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# **The Relationship of the Transformative Learning Experience on Substance Abuse Treatment Outcomes: The Hudson Lake Recovery Camp Curriculum**

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Keywords: Qualitative research, Alaska native education, recovery

**Abstract:** This paper reports preliminary results of a qualitative study. It appears that clients who successfully completed the Hudson Lake Recovery Camp substance abuse treatment program reported that positive transformative learning experiences helped facilitate their recovery process.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship of the Hudson Lake Recovery Camp curriculum to substance abuse recovery and what, if anything, about the American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) perspective woven into the camp curriculum facilitated learning for clients who are considered “successful.” Data was gathered to answer these central research questions: a) Did Hudson Lake Recovery Camp clients feel successful in their recovery after their stay at Hudson Lake Recovery Camp and how did they define their success? b) What aspects of the experience and overall design of the Hudson Lake curriculum facilitated the success? c) What significant learning for these clients took place at Hudson Lake Recovery Camp? d) To what do clients attribute their success?

## **Background**

*The Alcohol Problem in Alaska.* Research shows that Alaska Natives have unusually high rates of drinking. Many domestic, physical, emotional and societal problems result from this plague of alcohol (Segal, 1998, Beauvais, 1998). The American Indian/Alaska Native population, compared with the U.S. population in general, is especially at risk for alcohol-related consequences. According to the 2005 Drug and Alcohol Services Information System Report, American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) admissions to substance abuse treatment increased from 23.6 percent of all AI/AN admissions in 1994 to 37.1 percent in 2002. Alaska was the State with the highest percentage of AI/AN admissions.

“Alcohol-induced violence, especially sexual violence against women and children, were (sic) epidemic, contributing to the fact that the rate of Natives in the state’s prison population (32%) is double their percentage of the general population” (Alaska Natives Commission, 1994).

*Substance abuse treatment curricula and Native Americans.*

It is commonly acknowledged that many Native Americans are not well served by existing alcoholism recovery programs, such as those based upon the Alcoholics Anonymous 12-step program. It has often been observed that many Native Americans relate poorly to this strategy of therapy and self-help and that many Native Americans overtly complain that such strategies do not mesh with who they are and what they experience and /or feel. Researchers have stated that

“an appropriate method for promoting recovery among Native Americans is sorely needed” (Walle, 2004, p. 58).

Research has shown that alcohol treatment programs that integrate the cultural practices and values of the target population into the recovery process are more likely to be accepted by Native American alcohol abusers than mainstream rehabilitation programs that ignore cultural factors (Milbrodt, 2002).

“Spirit camps” or “culture camps” are being built across the state of Alaska. Some are used as a place for youth to go to camp, learn about traditional Alaska Native culture and activities and become a protective factor for these youth. Others are used for treatment facilities for youth or adults who are already engaged in the use of substances and need an intervention in their lives. The common factor appears to be that traditional Native values are being woven into the curriculum.

Hudson Lake Recovery Camp is a 40-day substance abuse wilderness camp operated by Copper River Native Association in remote east, central Alaska. The target audience of the camp is Alaska Natives and American Indians. The client population of Hudson Lake Recovery Camp has been a mixture of Alaska Native people, Eskimos and a few American Indians from tribes in the Lower 48 states. When there is room, a non-Native client can be admitted to the camp, but there is an understanding that Hudson Lake Recovery Camp operates under a Native preference policy.

#### *Hudson Lake Recovery Camp treatment philosophy.*

The treatment philosophy adopted by the Copper River Native Association is based on the work of Underhill and Finnegan (1996), which is a bio-psycho-social-spiritual model of addiction. This model attributes equal causative value to each of the named systems. It suggests that recovery requires attention to the biological/physical nature of the addiction, underlying psychological issues, accompanying social/relationship variables, and that recovery requires attention to the spiritual well-being of the client and community as well. This model is particularly relevant for Alaska Natives who see the spiritual dimension of addiction as a primary feature of recovery (Duran, 1990).

One of few papers written about substance abuse and Alaska Natives states that “the Alaska Native worldview incorporates a circular synthesis and balance of physical, cognitive, emotional and spiritual processes within a protective layer of family and communal/cultural beliefs and practices embedded within the larger environment” (Hazel and Mohatt, 2001, p. 541).

