

Be Courageous! The Circle of Courage and Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

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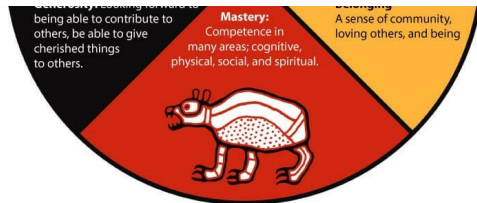
by **Sherri Parkins, Learning Strategist in Accessibility Services and Faculty Development Advisor in the Teaching & Learning Centre**

We recently were privileged to have Dr. Kevin Lamoureux speak with us on "[10 Journeys of Decolonized Instruction](#)." As we listened and learned, we were confronted with the fact that we have much to do! In that message, Dr. Lamoureux referred to a Circle of Courage created by Dr. Martin Brokenleg based on the Indigenous Medicine Wheel. Primarily used to address at risk youth, I found the Circle of Courage something that made the work I need to do have focus for possible first steps. The Truth and Reconciliation Council of Canada put forth 94 Calls to Action. Number 7 in the Call to Action speaks to me. It states:

"We call upon the federal government to develop with Aboriginal groups a joint strategy to eliminate educational and employment gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

As we consider our vital role in Truth and Reconciliation, the Circle of Courage provided for me a way to also pause, reflect, and consider the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and how they might be applied to our teaching as we endeavor to move into the future with intension and inclusivity in mind from an Indigenous perspective. The four words in the Circle of Courage to reflect on are Belonging, Mastery, Generosity, and Independence. The Skoden Medicine Wheel uses four doodem animals – the turtle, bear, beaver, and thunderbird – and I will include them in my thoughts (Seneca Polytechnic, 2022).





Source: Brendtro, Brokenleg, Van Bockern, 2002; Artwork: Adapted from Seneca Polytechnic/Skoden, 2023.

Starting in the east of the Medicine Wheel, let's begin with looking at the "Belonging" quadrant with its focus on being part of a community. The turtle image in Indigenous art represents the wisdom keepers. The community looks to them for guidance in decision-making and for mediation (Seneca Polytechnic, 2022). Universal Design for Learning's foundational belief is that we can create educational environments that optimize learning for **all** learners. In the Engagement principle, there are guidelines that discuss the idea of [fostering collaboration and community](#) (CAST, 2023). It's vital in our post-secondary school education environments that we build a community where our students feel respected, accepted, and have a sense of belonging. We can endeavor to mediate misunderstandings for the good of the learning community. Without a sense of belonging, students will find it difficult to engage!

Mastery is the south quadrant of the Circle of Courage to explore. In the Skoden Medicine Wheel, the south is represented by the bear. The bear symbolizes healing (Seneca Polytechnic, 2022)! That's interesting when we are exploring mastery from the Circle of Courage! Sometimes, when we consider mastery, we immediately think of the summative assessments in our courses. In the Circle of Courage, the emphasis is on accomplishments throughout the learning journey. Having high expectations of **all** students, coupled with encouragement, can instill a sense of pride and accomplishment in students as they accept new challenges and learn new skills. Universal Design for Learning's goal is to prepare expert learners. ["Building fluencies with graduated levels of support for practice and performance"](#) (CAST, 2023) aligns with Mastery in the Circle of Courage for competencies gained.

Now let's consider the idea of Generosity from the Circle of Courage. The beaver in the west of the Skoden Medicine Wheel has a vital role in creation. It diverts water to where it is needed and is the carpenter of the forest (Seneca Polytechnic, 2022). Generosity embraces the idea that we all have something to contribute. It focuses on the value of being generous and being prepared to contribute to another person's life. As teachers, we are grateful that teaching inherently allows us to contribute to the lives of our students. Do we provide opportunities for students to practice generosity? We want students to go beyond surface understanding to explore the impacts of what they are learning and what those impacts mean to all of us. This is often done in conversations. Do we provide opportunities to think and have conversations that go beyond the surface? Universal Design for Learning's Action

and Expression checkpoint [Expression and Communication](#) challenges us to provide more than one way for students to share ideas and thus their voices can be heard in those conversations. Listen to Elder Blu's Teaching on All People are Gifts to Community Teaching:



We started this discussion with belonging. Belonging helps us as learners to take a risk. Independence is the north quadrant in the Circle of Courage that Dr. Martin Brokenleg created. In the Skoden Medicine Wheel, the thunderbird represents change (Seneca Polytechnic, 2022). Part of learning is allowing students the choice to make decisions and then grow based on their successes or failures. Doing so takes a risk! Fostering independence supports our students to develop the lifelong skills needed to be successful and resourceful. As they develop these skills, they continue to change as community members. Universal Design for Learning's principle of Action and Expression address [executive functions](#) (CAST, 2023) and the principle of Engagement looks at sustaining [effort and persistence](#) along with [supporting self regulation](#) (CAST, 2023). Our learners need to develop the capacity to set appropriate goals and receive support from their learning community for achieving those goals, as well as supporting them to monitor progress as they continue their academic journey.

The Circle of Courage helped me to reflect on some Indigenous perspectives in learning. Sometimes we are encouraged to "step outside the box"; however, in this case, let's step inside the Medicine Wheel to broaden our teaching perspective. This time, I found comfort in staying inside the Circle of Courage to broaden my understanding a bit more on Indigenous pedagogy and to give me the courage to take first steps.

References

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