

This conversation guide is designed for use by instructional leaders and learning communities or as a self-paced study. It is designed to give each reader parts of “truth” that will lead individuals and groups in the direction of reconciliation. This guide is not a substitute for engaging in meaningful conversations with the indigenous community.

References

Elder Protocol and Guidelines

<https://cloudfront.ualberta.ca/-/media/ualberta/office-of-the-provost-and-vice-president/indigenous-files/elderprotocol.pdf>



Reconciliation Process

Truth is an imperative piece in the reconciliation process. The intent of studying each conversation guide is to learn the “truths” necessary to engage in meaningful conversations with the Indigenous community.

To the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, reconciliation is about **“establishing and maintaining mutually respectful relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.”**

Part of the reconciliation process involves reaching out to communities, Elders and knowledge keepers close to local schools and creating space for those important relationships. These relationships can begin with a request that a community member come to a meeting or event at the school. However, it is important to note the word “maintaining” in the definition above. Mutually respectful relationships can involve going out to the community and planning a visit in a setting close to members of the Indigenous community, such as their homes or coffee shops.

This guide provides some tools that are necessary to build relationships in a culturally respectful manner. It also shares additional topics that have not been covered in other conversation guides.

Ways of Knowing

There are many components of Indigenous culture and history that are difficult to summarize with words. Part of this difficulty is embedded in the sacredness of many nations’ protocols and experiences as well as the distinct and unique identity of Indigenous cultures in Alberta. These conversations are often best had with community members, an Elder, a traditionalist or a knowledge keeper.

This guide provides topics that address some of these challenges and can lead to interesting conversations that are more difficult to provide with paper or in a formal professional learning session.

It is important to understand who can be contacted and the steps that are involved. What is the proper protocol for inviting an Elder to an event? What should be considered before starting these conversations?

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Making Connections

1. Contact the school's Indigenous Education Coordinator or Indigenous Liaison Worker first, as these individuals have the best connections to community. Some districts have established their own Elder Committee.
2. If the school does not have someone assigned to this role, contact the closest Indigenous community. Call the band office (phone numbers are listed on the website) and ask if they have someone who works specifically in community relations. Some communities have their own Elder Coordinator who creates programming and activities in the community. This person can be an effective contact. A request for support can also be made to the Band Office.
3. Alternatively contact a Band School in the closest community with the request.
4. Other options for connecting with Elders and community are a local Friendship Centre, Native Counselling Services of Alberta or Métis Nation offices. Most educational partners and stakeholders, as well as Indigenous educators, are willing to provide support with requests.

Inviting Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Community Members

Examples of appropriate events or activities to invite Elders, knowledge keepers and community members include:

- Starting an event with a prayer or ending the event in a prayer.
- Leading a ceremony such as a smudge, a pipe ceremony or a sweat lodge.
- Assisting or leading a workshop such as storytelling, drum-making, cultural awareness, etc.
- Gifting sashes or feathers to students at graduation or special events.
- Sitting in during/after a Blanket Exercise and participating in the sharing circle.
- Sharing survivor stories. Many of Elders today are residential school survivors. Some believe that a part of their own healing is to share, while others are not comfortable sharing. For those who express their experiences in story, it is always advisable to have emotional support for the Elder. An Elder attendant, family member or friend should come with the Elder to provide this emotional support.
- Acting as an Elder in Residence. An invitation can be extended to an Elder for events such as Orange Shirt Day, National Aboriginal Day or Reconciliation Week. It is a positive experience to be with an Elder, as their presence can be comforting. If they are invited to *just be a presence* for students and staff, ensure they are aware of this intention. Use an invitation such as, "We invite you to come and enjoy our special day. It would be such an honour to have you come and witness the kids take part in the festivities. We are celebrating _____ and it would be wonderful to have your company during this special event."

Who is an Elder?

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation describes an Elder as "someone who is considered exceptionally wise in the ways of their culture. They are recognized for their wisdom, their stability, their humour and their ability to know what is appropriate in a particular situation. The community looks to them for guidance and sound judgement. They are caring and are known to share the fruits of their labours and experience with others in the community." (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2005, p. 4) (*Elder Protocol and Guidelines, University of Alberta, 2012*).-See Reference 1 for "Essential Qualities of an Elder"

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Communicating with Other Community Members

If the individual you are speaking with is not considered an Elder and is a Knowledge Keeper or a member of the Indigenous community (on-reserve member, off-reserve member, Indigenous educational consultant, Indigenous author or guest speaker) then instructions will be provided accordingly at the end of each explanation.

