

## A Virtual Circle with Elders: Guide to Relationship and Learning with Indigenous Peoples of Alberta

*Doreen Bergum - Métis*

*Mary Cardinal-Collins - Cree*

*Saa'kokoto, Randy Bottle - Blackfoot*

*Jeanine Bell – Inuk*



The intent of a CASS Learning Guide is to apply research, deepen understanding and enhance professional practice within the Alberta context. With a focus on optimum learning for all students, a Learning Guide provides an opportunity to grow system leader knowledge, resulting in quality school leadership and quality teaching throughout Alberta.

## Summary

✓ Building Effective Relationships

✓ Ensuring First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education for All Students

The [Guide to Relationships and Learning with the Indigenous Peoples of Alberta](#) is one of the most accessed resources on the CASS website, underscoring the great interest in and need for learning as highlighted in [Optimum Learning for All Students Implementing Alberta's 2018 Professional Practice Standards 2022-2023 Year 4 Survey Report](#). In this webinar, participants experienced a virtual sharing circle with teachings about the importance of relationships. Examples of how to create and nurture respectful and reciprocal relationships were shared to help guide participants and ensure that the learning aspirations and potential of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students, and all students, are realized. Watch the [full recording here](#).

*(SLOS/LOS) Whereas: Superintendents, principals and school jurisdiction leaders play a fundamental role in establishing the conditions under which the learning aspirations and the potential of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students will be/are realized.*

### Opening in a Good Way:

The importance of coming together in ways that build and honour relationship were emphasized. [\(1:32\)](#)

- Blackfoot Elder Saa'kokoto opened the circle with *aama'toosimaan* (smudge) and talked about beginning in ceremony to bless the circle and as part of relationship building.
- Inuit AngajukKâk, Leader, Jeannine Bell, lit a *qulliq* and shared that everyone brings their own light and gifts when we share space and enter relationship.
- Métis Elder Doreen Bergum offered a blessing for those gathered to respect and understand one another to make a positive difference for young people.

### Acknowledgement of Land:

Dr. Dianne Roulson, CASS Leadership Consultant introduced herself as a white settler with Icelandic and French roots. Within the acknowledgment she highlighted lessons she has learned from Elders and Knowledge Keepers. These included:

- the importance of showing respect for the contributions and ways of knowing of Indigenous Peoples which are reflected through stories and songs that have lived on this land for thousands of years;
- a teaching from Iikiinayookaa (Marlene Yellowhorn, PhD Student from Kainai Nation) that land acknowledgement is not something you do, rather, it is something you feel – a lesson passed on to Iikiinayookaa from her grandfather; and,
- a teaching from Lori Pritchard (Education Director, CBE, Métis and Ukrainian from Saskatchewan) that identifying a commitment to action must always be connected to land acknowledgement. [\(13:32\)](#)

### Land Connect Moment:

Crystal Clark, Indigenous Education Consultant, of Nehiwayak/Denesuline and Métis ancestry, provided an opportunity for participants to connect to land through their imaginations and hearts. The opportunity to connect with the land was done to set the tone for the virtual circle while modelling the need to acknowledge and become aware of our deeply rooted relationships, *wâhkôhtowin* (Cree), to one another and the natural world. [\(17:48\)](#)

### Spirit and Intent and Navigation of the Guide:

Crystal, one of the key developers of the Guide, talked about the birch tree image featured throughout the [Guide](#) as representing

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our connection to one another through land, life and breath. She described the [Guide](#) as an initial support for district leaders - a small part of the whole forest. The real work, she said, is connecting and working with Indigenous Peoples and building respectful relationships over time. She showed people how to navigate the [Guide](#), highlighting the introductory message from the late Elder Sykes Powderface and acknowledging the many Elders and educators who contributed to the Guide over time. She emphasized that the [Guide](#) needs to be a living document that will grow, shift and be enhanced. ([22:22](#))

