

## Cultural Diversity in Outdoor Education

by Graham Thompson and Erin Horvath

At first glance Sioux Lookout is a typical northern Ontario town, situated within an intricate lake and river system, socially focused on year-round outdoor activities, and enveloped by kilometres and more kilometres of undomesticated Canadian Shield landscape. You might think this would be an ideal spot for outdoor education, just as we did when we moved here only a couple of years ago. In fact, we specifically envisioned building a not-for-profit business that would fill the need for alternative professional training and youth programming through the use of outdoor experiences. However, as young people ready to bring atypical forms of outdoor education to the culture of Sioux Lookout, we were unaware of how the atypical culture of Sioux Lookout would instead expose the need for change in our outdoor education programming.

Before you Google “Sioux Lookout,” or plan a quick weekend visit to the town known for its Blueberry Festival and Bearskin Airlines, there are a couple things you should be prepared for. Although the first word in the town’s name is pronounced the same as the first word in the city of Sault St. Marie, they are as different from each other as the spelling of their names. And despite the fact that places such as Perry Sound, Timmins, and even the city of Thunder Bay are considered by most of the Ontario population to be located in “northern” Ontario, you would still need to drive many hours north on the Trans-Canada highway (or fly many nautical miles in a plane too small to have a toilet) to reach the northern town of Sioux Lookout.

Besides being located a great distance from most of urban Ontario, you should also be prepared for the fact that approximately half of its residents are Aboriginal. Bush planes dot the shoreline ready to transport First Nations

visitors and their cargo to fly-in communities north of the town. Self-proclaimed as the “Hub of the North,” Sioux Lookout is one of the major towns that services over 40 First Nations communities, and therefore has naturally become home to Aboriginal people wanting to live in a town that offers year-round road access and is merely a one-hour drive to the closest Wal-Mart. Riding on a cultural history proven to survive everything from the harsh Canadian climate to the assimilation tactics of political and religious groups, the First Nations culture in town has challenged us to continue developing the learning process within outdoor education.

The remainder of this article is a collection of observations and anecdotes about lessons we have learned in becoming more culturally fluent facilitators. It should not be viewed as a complete analysis of either Aboriginal or mainstream cultures but rather as a collection of incidents that have influenced us and helped inform our practice as facilitators. Furthermore we should point out that neither of us is of Aboriginal ancestry; we have, however, spent a considerable amount of time in the North, which has allowed us to develop close cross-cultural friendships wherein real dialogue about cultural differences has taken place.

We are very grateful to those Aboriginal friends who have in a sense taken us under their wings and with great patience helped us, first, to realize when we have been culturally inappropriate and, second, to learn other ways of doing things. Lastly, we would like to point out that the terms “Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal participants” and “Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal cultures” are used here to refer to the two main cultural groups in this area. We acknowledge that there is diversity within the membership of the mainstream cultures, as

well as between the various Aboriginal Nations within Canada. These terms are used here simply to help highlight some general similarities and differences that exist within these cultures.

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While we for many years have understood that ecological literacy is highly valued and practiced by most Aboriginal communities, we still made the mistake of approaching land-based experiences as challenges to be conquered. We failed to realize many participants on such outings are quite relaxed and see the experience as a natural and everyday experience. On one particular occasion while on a canoe trip with some of our friends, we were relying heavily on a map to guide our direction, and inevitably the decisions that faced our group. However, with their familiarity of the land and keen eye for seeing changes in landscape, our Aboriginal comrades thought it was hilarious that we relied so much on an overvalued resource, and threw the map into the wind, which eventually carried it to its destiny at the bottom of the lake. It was us who ventured into much of the learning that day, including trusting them to get us home.

In our efforts to become more experienced outdoor educators we have learned that many Aboriginal people in northern Ontario consider excessive eye contact and dramatic body language to be intrusive. As students of mainstream society in southern Ontario, we were taught and often required to use a very “in your face” and upfront form of communication. It appears to me now that leadership in mainstream society has correlated animated body language with confidence. Aboriginal leadership style is often far more subtle, yet reflects a confidence rarely seen in non-Aboriginal people. Both of us have learned that, when facilitating a cross-cultural group, it is important for the facilitator to be able to include and role model other ways of leading. If not, Aboriginal participants may come to the conclusion that they can never be leaders because they do not naturally lead the way that is most common within mainstream Canadian society.

Appropriate eye contact and leadership style are just two things that a facilitator of outdoor education must be conscious of in order to facilitate effectively when working with a cross-cultural audience. However, besides appropriate facilitation, we have learned that it is just as important to develop a program that allows room for new forms of problem solving and observation.