Inviting an Elder

Most Elders accept tobacco when they are asked to share their knowledge. However, this is not true for everyone. Elders have diverse teachings or may not have the unique skills that fit a request. It is very important to be specific when making a request. If the Elder accepts the tobacco (protocol), s/he is accepting the request and will do her/his best to help. If they cannot respond to a request, they will say so and will not accept the tobacco. (*Elder Protocol and Guidelines, University of Alberta, 2012*).

It is always best if the request can be made in person. However, if distance or time does not permit an in-person request, the Elder can be called on the phone. Be very specific and indicate that protocol will be given on the day of the meeting/event. Ask if they prefer tobacco or tea. Some Elders, more prominently in the North, prefer to be given tea. Find out about dietary concerns or special requests if they are attending an event. ***The same protocol should be followed with a Knowledge Keeper or community member. If they are being asked to share their gift of knowledge or wisdom, then tobacco can be presented.***

What kind of tobacco should you buy?

Loose tobacco or pouch tobacco can be purchased at most gas stations. Any brand can be selected. Organic leaf tobacco can also be purchased from online retailers. *See For More Information.*

A larger pouch wrapped in fabric can be offered when a community member is coming to the school for an event. It can also be given to a ceremonialist when a ceremony such as a sweatlodge is attended.

Smaller bundles can be made for more informal meetings like meeting at a coffee shop or asking an Elder a question in an impromptu setting. These bundles can also be given at Elder's gatherings and meetings.

Unplanned opportunities to speak with an Elder or Knowledge Keeper can occur at meetings or events. If no tobacco has been prepared, a single cigarette is acceptable as a way of showing gratitude.



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Gifting

If the Elder agrees to be involved in an event and accepts the tobacco, it is customary to provide a gift of appreciation afterwards to show thanks. This gift can be monetary and is also known as an honorarium. For internal auditing purposes, it is acceptable to ask Elders for their Social Insurance Numbers and address and to sign a receipt as acknowledgement of receipt of a gift of appreciation.

Historically, Elders were given food, clothing and other necessities in exchange for their help, and therefore, monetary gifts are now acceptable (*Elder Protocol and Guidelines, University of Alberta, 2012*). Along with a monetary honorarium, Elders appreciate blankets, tea and jams, art made by students, flowers or gift cards for food and coffee. ***The same protocol should be followed with a Knowledge Keeper or community member. If they are asked to share their gift of knowledge or set aside time, they may be presented with an honorarium and a gift. If the individual works for an organization and is an educational professional, then a monetary honorarium is not necessary; a gift is acceptable.***

Travel

A financial reimbursement of expenses or incurred costs in connection with the Elder's involvement (i.e., travel, food, accommodations) should be offered to the Elder under a separate travel claim (*Elder Protocol and Guidelines, University of Alberta, 2012*).

The Elder should be asked if s/he would like assistance filling out the forms. ***The same protocol should be followed with a Knowledge Keeper or community member. If they are asked to share their gift of knowledge and have to travel, they should be reimbursed for travel expenses. If the individual works for an organization and is an educational professional, then a reimbursement is not necessary because their organization may provide expenses.***

Hosting a Community Member

When hosting a community member, ensure that a student or staff is assigned to host the guest and can accompany the guest from room to room. This person can be responsible for giving a tour, showing the guest where restrooms are, ensuring that they have a comfortable seat, bringing coffee, tea or water and a plate of food. It is important to ask if they would like assistance or if they prefer to do things themselves.

Provide a comfortable environment. If an Elder needs assistance walking, plan accordingly. It is preferable to have the event in a space that does not have many stairs or requires extended walking to the event.



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Elders Helper/Apprentice

Sometimes Elders come with their own helper or apprentice (known as *oskapew* in Cree) (*ah-skahp-pee-oh*). An *oskapew* is different from an attendant because an *oskapew* assists the Elder in the preparation of a ceremony (for example, a pipe ceremony). If the Elder has their own *oskapew*, this person should be fairly compensated. An attendant is an individual who looks after an Elder and whose duties may include arranging transportation to and from a venue, greeting and introducing the Elder, and offering comforts that elderly people may require, such as a restroom, quiet resting place, food and drink (*Elder Protocol and Guidelines, University of Alberta, 2012*). The *oskapew* and Elder attendants should be acknowledged at a meeting or event.