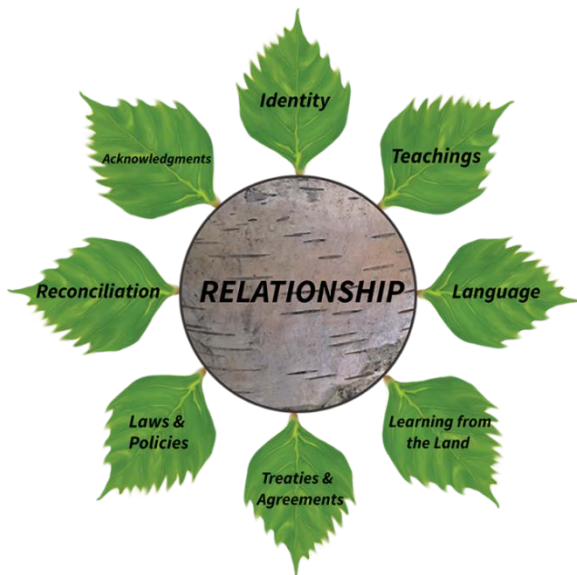
### Biographies and Introductions of Elders can be found here:

Doreen Bergum, Métis ([33:25](#))

Mary Cardinal -Collins, Cree (Recording: [35:06](#))

Saa'kokoto, Randy Bottle, Blackfoot ([35:53](#))

Jeanine Bell, Inuit ([37:05](#))



### Circle Topic Key messaging ([38:37](#)):



#### Elder Doreen Bergum ([39:23](#)):

**Learning Values Through Story.** Seven sacred teachings of love, respect, humility, courage, wisdom, honesty and truth were passed on to Doreen through story by her parents. ([39:27](#))

**We Each Have a Gift.** Everyone is born with a gift unique to them. Doreen teaches young people how important it is for them to find, practise, and share their gift. Educators must encourage young people to be who they are and nourish the gift they have been given; to love what they do and do what they love. ([41:49](#))

**Systemic Racism and Hiding Culture.** Doreen shared personal stories of racism, both historical and present day. This included having to hide, and not being able to practise, her gift as a

champion jigger like her mother, until she was 55. She emphasized that racism “goes a long way” and is present with her every day. ([42:02](#))

**Changing Racism Through Teaching and Truth.** Change will come about from teaching “who we are” and challenging misinformation. Doreen is willing to share her knowledge with educators so that new relationships may begin. It is necessary for educators to learn the truth about Métis history to build new relationships grounded in mutual respect. ([46:22](#))

**Healing and Moving Beyond Performative Gestures.** The impact of the discovery of children’s remains at residential school sites is far reaching and deeply personal for many, including Doreen. She has been challenged to reconcile her own faith and spirituality in light of these discoveries. She talked about the thoughtful action on the part of [Dr. Michael Hart](#), through her work with the [University of Calgary](#), to hold gatherings to “check up on the Elders” and see how they are doing. These gatherings have made a difference to her. Spirituality, connection to land and the relationship to First Nations ancestry, ceremony and language have been part of her own healing journey. She talked about her experience within her own church community and how important it is to move beyond performative gestures to real systemic change. Actions that bring about healing and change must happen year-round. ([52:28](#))

**Getting to Know Us.** “Get to know us. It is important to learn about who we are and how we have contributed to this country. This learning will lead to us being treated respectfully.” ([57:11](#))

**Walking Side by Side.** If we can come together, walking side by side, in parallel paths, we can do good things for children. They will grow up to be proud of who they are and that is the biggest thing. ([1:01:56](#))



#### Elder Mary Cardinal-Collins ([1:05:20](#)):

**Connecting with Community.** It is important to reach out to local organizations and Nations when seeking connection with Elders. Mary suggested that this may include, for example, Friendship Centers, Chief and Council, the ATA. There are other organizations as well that will be able to guide schools and districts. ([1:06:36](#))