Recently we constructed a low ropes course in a quiet location just outside of town called Cedar Bay Recreation Complex, a place that has an elaborate network of trails for horseback riding in the summer and cross-country skiing in the winter, as well acting as a summer day camp for the local youth (and trillions of local bugs). With limited access and just the most basic forms of infrastructure, Cedar Bay is a natural haven for groups to focus on their own challenges and successes, and a comfortable place for many First Nations people who even today continue to utilize the natural resources surrounding their communities.



During a region-wide leadership training camp for youth, we were privileged to have participants from a number of northern First Nations communities as well as non-Aboriginal youth from local towns including Sioux Lookout. Even though all the non-Aboriginal participants had some experiences living alongside Aboriginal peoples within mainstream society, the majority were not familiar with the ways that Aboriginal culture is different from the mainstream. This led to some interesting group dynamics. In one instance, several participants voiced that they thought the Aboriginal youth were just shy because they were out of their element. When asked by the facilitator, “Are you shy?” the Aboriginal youth replied, “No, we’re just

listening”! The Aboriginal youth explained that some of the non-Aboriginal participants talked more than they were used to, leaving few chances for them to share their own ideas.

Since utilizing our new low ropes course to teach various life skills, we have become even more aware of the need to develop programs that provide time and physical space for observation. When comparing the problem solving and group work styles of our Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants, we have noticed that there is an important difference: Instead of adopting the “brush yourself off and try again” strategy, many Aboriginal participants would rather wait, watch and try once they feel they know how to

successfully complete the task. When working in a culturally diverse group they will often stand back and silently strategize rather than lead a conversation regarding strategy. Unfortunately many facilitators have interpreted this type of behaviour as “timid” or even “uninterested.”

One incident comes to mind where some participants prematurely concluded that some Aboriginal group members were not interested in participating. Part of the group was huddled together brainstorming possible solutions while randomly trying things to see what would work. The Aboriginal participants were standing to the side observing and thinking about what might work. When we paused the group for a “teachable moment” we asked the group to observe the group’s physical formation. The non-Aboriginal participants realized that they had put their backs to the Aboriginal group members, excluding them entirely from their conversation. In an effort to include the Aboriginal members, one of the participants asked the others if they had any ideas to share. The Aboriginal participants shared their observations and suggested a solution (as it turned out, the proposed solution was the missing component of the puzzle!). During the debriefing component one Aboriginal participant explained that she did not want to seem rude and interrupt the group but had in fact seen the solution early on in the group task. An interesting conversation followed that gave members from both cultural groups a chance to inquire and understand more about norms within each society. The Aboriginal participants explained that many of them have been taught that it is impolite to tell someone that their idea is wrong because it robs that person of their learning experience. As facilitators we have observed that it is not uncommon for Aboriginal participants to wait to share their ideas until asked. This creates an interesting group dynamic when doing a problem solving challenge. We have learned that it is vital to acknowledge and talk about different cultural approaches before beginning an initiative, first, to avoid misunderstandings and, second,

to give participants the chance to try approaching the problem in a way that allows all forms of expression.

Our learning is definitely ongoing as we strive to become more culturally sensitive and relevant as facilitators in a culturally segregated community. Although we have been living and working in northwestern Ontario for over ten years, we still feel we are at the beginning of an awkward yet important journey of trying to see the world through different cultural lenses. This process has made us more aware of our own biases, processing preferences and leadership styles. Furthermore it has made us painfully aware of the many ways that other cultural expressions (in this case Aboriginal culture) are muted and suppressed inadvertently by the way many facilitators unknowingly promote mainstream cultures’ ways of communication, problem solving and leadership. While oversight may seem slight to those of us who see the world through the lens of the dominant culture, we have been told and have observed that it communicates volumes to members of different cultures about how their ways are viewed and accepted. We hope this article is viewed not as an anthropological case study, but rather as a small collection of observations that highlight an area in need of some attention, especially for facilitators who interact with Aboriginal participants. More importantly, we hope it is viewed as an invitation for all facilitators to become more culturally fluent facilitators within the culturally diverse country of Canada.

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*Graham Thompson and Erin Horvath live in a log home in the northern Ontario community of Sioux Lookout, where they are raising two young boys, Braeden and Tyler. Although both have years of experience providing outdoor education and each carry Master of Education degrees, it has only been in the last year that they have made facilitating experiential learning a fulltime job. Their not-for-profit business is called New Vision Unlimited ([www.newvisionunlimited.9k.com](http://www.newvisionunlimited.9k.com)).*