Meals

Offering food and beverage is a way of showing respect in many cultures, including First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. Elders should be asked if they have any dietary needs or preferences. Coffee and tea should be ready and can be brought to them. If it is a full day event, ensure there are plenty of snacks and provide lunch.

Meeting an Elder or Community Member at Homes or Coffee Shops

An Elder or community member can be met in their homes or another setting, such as a coffee shop. These types of meetings can help develop a relationship and enhance professional learning.

1. Bring tobacco to offer as you meet and express gratitude for the Elder's or community member's willingness to meet. The Elder or community member will be sharing their stories and teachings. They are providing a gift (knowledge, time, wisdom and friendship).
2. Buy the coffee or tea if you are at a restaurant. Accept tea or coffee if the Elder or community member makes some.
3. A gift is not necessary, but it is always appreciated.

Conversations with the Indigenous Community

The conversation should be the focus of the meeting. If a conversation is shared with colleagues, and answers are recorded in writing, the community member should be informed. A recorder can facilitate attentive listening to the conversation.

Develop a comfort level with awkward silences and be patient for responses, as it can take time to come up with the best response. A good rule to follow in these situations is more listening and less talking. *Some teachings are passed down through ceremony and stories. Some people will be able to share their experiences and others will not feel that they have the right to do so.*



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Conversation Starters with Elders

The following sample questions can assist with starting a conversation with an Elder. Variations of these questions may also be asked and answers may lead into other topics. Community conversations are most effective when they are natural. The sample questions are intended to be conversation starters and not interview questions.

Reciprocity

To most Indigenous people, reciprocity is heavily taught and practiced. It is important to be generous and give back to your community and others who provide support. Youth are always taught to respect their elders and give to anyone in need. Reciprocity is not about giving tangible items; it is giving time and love and sharing gifts. This is also shown by giving back to the Earth. When something is taken from the Earth, tobacco is offered first as a way of showing respect for the gifts Mother Earth has to share.

Sample Question: How was reciprocity (generosity) taught to you? What do you want children to know about reciprocity?

Oral tradition/Language

Engaging children in story is one way that Indigenous communities have taught their people. Indigenous languages are not traditionally written and read. Aside from observation, speaking the language were the only way to transfer knowledge from generation to generation. Fluent speakers describe conversations in their language as carrying different emotions and meanings. For example, stories in Cree are much more humorous to fluent speakers than hearing the same story in English.

Sample Question: Are you fluent in your language? Why is it important that Indigenous youth learn their language?

Symbolism

Various cultures use different symbols to enhance their understanding of the world around them. For example, the peace sign is a symbol of peace and the heart is a symbol of love. The yin and yang symbol or “shady side” and “sunny side” makes connections between contrasting components and leads to interconnectedness. For Indigenous cultures, the circle is a symbol that represents many components of traditional life. It is a symbol of balance, connectedness and infinity. The Four Directions are also an integral teaching that connects back to the circle.

Sample Question: Is there a specific symbol that you were taught about while growing up? Were symbols like the Medicine Wheel or the Four Directions important to your family?

Ceremony

Ceremony can be explained as an event or practice that is sacred to Indigenous people. Examples include sweatlodge ceremonies, smudging ceremonies and pipe ceremonies. These are very sacred ways of connecting back to culture, the Earth or the Creator. Sometimes, even talking about ceremony is very private and so sacred that it cannot be shared.

Sample Question: I am trying to understand the importance of ceremony in Indigenous culture. Are there parts of ceremony that you are able to share with me? Was ceremony important to your family?

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Stewardship, Sustainability, and Connection to Land

Environmental education was never “education” to Indigenous communities centuries ago – it was a way of life. The land is a relative, has many gifts and offerings and is considered sacred to Indigenous communities globally. The land, the water, the plants, and the animals are “all our relations” and should be sustained. Indigenous communities continue to express their love of the land and the protection of Mother Earth through peaceful protests that promote coexistence with surroundings. This is known today as environmental stewardship.

Sample Question: What are your teachings around land, water, plants and animals? Do you have a close connection to the land? Can you share a story?