**Learning Area(s) of Specialty.** As part of reaching out, it is essential to learn about each Elder or Knowledge Keeper’s specialty (e.g., if they are fluent in their language, ceremonialists, willing to say prayers). Identify what you want to learn and your area of focus and then find someone who can help you based on their expertise. ([1:07:27](#))

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**Learning History and Local Knowledge.** Take time to learn the local history and various language groups. It is the teacher's responsibility to learn and build foundational knowledge (e.g., re: Treaty areas, Nations, Métis settlements, Métis Nation). Getting to know Indigenous students' contexts is imperative and relying on them to be the class experts can be damaging to some. (1:10:15)

**Importance of Language.** Mary's expertise is language. She spoke about the many languages across the province and within Treaty areas. She also described various connections between languages (e.g., Blackfoot and Cree). She is someone with deep knowledge about how [language revitalization efforts are important for expressing Indigenous worldviews and identities](#). (1:13:30)



**Elder Saa'kokoto's** (1:20:58):

**Kinship.** Saa'kokoto began with the idea of kinship and how we are all relatives and connected to the land. "We call that kinship with the land. Everything begins with *Na'a* (Mother Earth). We have kinship with all beings in the natural world. All of the lessons and our way of life begins with the land." (1:21:05)

**Relationship and Connecting to the Natural World.** Saa'kokoto talked about how vital it is to establish relationship with *Na'a* as adults and with young people. "The beauty of the land" and important messages from the land are what the ancestors left behind over thousands of years. These messages have been left for us so that we can figure them out and learn their significance. Working together and learning from the land nurtures the building of kinship with young people and one another. (1:22:33)

**Land as Teacher and Breath.** Saa'kokoto described how young people begin to feel the heartbeat and energy of *Na'a* as they establish a relationship with and learn to listen to the land, and can then share who they are (e.g., through story, poetry, artwork). Young people's inner voice emerges when they feel kinship with the land. "Our language is in the breath and how we share who we are as people." Young people will take what they learn to their homes and communities and are the ones who will make a difference in the future. (1:23:17)

**Establishing Trust, Respect and Safety.** It is as we build relationship with *Na'a* and one another that we establish a level of trust and respect. "*This is when we can hear one another*" and when the learning begins as we listen from our hearts. (1:26:58)

**Naming.** Saa'kokoto talked about how he walks in the footsteps of his grandfather and carries his name. He shared how his name comes with many responsibilities. He has a responsibility to share stories and, also, why those stories are so important. Some of the

stories are 10,000 years old. Core values are part of those stories and continue to teach them all the good things they need to know in life. (1:27:44)

**Language of the Land.** The records of his ancestors, their "universities", are carved into the stone and left as messages on the land. Those teachings have been carried forward through storytelling in circles for thousands and thousands of years. Storytelling is vitally important for young people today. (1:28:24)

**Importance of Education, Ceremony and Sharing Strength.** It is necessary for Indigenous peoples to showcase and share who they are – their language, ceremonies, stories, how educated they are, why the land is so important, the beauty of their culture, images and gifts from the land. This shows and honours their strength and is how we begin to establish relationship. (1:34:36)

**Establishing Support Systems for Indigenous Students.**

Establishing relationships with *Na'a* and one another and drawing strength from their ways is how we can collectively keep the interests of young people forefront. (1:34:36)



**Jeannine Bell** (1:39:21):

**Connecting Past and Present.** Jeanine shared the lineage of her name and described how names hold the link between the past and present. It is through naming that gifts are passed on and contribute to the common good. She carries her father's name and his gifts. (1:39:21)

**Understanding Relationship.** Coming to understand the ways that we interpret and define relationships is vital. Relationships for Inuit include water, land, ice, and everything in the natural world. These were her ancestors' first and primary sources of knowledge, their first classrooms. Knowledge from her ancestors has come from observing and witnessing what happens on the land and then passing on that knowledge through oral tradition. These teachings and stories provide direction about how to live among one another in interconnected ways and hold the ancestors' core values and beliefs. (1:42:21)

