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LITERACY ASSISTANCE FOR ESL SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS: THE MICMAC INDIAN EXPERIENCE

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When planning the Micmac Bachelor of Social Work program, the Nova Scotia Micmac community gave ESL literacy low priority. However, when the students were admitted, two thirds spoke but did not write Micmac as a first language, and educational levels ranged from grade nine upwards. Therefore the new policy gave priority to spreading ESL across the curriculum.

All social work courses emphasized students' writing, reading, public speaking, and study skills. They adapted a process approach to meet the needs of Micmac ESL students. In particular, course assignments frequently formed the basis of functional writing activities and the revision component stressed affective feedback from peers and the instructor. Students were encouraged to develop their own style and voice in harmony with the program's philosophy which combines the self-directed learning of Knowles and the empowerment of Freire.

After an initial literacy assessment, students received feedback through their course assignments. Professors graded for course content and the instructor reviewed the style, content, structure, and syntax. Ongoing individual and small group tutoring or counselling followed as appropriate. Teachers developed a handbook and an assessment form.

As the program draws to a close, the community sees many advantages to this approach. It provided ongoing literacy development, rather than crash course remediation, and it recognized the effects of outside pressures on school performance. In addition, the real assessments and assignments enhanced student motivation. However, certain disadvantages dull the glow. Writing Skills was a noncredit course, and relied on the cooperation of professors, which varied considerably. Some viewed literacy as less valid than content and a challenge to academic freedom. Some students found the combination of upgrading and social work content overwhelming and dropped out.

Others found the skills sessions frustrating in the multilevel group.

Academic ESL across the curriculum has provided an exciting and innovative approach to Native students' literacy development. It can also provide a thought-provoking alternative for writing teachers in postsecondary education.