People who are going through substance abuse treatment are learning new ways of living their lives or addressing their chronic problems. Prevention programs encourage changes in knowledge, attitude or beliefs about substance use. In both treatment and prevention instances, there is a collection of materials that carry the lessons.

#### *Hudson Lake Recovery Camp curriculum.*

The curriculum is composed of a semi-subsistence lifestyle, an Alaska wilderness setting, and educational tools based on American Indian and Alaska Native cultures and values. The curriculum includes journaling about life experiences, spending time in talking circles sharing fears, concerns and victories; learning the Native tradition of catching and smoking salmon; hunting moose and caribou; learning to work with logs to build dwellings; and learning about the values of various Native American tribes and peoples. Clients are required to eat together as a

family, share the chores that keep the camp running, and talk and pray together regularly on a daily basis.

Clients at Hudson Lake are situated in the quiet atmosphere of a mountainous region of rural Alaska, set apart from modern conveniences such as television, radio, electricity and running water. In this curriculum there is an allowance for ample quiet time and reflection. Residents of Hudson Lake are encouraged to reflect on their lives, their losses and griefs, and share their experiences with fellow residents. The curriculum employs all of these methodologies to allow the client time, space, and opportunity to clean their bodies of toxins and mental stresses and begin to restore the parts of their lives that they've lost.

#### *Texts used in the curriculum.*

The following text books are employed at Hudson Lake. Strengthening the Spirit is a journaling workbook, developed by Serenity Support Services, Inc., written in the Oglala-Lakota Sioux tradition and includes a journaling method as part of its method of aiding in positive lifestyle changes. Principles of Living, a small pamphlet produced by the Native American Rehabilitation Association contains the Cree and Sioux commandments as well as the principles of the Blackfeet Confederacy (Burgess, Fair, Saylor, 2002). The Red Road to Wellbriety is a book of personal testimonies from many different tribes about the journey to sobriety. A Cherokee Feast of Days is a daily devotional featuring thoughts and sayings by Native Americans.

#### *Subsistence and self-reliance in the curriculum.*

There is no electricity or running water available at Hudson Lake, so water must be hauled from local streams. Camp residents fell trees, chop wood and bring it to the camp in order to heat all cabins at the camp. The counselors' cell phone provides communication access to the outside.

Hudson Lake Recovery Camp is designed around Alaska Native traditional values and cultural beliefs. The camp utilizes the natural setting and the subsistence practices by including traditional chores like cutting wood, carrying water, cooking food for a family setting, using a steam bath, hunting and fishing, to encourage the client to healing and self-sufficiency.

#### *Spirituality in the curriculum.*

As Beauvais (1998) writes, many AI/AN people believe that the reason for so many social ills related to alcohol among their people is that they have lost their culture. "Many of the community-based alcohol treatment programs in Indian communities across the country have a strong cultural or spiritual component that is intended to revitalize traditional beliefs and serve as the primary source of individual strength in maintaining sobriety" (p. 256). Spirituality is included in the Native values and customs at Hudson Lake. The textbooks talk about the Creator, the sweatlodge ceremony helps the client to a "rebirth" experience with Mother Earth. Each client is encouraged to pray to their Higher Power and use whatever name they are comfortable with, whether it be Grandfather, Jesus, Lord, Creator, etc.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

The researcher approached the study from the theoretical perspective that transformational learning has occurred for each of the study participants. The definition and goal of transformative learning is to assist learners in assessing their current perspectives and

approaches to life, and through education, to provide an opportunity to change these perspectives and approaches (Mezirow, 1991). Based on the definition of the theory of transformative learning, defined by Mezirow (1997) as “the process of effecting change in a frame of reference” (p.5), this study deduced transformative learning as a key ingredient in the experience of study participants. Mezirow (1991) suggested a series of phases that people go through when they experience transformation:

1. Experiencing a disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination
3. Critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognizing that others have gone through a similar process
5. Exploring options
6. Formulating a plan of action,
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills to implement the plan,
8. Trying out new roles
9. Building self-confidence and competence in the new roles, and
10. Reintegration into one’s life

These phases seem to describe very well the related experiences of study participants. When completed, the findings section of this study will specify the parallels of participant experience and the phases of transformation as described by Mezirow.