**Natural Law. How we Walk in the World.** Each community relates differently based on the vastness and diversity of its geography. Natural laws, *Maligait*, are centered around relationship: working for the common good; being respectful of all living things; maintaining harmony and balance; and, continually planning for the future. *Maligait* determines how the Inuit walk in the world. It is important to situate ourselves in relation to one another so that we come to respect our commonalities and differences in order to live well together. (1:45:28)

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**Best Way to Build Relationship.** The best way for educators to build relationship is to spend time with community and on the land, with an open heart and mind. We must be willing to learn with and from community members, water, land, ice and all that is found in the natural world. Jeanine suggested that educators come to know Inuit principles and practices and take that learning into schools, classrooms, homes, and communities. She highlighted Dr. Dwayne Donald's messages about how colonialism has fractured and denied relationship. "Our work together is to restore and renew those relationships." ([A Curriculum for Educating Differently: Unlearning Colonialism and Renewing Kinship Relations](#)) (1:47:31)

## Closing:

### Gratitude and Honouring Knowledge (1:50:06)

As part of the closing, Dianne spoke about the ways that she and Crystal were honouring the knowledge of Doreen, Mary, Saa'kokoto and Jeanine. She described how they were doing so to express gratitude to the guests for their trust and willingness to share knowledge and teachings. The way we honour knowledge matters greatly and is an important part of establishing respectful and reciprocal relationships. Dianne highlighted a resource, [Indigenous Education | Cultural Protocols, created by the Calgary Board of Education](#), included in the [Relationships section](#) of the [Guide](#). As indicated in the resource, cultural protocols refer to the guidelines and processes that are in place to keep Indigenous knowledges, traditions and ways in the forefront. While honouring knowledge is often done quietly and in private, Dianne and Crystal made it a visible part of the learning during the webinar in keeping with the spirit of establishing respectful and reciprocal relationships. (1:50:06)



## Closing in a Good Way

Doreen Bergum offered a closing prayer. (1:55:05)

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## Questions for reflection and dialogue within your context.

1. How are we working to build and sustain respectful relationships with First Nations, Métis and Inuit?
2. How are we engaging and collaborating with First Nations, Métis and Inuit to optimize learning success for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students? How do we know?
3. What difference are these relationships making for young people and their learning? How do we know?
4. How will we foster relationship to the land in alignment with kinship with land for staff and students within our school/district?
5. How can we shift Anti-Indigenous Racism within our school/district?
6. What are our next steps and how will I put one learning from this webinar/learning guide into action?

## Additional Supports for System Leadership Capacity

- [Watch full recording here](#)
- [Mary Cardinal-Collins: Language Revitalization Efforts are Important for Expressing Indigenous Worldviews and Identities](#)
- [Urban Society for Aboriginal Youth, Blackfoot Graphic Novels](#)
- [The True Canadians: Forgotten Nevermore](#)
- [Métis Legacy II: Michif Culture, Heritage and Folkways](#)
- [Indigenous Education | Cultural Protocols, Calgary Board of Education](#)
- [Walking Parallel Paths, Together, in a Good Way. The Office of Indigenous Engagement and ii' taa'poh'to'p, University of Calgary](#)
- [A Curriculum for Education Differently: Unlearning Colonialism and Renewing Kinship Relations](#), Dwayne Donald
- [We Need a New Story: Walking and the wâhkôhtowin imagination](#), Dwayne Donald
- [White Benevolence: Racism and Colonial Violence in the Helping Professions](#), Amanda Genhard, Sheela McLean and Verna St. Denis
- [Optimum Learning for All Students Implementing Alberta's 2018 Professional Practice Standards 2022-2023 Year 4 Survey Report](#)



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