



CUSTOMIZED AND CULTURALLY APPROPRIATE SUPPORT MEASURES FOR INDIGENOUS UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: The Case of Work Methodology Workshops



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Context

Recognizing the key role of education in improving the quality of life and low rates of post-secondary graduation among First Peoples (CFC-FCÉE, 2014, Joncas, 2013; Ticci Sarmiento, 2017), the Centre des Premières Nations Nikanite (CPNN) has a mandate to enable more Indigenous students to pursue higher education and support their academic perseverance and success.

To do this, the CPNN—a place of reception, supervision and consultation—establishes personalized support measures culturally adapted to the needs of students¹.



Although each student has specific needs in relation to his or her academic career, the CPNN has identified, over the years, in Indigenous students showing cultural, personal, family and academic difficulties. Adapting to student reality is often more difficult for those who have left their communities to pursue university studies in urban areas (Ticci Sarmiento, 2017). In many cases, the language of instruction—French—is not their mother tongue (Blackburn, Gauthier and Bacon, 2015, Ticci Sarmiento, 2017), so this forces them to engage more effort to meet university requirements in terms of language, which is at the heart of learning. Added to this difficulty is the fact that the university favours the development of knowledge through reading and writing, whereas in the case of Indigenous people, knowledge is transferred orally, from a cultural transmission perspective (Boucher, 2005). In terms of post-secondary education, many students are admitted to program on adult bases (age 21)—they do not hold a college diploma. However, this avenue often requires them to make greater efforts to meet the requirements, particularly those older students who have not been to school in recent years and who, for the most part, have difficulty using information and communication technologies (ICTs) for learning purposes. Finally, adapting to the university reality is more difficult for people with additional problems such as learning disabilities, anxiety disorders, lack of self-confidence, etc. (Joncas, 2013). For these reasons, additional adaptation measures are needed to help students progress through their program.

The purpose of this article is to present an example of personalized, culturally appropriate support provided by the CPNN to Indigenous students to support their academic perseverance and success: the case of work methodology workshops.

Work methodology workshops

Participants' involvement

Work methodology workshops are for all CPNN students, although most participants are enrolled in a teaching program (certificate or bachelor's degree). The two-hour workshops are offered once a week, in groups or individually, depending on the needs (face-to-face or distance learning). By registering for the workshops, the students complete a contract committing them to attend every meeting and participate actively since, among other things, they determine most of the content. They are invited to define, in writing, their expectations for the workshops, to discover their strengths and difficulties in formulating learning objectives to which they will refer throughout the process to regulate their approach. They must also talk about their academic background and about themselves (interests, mother tongue, home community, family, etc.). This process makes it possible not only to establish a profile of each student and take it into account when planning the workshops, but also to make a diagnostic assessment of their writing skills (reference to the French language workshops if needed). Traces of their actions allow students to

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self-regulate through feedback from the teaching assistant and their peers and to check if the goals are being met.

Content

The content of the workshops is developed throughout a semester according to the needs of the students and the work that they must do as part of their courses. In the first workshop, students present their lesson plans to plan the work to be done during the semester (long, medium and short term). Each week, they report on their progress in their work process. In addition, to support teamwork, discussions on collaborative work are conducted: the distribution of roles and tasks among members. By developing their collaborative skills, students learn to deal with conflicts that may arise during teamwork.

Since French is not the mother tongue of the majority of CPNN students, some work instructions can be misunderstood, especially since some abstract concepts do not have equivalent words in Indigenous languages. The methodology workshops then make it possible to develop cognitive and metacognitive strategies aimed at better understanding certain concepts studied. Strategic teaching (Tardif, 1992), including the use of modelling, guided practice and independent practice in problem solving, is used to enable them to "learn to learn" in all learning situations.

The methods

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We let them express themselves freely, *reveal themselves*, so that they can relate to their learning and have a feeling of power on their academic path. Students are also invited to speak with their family and community about possible reinvestments of their professional skills developed during their university studies. To respect the oral culture, the sharing



circles formula is transposed to that of the workshops, so that students can discuss their problems or share their initiatives. This procedure allows students to realize that they are not the only ones coping with difficulties and that they can, by interacting with others, discuss ways to overcome them. In fact, pedagogical assistant acts as an accompanist and mediator.

Some observations and development prospects

It is possible to highlight some observations among CPNN students who participated in the work methodology workshops, particularly in terms of perseverance and academic success. First, there is greater commitment and investment, especially through their weekly presence and active participation in the mentoring sessions. Not asking them to do additional tasks and to work instead on the assignments they need to do as part of their courses could contribute to these observations.

The fact that students can *reveal themselves*, to express themselves about what they experience, both at university and in their daily lives, seems to favour their participation rate in workshops. In addition, students who have used this help service, from their first year of study, have had successes (better results, involvement for research projects, etc.). They also appear to have developed greater autonomy in performing their work, as well as greater confidence in their ability to succeed. Moreover, students who had some difficulties in terms of the French language, improved their skills in reading (reading scientific texts) and writing (strategies for writing a summary of text, a research report, etc.). Finally, some students show a desire to pass on their knowledge to the members

of their community, so it can benefit from it, which increases their motivation to succeed.

The methodology workshops also present challenges. The first would be the fact that the participating students do not always come from the same program. The elements to work therefore vary according to the work to be done. Consequently, strategic teaching formulas are to be favoured, such as to suggest working "in islands" according to the types of work to be performed. Also, more and more

students want to participate in the workshops by asking for a more personalized support according to their program of studies. To overcome this difficulty, it would be interesting to offer workshops that would bring together students from the same program. Lastly, since students' time constraints do not always allow them to benefit from every support workshop offered at the CPNN, some of them would benefit from more personalized supervision.

Thus, in light of this experience, the CPNN wishes to create a short, one-semester program, offering an upgrade to students who wish to undertake university studies, but who have difficulties in terms of the French language, the use of ICTs, and the work methodology. Admission to a training program at Université du Québec à Chicoutimi would be conditional on the success of this short program for students for whom an upgrade is required. This would promote retention and prevent academic failures, which are often harmful to some people's self-esteem and health (exhaustion, anxiety disorders,

etc.). This program would be created according to a collaborative approach to involve, not only the teachers, the teaching assistants and other partners, but also, and above all, the students themselves who are the first actors of their success! ■

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