#### *Methodology*

The researcher used a semi-structured interview approach with study participants to gain insight into the experience of the program at Hudson Lake Recovery Camp. Interviews were conducted to gather perceptions, reflections, and experiences. The researcher privately interviewed study participants face-to-face. Questions were asked pertaining to the Hudson Lake Recovery Camp experience, allowing the clients to express any recollections and thoughts they may have had about the learning environment, curriculum, staff, activities or personal development that may have happened while they were at Hudson Lake Recovery Camp. Participants were Native Americans from the state of Alaska, eight males and 3 females, between the ages of 18 and 60, and were identified by Hudson Lake Recovery Camp staff as being successful participants of the 40-day recovery program.

Because there are an increasing number of cultural treatment camps being built in Alaska and because there has been very little written about the success or failure rate of the clients who attend these camps, this study provides some evidence of what clients see as the factor that made a difference for them and thus, helped them on to recovery. If, in fact, clients had a successful recovery experience while being treated at Hudson Lake Recovery Camp, this researcher wants to know what part of the curriculum caused this success.

This study is significant because if the curriculum of the camp proves to be an effective tool for recovery, there is the possibility of developing an Alaska Native curriculum that will meet the needs of many agencies to provide a cultural curriculum to their clients. Currently, books and journals that depict values of American Indians from the Plains are being used to supplement the curriculum of Hudson Lake Recovery Camp. Alaska Natives will be better served if curriculum is developed that reflects the values and traditions of local Alaska tribes.

#### **Preliminary Findings**

While analysis of the data is not complete at this writing, some recurring themes are beginning to appear in the interview transcripts:

1. One must be willing and ready to get sober: Most participants made statements regarding their personal desire to get sober. They had had a disorienting dilemma of some kind that brought them to their senses about the desperate circumstances in their lives, i.e. they knew they were going to die if drinking continued, they had lost family members, they were constantly sick, etc.

2. Quiet time and reflection are not available in other treatments: participants commented on the fact that other institutional treatments they had attended were so busy educating the clients that the clients had no down time to think and reflect on their lives. Quiet time appears to be a very valuable piece of the Hudson Lake curriculum

3. Learning about oneself is important – who you are, where you're going and what you have to do to get there: When asked about significant learning in their camp experience, participants stated that they learned about themselves – to forgive themselves; that they weren't as bad a person as they thought they were; that they could do things they'd never done before, etc.

4. Spirituality/relationship with Creator/forgiveness: Spirituality was important to nearly all participants. Many commented that they came back to their Creator during their experience at Hudson Lake, they began praying on a regular basis and felt healing in this experience.

5. Contributing to a “family” setting: Hudson Lake is designed to be a family-type setting. Everyone has chores that they take turns at and everyone relies on the others to get their chores completed each day so that there is water, heat and food. When participants discovered that they were being responsible and providing for others, it appears that their self-esteem developed.

6. Getting “honest” with oneself and others: Many statements were recorded from participants who reported that they were honest about feelings of grief and pain. Some said they had never been honest before in their treatments. They had just said what they knew counselors wanted to hear. It appears that talking circles assisted in being able to open up wounds that had not been dealt with before. Honesty made participants feel “relieved”.

7. Physical activity is good therapy: Many participants reported enjoying the physical activity of camp life. Male participants especially liked cutting firewood. Many enjoyed hiking, fishing, boating and even swimming. Physical activity appears to be good therapy for those who need to work out their frustrations and grief. Some think best when they are being active.

Throughout these themes, the holistic and cultural approach is confirmed. It appears that study participants are healing with this curriculum in the areas of self-awareness, spiritual wellness, physical wellness, and mental wellness.

Although each study participant had a different circumstance that brought them to Hudson Lake and their own personal experience while at Hudson Lake, the phases of Mezirow's transformative learning experience can be seen in each interview. The tools used in the curriculum at Hudson Lake appear to facilitate these phases. While Mezirow addresses transformative learning as an individual, personal process, Dirkx (2000) looks at transformative learning as a holistic phenomenon, focusing on the emotional and spiritual dimensions of learning. All of these aspects can be clearly seen in the Hudson Lake Recovery Camp curriculum.

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