress from elementary to secondary levels.

However, the researchers came to the conclusion, as was echoed by the Elders, that education and rigorous assessment are necessary for a sound education – an education that develops productive individuals who can survive and make a living for themselves.

**The Learning Spirit as a Foundational Philosophy**

A main concern of Elders was that learning must be placed within a spiritual context. This is especially true for youth who lack a strong sense of self-direction. In other words, the best answer to improving assessment outcomes is to come up with ways to *truly* connect with the student and strengthen a student’s commitment to learning.

**Medicine Wheel Model of Holistic Learning/Assessment**

An authentic, Indigenous-based holistic assessment model must include all four dimensions of human development that comprise the whole being: the spiritual, the physical, the emotional, and the mental. Such a model should also establish some sort of base measure of an individual student’s life-long learning goals and motivations.

**Implications for Curriculum**

This assessment review exercise will be meaningless unless it is partnered with some form of curriculum change. Perhaps a Vision Quest unit could be developed to address education issues/challenges from a number of perspectives including culture, Elders, motivation, vision, dropping out, and joining gangs. Such a traditional visioning exercise would most likely be adopted in First Nations secondary schools, because this is a traditional practice common to all First Nations’ culture and, already, this practice is being tried in some First Nations schools in Saskatchewan. There are no barriers to non-Aboriginal students engaging in such a practice, as long as it is done with respect. It would be interesting to ascertain the value and outcomes of such an exercise in existing counseling/therapeutic practices. Such a unit would address issues of spirituality, interaction with Indigenous Elders, personal motivation, and experiential learning - all in one package.
Circular Rubrics

Circular rubrics provide more global information in an interesting, attractive format that honors a student’s work and individuality. Circular rubrics provide a good forum for students, parents and teachers to discuss a student’s overall, as well as detailed, progress. It is similar to the current practice of teachers providing a portfolio of a student’s work at teacher-parent conferences. At the secondary level, current assessment practices provide real obstacles to loosening up the rigid hold that subject-based teaching seems to have on the curriculum.

Digital rubrics could be designed and accessed by the teacher via the web. Basic circular rubrics have anywhere from 4 to 12 segments that can be called up with the click of a mouse. There should be opportunity to have additional circles between the “eye” and outer circle, and the ability to insert text and numbers within each segment. It would be desirable to add colour, both within and as background to the circle. If a numerical grade is required, it can be determined by sliding the mouse upwards along a corresponding scale. Digital “levels of achievement” could be converted into performance statistics that would provide feedback to teachers or the school system.

Focus on Secondary Level

Elementary report cards tend to largely use student-centered assessment. The holistic assessment approach needs to be extended to high schools, where assessment continues to be rigid. Circular rubrics allow for greater diversity in the recognition of progress. There could be more student self-assessment at the high school level. Harsh assessment practices at the secondary level tend to have the greatest negative impact on the most vulnerable students. Society needs to reflect on the primary value of schooling from a holistic perspective, and this would involve dialogue with parents, teachers, and students.

There needs to be greater understanding of, and involvement in, assessment by students and parents. Students need to clearly know why they are learning and clearly understand their short- and long-term goals of learning. While various forms of standardized testing and measurement that result in grades can continue to play an important role, it will be even more
important that the student understands how such assessment is intended to assist him or her, and how it can become an instrument of personal empowerment. Finally, it needs to be kept in mind that learning is life-long process, and individuals must be empowered to find their own way in the long run.

**Postsecondary Admission Requirements**

Post-secondary admission reporting requirements should not be an obstacle to implementing holistic assessment. It must be understood that holistic assessment will not jeopardize the pursuit and measurement of excellence by individual students or the production of excellent student outcomes in the education system. The outcome of secondary education should be the production of better rounded individuals who feel they have had a rewarding secondary education and are motivated to find niches in postsecondary education or in the work world.

**SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Place more focus on Indigenous foundational issues such as the Learning Spirit and Medicine Wheel as they apply to on-going learning and assessment

2. Consider more holistic and flexible curriculum and assessment practices, especially at the secondary level. A unit such as Vision Quest could be a practical measure for interested or at-risk students

3. Make circle rubrics available as an on-line assessment resource for teachers

4. Review the application of qualitative and qualitative assessment as they pertain to meeting the requirements of postsecondary admission.

5. Further exploration of testing of specific holistic assessment practices tied to curriculum. To continue the process of assessment change, one will need seminars, conferences units.
SELECTED RESOURCES


APPENDIX A

First Nations and Métis Holistic Learning Model
APPENDIX B

Circular Rubrics
Grade 8 Social Studies
Holistic Rubric

Identity

Attitudes/Values
- Novice: Recognize and accept that others may see us differently from how we see ourselves.
- Apprentice: Create a collage to express personal identity.
- Practitioner: Respect others' views and opinions.
- Expert: Develop an awareness of personal identity.

Knowledge
- Novice: Know that most people have a private self and a public self.
- Apprentice: Know that others' views and expectations affect an individual's identity.
- Practitioner: Respond to selections read aloud and silently.
- Expert: Know that self refers to a person's own distinct individuality and character.

Skills/Processes
- Novice: Make comparisons between their private and public selves.
- Apprentice: Contribute thoughtfully to class discussions.
- Practitioner: Read selections read aloud and silently.
- Expert: Demonstrate exceptional understanding of the objective.

Novice: Student has begun to understand and achieve the objective.
Apprentice: Student is well on his or her way to understanding of the objective.
Practitioner: Student has demonstrated sufficient evidence of achieving the objective.
Expert: Student has demonstrated exceptional evidence of having mastered the objective.
Grade 5 Social Studies
Holistic Rubric

Skills / Abilities
Identify and interpret some of the symbols of Canada and its regions

Knowledge
Know that various symbols have come to be associated with Canada and its regions

90-100
80-89
70-79
60-69
50-59
40-49
30-39
20-29
10-10

Identity

Attitudes
Value Canada's symbols and what they represent

Skills/Abilities
Design symbols relevant to student.

50-59 – "good start"
60-69 – "generally satisfactory"
70-79 – "average performance"
80-89 – "good performance"
90-100 – "outstanding performance"
Grade 11 Social Studies
Holistic Rubric

Skills/Processes
Learn to use the process of dialectical thinking

Knowledge
Know that dialectical thinking is the process of searching out contradictions and conflicts of an issue

Knowledge
Know that human rights are those rights that an individual is entitled to

Knowledge
Know that a human rights claim imposes a set of responsibilities and obligations

Knowledge
Know that human rights are more than demands for rights...

Knowledge
Know that the morality of human rights is based on the humanity and dignity of the individual

Knowledge
Know that human rights are universal

Values
Consider a life of dignity and humanity regardless of people's contributions to society, the obligations society assumes for others

Skills/Processes
Practise using concepts to categorize and classify information

Skills/Processes
Know that self refers to a person's own distinct individuality and character

Skills/Processes
60-100

Knowledge
60-69

Knowledge
70-79

Knowledge
80-89

Knowledge
90-100

60-69 - "good start"
60-69 - "generally satisfactory"
70-79 - "average performance"
80-89 - "good performance"
90-100 - "outstanding performance"