Spirituality

Spirituality, in a global sense, can be expressed as having a sense of connection to something bigger than ourselves, which may even include a search for the meaning of life. For Indigenous people, spirituality is separate from Western religion. Spirituality is the connection to the Creator, who can be identified as many entities (God, the Universe, Buddha). When Indigenous people pray out loud at an event, you might hear them say “pray to your Creator.” Spirituality in Indigenous communities also means practicing in ceremonies that connect an individual to the Creator, including smudging, going into a sweatlodge, being involved in a pipe ceremony or offering tobacco to Mother Earth.

Sample Question: Is there a higher power or connection to the spirit world that you relate most to, for example the Creator? What are ways that people in your community connect to spirit?

Children

Children were seen as being at the centre of the circle of life. Children, in Indigenous cultures, did not belong to parents; each child is a unique gift from the Creator to be cherished, protected and nurtured into respected beings (*Bringing Tradition Home. BC Aboriginal Child Care Society, 2010*). The innocence and sacredness of the child was broken through the generations of residential school attendance. Intergenerational trauma exists today; however, so does the traditional practice of child rearing in many communities. “It takes a village to raise a child” is still a prominent idea among many families and communities.

Sample Question: How has the role of the child changed over time? What kinds of values are children taught in your family?

Patriarchy vs Matriarchy (roles of men and women)

Depending on the governance model practiced in pre-contact communities, the roles of men and women were established and determined in the early stages of life. Women were always held in high regard and provided leadership to the community. In some First Nations cultures, women did not drum. Today, you may see more women use the hand drum and even form their own groups. It wasn't until colonization that Indigenous men and women were forced to change their ways and adopt a paternalistic way of life.

Sample Question: What is your understanding about the role of men and women in traditional societies? Are Indigenous communities reclaiming their traditional roles? What are children today being taught about their role in the community?

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Well Being and Medicine

Indigenous people have been living off the gifts of the land since time immemorial. These gifts include tobacco, sage, cedar and sweetgrass; all natural and holistic forms of medicine. To Indigenous people, medicine is not just to heal one's physical self, medicine is used to heal the whole body (emotional self, spiritual self, mental self, physical self). All of these components of self are connected and affect the others. For example, if you have a headache (physical), it may be because you have not getting enough sleep (mental). The ailment is a side-effect of neglecting to take care of all the components that make up the whole self. Many people today increasingly turn to holistic forms of healing rather than western medicine. Medicine also comes in many forms. For example, the jingle-dress dance is a dance about healing. Jingle-dress dancers are called upon to dance for the sick as it is thought to bring health to people who are grieving, injured or ill.

Sample Question: Are traditional forms of medicine still practiced today in your community? Is there a story you can share about your experience with traditional plants or medicine?

Culture

Indigenous culture continues to thrive despite many attempts to suppress or even erase it through colonialism, eurocentric policies and residential schools. Culture is expressed in many forms and encompasses many elements such as dance, music, medicine, ceremony, stories and language. Indigenous culture varies in Alberta from treaty area to treaty area. Each language group has their own unique way of passing down their culture and stories about the land and the people. The Cree in the far north speak a dialect of Cree that is slightly different from Central Alberta. The songs and ceremonies vary from the North to the South. An appreciation of the fact that there is **not one** Indigenous worldview, and that Indigenous groups are distinct, is crucial to understanding the original people of this land.

Sample Question: What components of your culture (dance, music, medicine, ceremony, stories and language) have your tried hardest to maintain in your life? How can schools help to foster these important gifts in a child's education?

Identity

Since colonialism, Indigenous people have been given many labels. In the attempt to assimilate, these labels have segregated Indigenous people from the rest of Canadian society. Government labels and names have constantly changed and created confusion. Examples of past labels or names include Indian, First Nations, Aboriginal, non-Status, Treaty, halfbreed and Eskimo. These labels and names are prevalent in textbooks and daily conversations, but may not be the names that Indigenous people call themselves. Asking this question is a part of the relationship building process that forms a deeper understanding about individuals but also helps to fully appreciate that Indigenous people have an identity of their own, not one that is owned.

Sample Question: The government has given Indigenous people many labels, including Aboriginal, Treaty, Status Indian, etc. What do you call yourself and is there a term that you prefer?

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